

Velvet

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Winter's here again
Keep me in your mind
Keep me in your mind
Winter's here again
Fairuz

THE RAIN WAS NOT IN a docile mood. It certainly wasn't flowing, soft, or gentle, nor was it graceful, treading lightly on the earth.

The rain beat down viciously on naked life, its hard drops splitting the rough crust of the earth. Daggers of water pierced the dusty flanks of the ground, thrusting rapidly and in quick succession, as if laden with emotion, or haunted by ancient sorrow, or filled with deeply buried rancor.

The veins of the earth continuously bled black water. The surging water closed the streets, rising to the very edges of the sidewalks. It poured into the lanes, where streams formed, burdened with mud, while the network of sewer pipes disgorged the filth in their bellies onto the roads.

The water poured down like a hail of bullets on terrified windows. Some of the bullets crept in at the edges of the windows, their frames now dislodged, enfeebled by the effects of advancing age. Lightning flashes split the sky, the thunderclaps colliding, scolding men unprotected in the night streets. Men in houses—not fully fortified against the unreasonable effects of nature—protected themselves with television screens devoid of interest, and with cups of consoling tea that had absorbed the brewing vengeance, and that were redolent with winter sage and the stifling breath of small kerosene heaters.

That was the first day of the rain. People allowed themselves to feel betrayed, as the day before, the sun had spread its ripe yellow over half the sky and that general feeling of winter

gloom had retreated, even if a deceitful cold sting still penetrated their bodies, through toughened skin. Where was all this angry water coming from? “God’s own downpour!” The words rose from some people in an amazement very likely to fall under the heading of blaspheming divine omnipotence. Vendors with display stands spread along the roadsides rushed to gather up their copious wares—combs, hairbrushes, key chains, sunglasses, leather wallets, cases for cell phones—after the earth exploded in springs of water under their displays. Meanwhile, produce sellers scurried to rescue crates of tomatoes, cucumbers, lemons, onions, potatoes, cabbages, apples, chestnuts, sweet potatoes, oranges, tangerines, and pomelos that displayed their maternal firmness on angled display tables along the walls.

On the second day of the rain, the skies were gloomier and the roadways were muddier and blacker. People with pale faces ran about, covering their heads and exposed faces with shawls and keffiyehs against the storming water and buffeting wind. Even so, their steps were heavier at the end of the day, with the weight of the rain descending on their backs in torrents.

On the third day of the rain, which continued with unflagging zeal, the sky awoke in the morning gloomy, dispirited, and very dark. Deep wounds opened in the earth, whose pus overflowed into the asphalt streets, long neglected, whose tar coating had dissolved long before. People walked listlessly, their backs bent, exhausted; the rain slapped their sides and they did not resist or make any real effort to avoid it.

The rain did not stop pouring for seven days. During the day the sunlight was short, so the light diminished, like a hoarse voice fading, to the vanishing point; and at night the darkness thickened, the skies covering the moon and the stars, which went into a long swoon. At times the rain was rushed, as if it wanted to empty everything in the womb of the sky and be done at last with its burden, or perhaps its sin. At other times it slowed, as if its will were feeble, the space between one raindrop and the next becoming wider and longer, as if

the sky's mouth had gone dry, before the water once again reclaimed its anger, its lash, and its bluster.

Lakes overflowed on the roofs of houses, and puddles appeared here and there where people walked, while twisting rivers wound through narrow lanes. People got used to leaping in the muddy roads during the days of rain, though they were unable to keep their feet completely out of the puddles that suddenly gaped before them. It was something that in all likelihood made them more impetuous than usual.

The deliberate, monotonous drumming of the water and the heavy downpours were interspersed with pauses, space for the sky to catch its breath and gather new, watery energy. But the bubbling rain was an established fact, as continuous as if it were eternal.

On the eighth day the rain stopped suddenly, just like that, without slowing down or diminishing gradually as a prelude to stopping. All at once the sky went from a jungle of clouds to a desert, and a large sun rose over the world. The rivers of mud in the roadways turned into paths of hard, cracked concrete, as if they hadn't been wet for long days, when languid spaces of morning alternated with long, desolate spaces of evening. But the persistent odor of the water remained in the air and settled into every place, clinging to the bodies of people completely exhausted by the days of water, lurking in the fur of cats stretched lazily on the smooth ledges outside the houses. Inside, the odor dominated the accumulated smells of sweat, urine, kerosene, and the oil used and reused for frying, whose fumes hung in the air of houses crammed with human beings whose flesh, or some of it, had a quarrel with warm bathwater. The odor established itself in the walls, their surfaces cracked and shedding worn paint. It was not a good smell, as it married humidity and leftover decay. It snatched away the air breathed by all beings, and that left the temper of the cosmos roiled and brackish. A trace of something like disintegration clung to the edges of both the water and the air.

The sun was very yellow, and very low over the camp and the people, as close as could be to a summer sun, except that it wasn't burning. This sun was like a discovery, as it was clear under its revealing light how worn down the houses were. It was clear in the rising daylight that fatigue had afflicted people's shoes, their cheap leather holding together only with difficulty, and their old woolen shawls, and their worn coats, some with forgotten mothballs still stuffed in their lined inner pockets.

