

All That I Want to Forget

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First published in 2019 by
Hoopoe
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt
200 Park Ave., Suite 1700 New York, NY 10166
www.hoopoefiction.com

Hoopoe is an imprint of the American University in Cairo Press
www.aucpress.com

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First published in Arabic in 2013 as *Kabirtu wa nasaytu an ansa* by Arab Scientific
Publishers Inc.
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Exclusive distribution outside Egypt and North America by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd.,
6 Salem Road, London, W4 2BU

Dar el Kutub No. 13355/18
ISBN 978 977 416 908 3

Dar el Kutub Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Al-Essa, Bothayna

All That I Want to Forget / Bothayna Al-Essa. — Cairo: The American
University in Cairo Press, 2018.

p. cm.
ISBN 978 977 416 908 3

1. English Fiction
832

1 2 3 4 5 23 22 21 20 19

Designed by Adam el-Schemy
Printed in the United States of America

You should never be here too much; be so far away that they can't find you, they can't get at you to shape, to mould. Be so far away, like the mountains, like the unpolluted air; be so far away that you have no parents, no relations, no family, no country; be so far away that you don't know even where you are. Don't let them find you; don't come into contact with them too closely. Keep far away where even you can't find yourself . . .

—*J. Krishnamurti*

Do not go far away, they say, as they bury me.
Where is far away if not where I am?

—*Malik Ibn al-Rayb*

I Grew Up

They always told me, *You'll grow up and forget all about it.*

When I fell and cracked my skull.
When my math teacher told me to stand facing the wall,
Because I forgot that $7 \times 6 = 42$.

When my bicycle broke and they didn't buy me another,
So I wouldn't break it.
When the vessel sheltering my spirit broke.

When my parents died.
When I didn't die.
When the world was too much and I was alone.

When my brother tore apart my doll because Barbie is haram,
And canceled Spacetoon because Pokémon is haram.

When he removed the photograph of my mother and father
from the picture frame and buried it in the broken drawer,
So as not to drive the angels away.

When the cracks in the wall filled with devils.

When I was forced to enroll in the Girls' College,
To preserve my chastity.

When he offered me to his friend in marriage,
To preserve my chastity.

When I tore the covers off my books to protect them from
the fire.
When I wrote my first poem on the bottom of a box of tissues,
Trembling in fear.

When he dragged me by my hijab at my first poetry reading.
When he finally slapped me.

They all said, *You'll grow up and forget all about it.*

Problem is, I grew up and didn't forget.
I grew up and I didn't forget all that I want to forget.

Eating the Apple

“Mirror, mirror on the wall,
Who’s the ugliest one of all?”

“You are, O apple eater.
You are, O naughty bookworm.
You are.”

I DIDN’T WAKE UP, I plummeted to awareness.

The mirror in front of me, terror filling my pores.
Who am I?

The dream had thrown me out. It wasn’t a nice dream, though I’d have preferred to continue it rather than return to this place. For a moment I wondered, what’s this? Where am I? Then I realized—or remembered. This is where I’m hiding. I’m in the hotel. I ran away. It wasn’t yet 3:30 a.m. What was I going to do with myself, awake? I bent my knees and pulled them to my stomach, hugging myself. I’m a ball in the form of a woman, more ball than woman. Like a letter C with its wrists tied together.

I pulled the blanket over my head and closed my eyes. Sleep, Fatima. Tomorrow we’ll sort out your thoughts. Tomorrow you’ll iron your shirt and comb your hair and sort out your thoughts. That’s the plan. All you have to do now is sleep. The night isn’t on your side. You know that, Fatima, and still you wake like this.

I curled up into myself, a snail that knew what to do. Sleep, little one, sleep. I sang to myself as if I were my mother, as if I were my child, as if I were the only person I had left, because I was the only person I had left. My limbs were trembling, my body was in revolt. The dreadful reality washed over me like the horror that always accompanies that simple question. Who am I? I ran away. You really ran away, Fatima.

The face in the mirror mocked me. Shout it out, Archimedes, shout out your brilliant discovery. Wake the whole world up! Please sleep, Fatima. Go to sleep, quick, before the outlines of the story come back, the immorality and indecency of it all, its power over you. Before the thought absorbs you entirely and sucks the life out of you, leaving you withered and powerless.