Nonetheless, despite the obvious feebleness and overall frayed state of life during the violent era of a watery universe, and despite the specter of a wasteland planted by the rain during its dark days, no complaint rose to the heavens, nor was there open grumbling about God's water. People hid the spells of fever that settled in their bodies and bore up under the loosening of their joints and shaking of their limbs, and shut their mouths over the spray of their violent dry coughing.

In general, people's feelings remained hidden. But Hawwa's feelings remained open during the violent, beating rain, yearning for the water, for ever more water. Hawwa loves the sun, but she loves the clouds more. While others crave radiant, sunny, cloudless skies, she prefers them angry, overcast, and frowning, pouring out rain.

Anyway, it's a beautiful morning, she says to herself from behind the window of her house, as she opens it on a horizon no longer wet, on a day when the sun has wakened after a long sleep. Today sun, a vision of summer, and daylight; tomorrow water and companionable winter, freighted with promise. When Hawwa listens a little she can hear jubilant birdsong, and human clamor in the houses of the camp, where life yawns in waking. She hears the clatter of restless souls, and she hears Fairuz singing: "Fly, O kite, fly, O paper and string, I wish I were a little girl again, on the neighbors' roof." The song plays from the radio, Fairuz's voice embellished with pure joy.

Hawwa smiles to herself. She loves Fairuz's paper kite, but she absolutely does not want to be a little girl again.

1

THE RUTTED LANE TAKES HAWWA, and she surrenders to it. She has hardly passed through it when she enters a second rutted lane, still more wrinkled, and then two others, no less corrugated. But Hawwa does not seem careful or cautious as she walks; her feet, in black leather boots with collars of matted brown fur, glide along the path mechanically and lightly, as usual.

Hawwa knows the lanes of Baqa'a Camp well, and they rarely surprise her. She has learned them by heart, with their austere geography, outwardly stable; with their long-standing cracks; with their pockmarks that store dark, sticky wastewater; with their sandy pimples that are no sooner picked off than they form again. She knows their scales, roughening their rugged hands; their hillocks, fresh and muddy or dried; their mounds of cement, dried at the edges of the houses; their random collections of gravel, pebbles, and stones; their puddles of water, accumulated from the wastes of the skies and the houses; and their thin streams that dig narrow furrows. She knows the lanes with the lone plastic slipper, nearly split, overturned on the path, and the sole of a sandal, gnawed at the toes; with the limbs of a half-buried doll, the head showing, implanted with locks of coarse blond hair, one eye gouged out; with the eight hopscotch squares, laid out on a bald patch of earth, their sides not completely straight, drawn with thick blue paint, partly worn away. Hawwa crosses the hopscotch

squares, being careful not to step on the lines, in keeping with the rules of the game. In her imagination, which is still active, she casts a stone shaped like a cake of soap, polished on both sides. With a practiced throw she lands it at the heart of one of the squares, without letting it land on any of the faded blue lines or beyond the outside lines.

The biting cold morning air strikes her face, or what shows of it. She covers her frozen nose with a part of the scarf wrapped around her neck, made from amber wool with off-white carnations scattered over it, crocheted with a large hook. She has replaced her cotton head covering with another of a soft wool and polyester blend, colored with intertwining shades of beige, crimson, and cocoa, and wound firmly around her hair and ears. Even so, the air whistles its freezing cold through the threads of the scarf over her ears. She hunches her shoulders over her chest. "Cold enough to cut a nail in two!" She remembers her father's expression from long ago, as she carefully fastens the top button of the black coat hugging her body.

"Abu Lutfi! Abu Lutfi!"

A raucous voice was calling her father after dawn, coupled with a heavy pounding on the iron door of their house, making the walls shiver. They curled up in their beds, hiding their expectant heads under their heavy covers that gave off an odor of humidity, kerosene, and the chill stored in the hidden bodies.

Her father, Mousa, who worked as a builder, hated winter days and hated rainy days. The people in his household also hated winter, and they hated rain, and they hated their father during the rain and the winter, just as they hated him before and after winter. During many winters, as in other seasons, when her mother, Rabia, would cautiously poke one side of his huge back, his senses would rouse all at once, in a whinnying snort. She would pull back fearfully as he turned over

on his back, spreading his body over most of the surface of the bed. Once again she would shake him a little, with the palm of her hand bent back; he would raise his long arm, ending in a broad, swollen palm, toward her face, as she pulled back, out of reach. Then he got up, gathering his slack body, the metal bed frame shaking violently, its clatter tearing the dark silence. He sat on the edge of the bed, a mass of lava gurgling in the mouth of a volcano. With the rough soles of his feet, he searched for his slippers and kicked one of them under the bed, by mistake or because of his crankiness. “Fuck you, for the fucking morning!” He took aim at Rabia with his eyes, half closed by the heavy curtains of his eyelids; she lay flat on the floor, trying to squeeze half her body under the bed, stretching her heavy arm as far as possible, to pick up the stray slipper. Then she guided his stony heels into the slippers with her hand. He got up dizzily, with his repelling face, and headed for the bathroom, preceded by continuous coughing, both nasal and rumbling from the effects of the dark phlegm settled in the deep well of his throat. The noise of the spit coming from his moist throat ruptured the air of the bathroom, and from beneath the door came the stench of dark piss, like a cloud, along with the crude sound of a long, thick stream of urine that nearly broke the bottom of the toilet.