I can't stop thinking. I have to turn off this crazy machine they call the mind. I jump out of bed, my fingers shaking as I open my suitcases, my fingers as frantic as I am, bony and sweaty and injured like me. I open the suitcases one after the other, tear through them, throwing things out, rummaging and raging through them, ransacking the contents. I dig my fingers deep, deep into the pockets and openings and corners of the suitcases. I dive, searching for relief, for that damn bottle of pills that pulls me gently out of my reality. Alprazolam, the magical soporific, cure for epilepsy, anxiety, and depression—my best friend and worst enemy, working steadily, with my blessing, toward my undoing.

Where are they, those little devils? Come, dears. Come, little ones. Come, before I run out of the room and turn myself in to the first policeman or tissue vendor I find in the street. I fumble over the bottle under the cotton pajamas. Opening it with trembling fingers, I swallow a pill. I assure the frantic being inside me that things are under control. Calm down, Fatima. You took the medicine.

I am sinking into the bed. The bed is a pit and I fall. The pit is endless, like bloodshed, like the hungry, like the dead, like Sayyab's poetry: "Your gifts, my Lord, I accept them all.

Bring them . . . Bring them . . . O giver of shells and death.” Am I delirious? I’m shaking, and not from passion or ecstasy or prophetic revelation. The alprazolam is tearing through me, leaving me lit. A terrible dryness in my mouth. There’s no water in the well.

I close my eyes and see Faris. He’s searching for me through the many streets, wandering the sidewalks and looking all over, looking for me behind trees and under rocks. I smile at him tenderly and mumble with a tongue thick as a bag of sand, *Sleep, dear. Sleep.* The numbness crawls toward me from my fingertips, my limbs are shrinking. I’m slowly being eaten away, getting smaller and smaller. I grow numb and can now think of Faris. I feel sorry for him. With my weak throat and thin voice, I sing to him, sing him to sleep.

Prayer

I embrace the shattered pieces of myself so that I
might write.

Inside I am destroyed.

Show me Your might, O Almighty.

Teach me to pray,

A prayer of my own.

Give me my language.

Give me my language, O Lord of Language.

Give me my language so that I might pray to You,

To You the honor and the glory.

Give me all of my words.

Give me my language so that I might think, so that I
might exist,

So that I might know myself, so that I might know You.

LORD OF CLARITY, CREATOR OF Man, be with me in my solitude, for I am lost in the underground tombs. I want a word that I might set afire, that might set me afire. A word that I might return to life, that might return me to life. A word from which I might draw warmth and illuminate what is inside me.

The word that was in the beginning. The word that created the world out of nothing. The word that brought me here, to

this place. I make out my prayers with the tips of my fingers; I can sense the letters with my heart. Give me the word, the secret word, the secret of truth, the truth of wisdom. Give me the wisdom to forgive this loss. Give me my language.

Give me the first letter of the answer so that I might understand the ugliness of the world, so that I might make sense of the harm and forgive. Give me L so that I might love, C so that I might contain and find compassion. I am drained of life, and water is hard to find. I am parched and far from myself. Give me D so that I might depart, might disappear. Give me R so that I might rest, might relax, might recover and find a way to heal. Give me S, give me T, give me U and V and W. Give me my language so that I might cultivate this wasteland called my life, so that I might illuminate the tomb inhabited by the ghosts and devils crouching deep in the caves of memory. Give me F so that I might forget, might feel, might flourish like a tree. Give me language, O Lord of Language, to You the honor and the power and the glory, on earth as in heaven. I am small and weak and insignificant, and this vast creation shall be yours forever and ever.

Give me my language.

A Withered Old Woman

It's an ideal place for one to be unseen,
For a woman to be unseen.

A ROOM FOR TWENTY-FIVE dinars a night, in a cheap hotel that flaunts its ugliness as if it were an achievement. In the shadows of the mongrel crowds of Salmiya, among a group of sluggish cafés propped against each other as if holding themselves up, the cafés' patrons spread out along the sidewalk next to the red coals of their nargilehs, enveloped by the thick scent of grilled meat and sitting under a turban of smoke.

I melt into the throng and nearly disappear.
I have no odor and no shadow.
I am no one.

I am in the right place. Not just because no one would expect to find me here, but because the place resembles me—its unforgivable lack of shame, already old despite its youth, a pond of fish gutted by grief. The blue curtains, the burgundy sofas, the scandalous absence of any harmony among its parts—everything here is me.

I feel I've lost many limbs crossing the miles. Emptiness has left its stains on me. I have died and buried myself many times, and have nowhere left inside that is green and alive. I am an old woman at twenty-five, a withered old woman.

When I talk about why I ran away I have to be convincing. I can't come across like a crazy woman addicted to pills, a poet railing against the dryness and distance of things. It's easy to condemn me; I need to make things clear, quantifiable, with sharp edges, simple as a percentage. The answer was to run. The data is endless and the story isn't a straight line, but I will try anyway.

I want Faris to understand that I couldn't stay in that world a moment longer. A world of coffins and tombs. A world of shoes that walk all over me. I want to eliminate all possible ties to the conventional way of life. I want chaos—to sleep when I want and eat as I want, to be silent as much as I want. I want to want. I am starved for my will, starved for myself. I hunger to feel, for the first time in my life, that I am immune to violation, that no one's claws will rip away the shield masking my frailty.

I've started to understand that it's pointless for me to think about our marriage, and our impending divorce, as isolated from the seven years I spent in that basement. That is what I tried, and failed, to tell Faris: you married an old woman of twenty. They stole many years; years that I was supposed to live, innocent and youthful. I can't be your wife; nothing will grow here.

I'll stay here. I'll hide here my entire life, with my bottle of alprazolam, my socks, my glass vases stuffed with papers, my computer. Here in the hotel flaunting its three stars, celebrating its perpetual inferiority, and delighted by its truth. I'll stay here on the second floor, room twenty-eight, and write.

The Tomb

I Didn't Cry at My First Funeral

IT WASN'T THE FIRST TIME.

The first time I snuck out of the house I was nineteen years old. It was unplanned and careless. Life was a mess so I went out, and called going out “running away.” Then I called running away “salvation,” and salvation “death.” I said I won't go back no matter what. I'd only go back as a body.

I drove the black Subaru to the nearest Burger King and bought a super-sized Double Whopper. I wanted everything to be huge, greasy, and excessive. I paid, took the paper bag in one hand and the bucket of Pepsi in the other, and crossed the street to the girls' high school that I'd graduated from two years earlier. I crouched in front of the entrance and started eating.

It was in exactly this spot that I used to stand after school every day, waiting for my older brother to arrive, famished and dying to eat something. I'd inhale the greasy smell of fried food and think about french fries.

Getting to the other side of the street seemed impossible given the school's tight security. The school counselor would wait until the last student left before going home, her conscience clear. She had made it her duty in life to make sure we didn't cross those few meters to the restaurant unaccompanied by our “guardian.”

The girls who were braver than me, who dared violate the sacred and shatter taboos for the sake of a Whopper meal

or a Chicken Royale, those intrepid girls, fully in tune with their desires, were taught a lesson the next day, forced to stand in the middle of the schoolyard during lineup, where we all witnessed what I called the “three-minute roar,” because the principal’s voice went beyond mere yelling. It was perfectly humiliating, and delivered in such a manner as to produce a “story” from which we’d take away the moral and our lesson on the fate of wayward girls embroiled by desire.

Why didn’t we just wait for our guardians then? Because the driver isn’t considered a guardian. Because guardians would never permit their daughters to eat outside the home when the table there was overflowing with platters of rice and rich meaty sauces. Because there is pleasure in the forbidden.

The public humiliation hadn’t scared me, and I wouldn’t have minded the principal’s verbal beating, or the scandal of the public punishment in lineup, as much as I feared my brother would find out about it and the octopod arms of the school’s punishment would reach into my home. In those years I was convinced that bad deeds were rewarded ten times over, and good deeds were worthless.

Four years and I didn’t cross. I never gave in. I abandoned the voice inside me and just stood there, the sun boring into my head, eating the Whopper in my imagination—picking it up in my hands, tasting it, hot and juicy in my mouth.

That day, the first time I ran away, I purchased my forbidden fruit and sat with my back to the school entrance and ate. Screw the principal and the teachers and my big brother. I had my revenge.

I finished the mountain of rubbery American food within minutes, half in attempt to smother my fears. I grew heavier and calmer. I walked back to the car parked in front of the restaurant, wondering, now what? The food I’d eaten suddenly heaved in my stomach, then came up fiery and acidic. My cheeks were hot and my eyes burned with tears. I wiped my mouth with the napkins and paper bags in my

hand and sobbed. Why had the forbidden fruit I'd craved for so long rejected me?

It had been a year since I'd gotten my driver's license and I wasn't familiar with the streets. The Subaru was the driver's car; they'd notice it was gone any moment now. I was afraid I might get lost, but I was more afraid that my failed attempt to run away would become a scandal. Had I been serious about leaving, things wouldn't have happened so randomly, without a suitcase or money or even a passport.

The horizons collapsed before me. I kept driving forward, forward, always forward, sobbing. I knew I was fooling myself, but going back to that place, that house, that tomb—I wished for a moment that a car would hit me and I'd die and it'd be all over. Then I figured out the solution.

If I really died, all of my problems would be over. If I surrendered to death, getting through the rest of my days wouldn't be this hard. I'd deal with things like a corpse. My death would be thick, and the world wouldn't be able to get through.

I took the Fourth Ring Road to Jabriya. I turned right and continued until I got to a flower shop. Since I only had three dinars left after the super-sized lunch I'd eaten and vomited back up in a half hour, I bought the cheapest flowers: a bunch of day-old white daisies, simple and starting to smell bad. I drove to the Jabriya public garden, empty except for some Asians and Syrian families eating sandwiches on blankets they'd spread out on the grass. I walked in a straight line, as though following a secret call. I searched for the right gravesite, someplace appropriate for me and my symbolic death. While walking, I cursed my uncomfortable shoes and rash decisions. In the sandy space between two cactuses, I dug a hole and buried the white flower petals in it. I decided that I'd died, and called that spot my grave. I'd died and found peace and it was all over.

I didn't cry at my first funeral. I thought, if somehow they found out about my death they wouldn't have cried either. I

had a strange feeling of relief as I finished my ceremonial burial. I wouldn't feel any more pain now, because I was dead.

I went home. No one had found out that I'd snuck out, or returned, or that I'd died. For them, nothing had happened. But I knew that the part of me that had died, that I'd buried between the cactuses without tears or fanfare, was something I'd never get back.

The Pit

THE CAR ROLLED OVER AND with it the whole world.

The story could begin here. With the accident, when reality acquired teeth. I was in my pink pajamas, dipping french fries in chili sauce and watching television. I was thirteen and death had forgotten me.

Everything had been fine. Then the grown-ups started whispering, drying their tears with their sleeves and hugging each other, exchanging the news of my parents' death as quietly as possible. I was still dipping my fingers in the chili sauce and licking it off, as if the disaster hadn't happened. What was wrong with them? Why was everyone coming over to our house and crying? Why were they whispering like that? I went to see, crept over and hid behind the half-open door, strained to hear. I learned some new words: corpses, corpse washer, quick death, Arar Road. I heard people saying, "*There is no power and no strength save in God.*" I heard a lot of sighing and sniffing and tissues being pulled from boxes. I hadn't known, yet, that the disaster concerned me more than it did them.

When my uncle's wife came to close the door she saw me behind it and let out a sob. For a moment I thought she was going to scold me for eavesdropping, but when she saw me she put her hand on her mouth and cried, Oh sweet little Fatima! Just like that, for no reason. I froze, looking at them, hearing things that meant nothing. Does she know? No. What are you waiting for? We're waiting for Saqr. God help them. One of

my relatives asked me to go upstairs with her. Why? I want to watch the adults cry and fall apart. Come, Fatima, let's go play. Do you have any toys you can show me? She was crazy, this woman. Did she think I was five years old?

Then Saqr arrived, my half brother, my big brother, sixteen years older, square and stocky, with huge hands, a red face, and a thick beard, the number eleven between his eyes and three lines curving across his forehead. My uncles hugged him. Our deepest sympathies. May he rest in peace. God have mercy on your father. Dad? I asked. Dad died? Their faces clenched in tears that almost fell on my face. Saqr leaned over, looked at me with his red eyes. Your father and your mother, Fatima. Say, May they rest in peace. Mom too? May she rest in peace. Mom and Dad? May they rest in peace. May they rest in peace?

I fell into the pit. The pit I fell into is in me, the pit is me, the fall is me, the endless falling. I kicked. I punched my fists. Saqr hugged me tightly, said, Shhhh. There, there. Don't be afraid, I won't leave you. You'll come with me. I'll take care of you.

Yes. He'll take excellent care of me. I'll become his greatest concern; he'll take care of me so well I'll crumble, from the inside out.

Wedding-Night Pajamas

THE NIGHT OF MY WEDDING I went to bed wearing ridiculous cotton pajamas: blue pants flecked with white and a white top with a smiling and winking yellow tulip in the middle. Ridiculous and comfortable pajamas that served their purpose. Pajamas that said, “Don’t think about touching me!”

I had no interest in getting to know the man who had become my husband, or to ease his fright over the way our wedding had been conducted, with my brother’s thick hand pushing me toward him with barely a congratulations.

As the cars parked in rows outside the house, the guests thought perhaps they had the wrong place. Where were the drums and the guests? they wondered. Where were the ululations? Where were the festive lights? The Sri Lankan maid opened the door and waved them inside to the sitting room. There sat Faris with his mom, two sisters, five aunts, and a few female cousins, waiting for the “celebration” to begin. His mom, seeking reassurance, asked, Is it today? Everyone searched themselves and their mobiles for the date. His sisters were annoyed with their skyscraper-high hairdos; were annoyed as well with the joke of calling this a celebration, given the screaming indifference of the residents of the house, our house. After a few minutes Wadha went downstairs and told them the bride was still getting ready. After a few more minutes Badriya entered, covered in her abaya, and asked Faris to sit in the salon because Saqr would meet him there in a few minutes.

It wasn't a few minutes. Faris had waited nearly an hour when the door opened and Saqr came in, sat back against the cushions next to him, and offered him some sunflower seeds, avoiding any conversation that might lead to me, the skinny sacrificial bride.

A half hour later I went upstairs to them, like the dead rising from the grave, the body wasted away in the soil. Badriya had bought me a white chiffon outfit, the closest thing possible to a wedding dress, given the glaring absence of all signs of a wedding. The guests mumbled in disbelief because I came in alone, without any procession or ululations, carrying the heavy suitcase of my clothing, until Chandra rushed to take it from me. I looked around for the man who'd become my husband.

Badriya hugged me as she took my hand to lead me to the salon to see the groom. I wasn't thinking about Faris, I was thinking about Saqr, about what he'd say had he seen me in a gauzy chiffon dress. My body felt hot. The women started their ululations, and Badriya joined them. Wadha averted her eyes and just walked at the end of the procession. At the door of the salon, Badriya pushed me inside. I didn't look at Faris, and Saqr didn't look at me. Congratulations. He said it while staring at the carpet.

Those are the details of my wedding day, with its suspicious calm and funerary silence. I climbed into the limousine next to Faris. Our hands accidentally brushed against each other and I pulled mine away, drawing it up inside my sleeve. He looked at me, baffled; I averted my eyes. To the Hilton, he said to the driver. He looked at me the whole way, at my painted fingernails hiding inside the sleeves of this disaster.

We entered the hotel suite. It was very beautiful. The couches wrapped around the corner of the room, beige with brown, red, and olive cushions. The bedspread was white cotton like a drifting cloud. There was a twenty-two-inch television and a shiny black kitchenette. The windows went on forever. I felt dizzy. I pulled all the curtains closed and turned to Faris, who

was sitting on the edge of the double bed, examining me in great confusion and fighting to overcome his feelings of cowardice. He got control of himself and gave me a little smile. I saw in that smile that he was handsome. I should have smiled back.

“Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“I made us dinner reservations.”

“I’m a little under the weather.”

“Oh?”

I hesitated, then said, “I have my period.”

His face reddened and he answered politely: “I hope you feel better. There’s no need to go out. We’ll eat in the suite.”

He lifted the phone to order dinner. I was in the bathroom, pondering—in great disbelief—the size of the Jacuzzi, after seven years of showering standing up. I locked the bathroom door and sat on the cold marble edge. The mirror in front of me was smiling. You devil, Fatima! You like the Jacuzzi more than your husband outside. I laughed, sliding my hand across the white polished surface of this perfectly beautiful thing that I would soon sink into. I turned on the faucet. A waterfall of hot water rushed out and the room filled with steam and the scent of lavender. I emptied all the bottles of soap into the tub and made many bubbles. I soaked there for an hour. For an hour I played, for an hour I was the child I used to be.

When I came out of the bathroom, drying my hair with a towel, Faris was sitting on the couch in front of the television looking for a movie to watch. When he saw me and my ridiculous pajamas he forced a smile and looked at the ground. He’d gotten the message.

“Dinner is cold!” he scolded me gently, pointing at the dinner table with its covered metal trays. I sat on the chair opposite and ate some french fries. I looked at the lasagna, but didn’t dare eat it. The presence of this man who’d become my husband made me anxious. I barely ate, and he barely ate. Neither of us were happy with the other. Silence prevailed.

I thanked him and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth. When I came out I found that he'd pushed the long couch closer to the television and spread some pillows out on it. Come here, next to me. We'll watch a movie for a little while then we'll sleep. As he spoke, he patted the spot next to him on the couch.

"I'm tired. I'll go to bed," I said as I buried myself under the comforter. I wrapped the comforter around me for more protection. I smothered my body, shuttered my pores, and disappeared far into myself, an earthworm.

"Are you cold?" Faris asked.

"There's another blanket in the closet," I said. "Good night."

Silence.

"Good night," came his response.

Evening of the Third Day

HIS HAND WAS WRAPPED TIGHTLY around my neck, nearly breaking it. He stood behind me, an impossible wall, bringing me down to the basement.

The funeral had ended and the crowd dispersed. I said goodbye to my uncle's house and moved with him "far away to here," descending down into the lowest depths of reality. Fourteen steps was all that separated me from the world.

My heart lurched with every step down, seeing the damp blotches spreading across the wall's surface, the green mold peering at me menacingly from the cracks. It was pitch dark and the smell betrayed the slow decay of a place that had died long ago and was decomposing at its leisure. Saqr pressed some switches and the blue lights of the long neon bulbs trembled. There were wires fixed to the wall with tape. The place looked like it had vomited its guts out. The vast desert of what he called my room spread before me, and he gently pushed my shoulder into it, a mouth that opened to swallow me up.

"You'll live with us from now on," he said. "You can be my daughter instead of my sister. You're too young to be my sister anyway. You can be a sister to my children."

My heart filled with anguish and I closed my eyes. This basement is my room? I'm afraid of basements. We have no choice, he'd said. They didn't have any extra rooms. There was a spare room on the second floor but he had decided to fill it with sports equipment.

I looked around. The carpet was dark olive; walking on it scratched the soul. On the ceiling above my head, yellow stains spread out over a white wasteland. The air conditioner droned incessantly. He turned it off and five minutes later the room smelt musty. Since it was a basement, there were no windows. The room looked out only onto its own ugliness, and knew nothing of the world other than the musings that sprouted from its dark woods. The air was heavy with the smell of the little white mothballs scattered here and there. This meant I wasn't alone. I'd entered a utopia of rodents; generations upon generations of cockroaches and mice had established countless civilizations here before I came, with the rapping of my sandals and spasms of fear, crowding in to fight for space.

I would spend seven years of my life in this place. Compared to my pink room at my parents' house, this basement was a cowshed. I cried for days, hugging a picture of my parents. I wept not just over their death but over the death of the carpet in my room, my little chandelier, the floral wallpaper, of how the room smelled of strawberries, many things. I didn't know why, having suddenly lost my parents, I had to lose these things too.

“Where are my things?”

“We got rid of some of them,” he said, nodding toward the small pile that remained. Most of them, he meant. I didn't ask why; I was still afraid of his big belly and red skin. But he was generous enough to explain. He went into great detail, telling me why it is forbidden to buy dolls, because they are images of man that keep the angels away, especially “depraved Barbie” that plants debauched ideas in girls' minds. Two new concepts entered into my vocabulary: depravity and debauchery.

With the exception of my bedspread and clothes, I wasn't allowed to hold on to my life. All of the beautiful things departed at once: my mother, my father, my toys and my room, my teddy bear and my big wooden dollhouse. Everything died; everything except me. I was now an orphan, and

a pit opened up around me ready to drink from my soul. He said, “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to the place,” and put his hand on my shoulder. His hand was heavy, like the emptiness pulling me under.

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by Rana Haddad

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