Her oldest sister, Afaf, cracked four eggs into the blackened aluminum skillet, and the heat of the olive oil set the glutinous eggs, making four suns gleam in the middle of a foamy white sea. Meanwhile, the water started to tremble in the metal teapot, with its coating of chipped blue enamel; she added two spoons of tea and six of sugar. As soon as the bright yellow of the eggs faded and the foam of their whites subsided, she turned off the gas burner, one of three in the stove, under the pan, as well as turning off the second burner under the teapot. She stirred the water, thickened with tea leaves and sugar, many times, then left it to steep. Wrapping a towel around the hot handle of the frying pan, she rushed

off with it, down the fairly high step from the kitchen to the small living room, which Mousa had fashioned by biting off a part of the entrance to the house and a part of one of its two rooms, after his offspring multiplied, so it could serve all purposes, as a bedroom, a dining room, and a room where he could fling himself down in front of the television. Afaf placed the frying pan in the middle of the low, round table, then Hawwa joined her with a tray bearing the teapot, its handle wrapped in a crushed rag taken from the remains of a tattered t-shirt, along with straight-sided glass cups, a plate of Nabulsi cheese, a plate of green olives, a plate with two tomatoes cut into wedges, and a plate each of oil and za'atar, all of which she distributed on the table.

Her middle sister, Sajida, folded the mattresses spread out in the corner of the room where the girls slept, all except the one belonging to Duha, their youngest sister. The small child with her tiny frame lifted her stick-thin legs to the smooth surface of her belly, curling up under the blanket, which was folded over her twice. Her shrinking body and spirit harbored an unshakable peace, at least at that moment; Duha's limbs were not long enough for her to join in the daily toil of life. Hawwa thought that Duha's feminine flesh would probably never blossom like that of her sisters, or at least that she would not resemble her, Hawwa, specifically.

Hawwa, who was younger than Afaf and Sajida, had the largest build among the sisters, and in some ways she was the most a woman. They were convinced that she grew every day; and on the day when she had leaked a stream of dark blood, which traced a wide line on her white thigh and descended to her compact calf and her thin ankle, her mother had been terrified. She had led her to the doctor in the camp's medical facility, and he had confirmed what she feared. "But she's young, really young!" she had said to the doctor. "Oh Lord, what a catastrophe!" she repeated to herself, as she dragged her heavy heart along the street. Hawwa stopped her at a cart

selling ice cream. “Yamma, Mommy! Buy me an Eskimo!” Rabia looked at her with compassion for a few seconds. Then the compassion in her eyes was replaced by hot anger and the blood boiled in her limbs; she made a fist of her trembling hand and hit Hawwa’s shoulder out of spite, knocking her off balance so that she nearly fell. Before they reached the house, the mother had taken her little girl aside in a lane empty of all but a few flies hovering over a split garbage bag, spilling chunks of rice, a sticky rotten tomato, a wilted cabbage leaf, yellowed cilantro leaves, and onion skins. She leaned over her face and warned her: “Don’t you dare let anyone know you’ve bled! Is that clear?” Hawwa was still crying for the Eskimo she hadn’t gotten. Her lips, unstained by the blood-red tint of the popsicle, were puffed up with a mix of tears and snot. The eight-year-old child had known very well why she was crying hotly. But she had not understood why tears were pouring from her mother’s eyes, accompanied by suppressed sobbing.

Now, Duha seemed plunged into a deep sleep. The wrinkled end of her thumb, with its nail nearly dissolved from her continuous sucking, rested at the edge of her mouth. The sound of her regular breathing formed an abiding, flowing tune, spreading a passing warmth throughout the room. Hawwa lit the kerosene heater in the kitchen, watching the thin conduits as they were populated by flames. She brought her hands close to the metal body of the heater, trying to store some of the warmth in her body. But what came into her instead was the odor of the sputtering kerosene in its first huskiness, an odor that would remain with her the whole day long. She picked up the stove by its thin metal arm, the burning liquid shaking in its half-full belly, and walked with it to the living room, balancing it with difficulty, not letting it lean to either side. Her brothers Lutfi and Ayid slept on mattresses next to each other in one corner. She put down the heater near the round table, and the flames flared up red. “Lutfi! Lutfi!” She pushed her older brother’s shoulder, and the younger Ayid opened his

eyes anxiously. She exchanged a conspiratorial look with him, and he went on sleeping, or pretending to, curled up in his place, while she lifted the blanket to cover the shaved half of his head and the recently stitched wound above his forehead. “Lutfi! Get up and have breakfast!”

Her father’s coughing rose continuously, as he crossed the small distance from the bathroom to the low tabliya tray table. He took his place on the padded pallet that was his alone, during the long, demanding evenings, and during the days of unemployment or idleness, which he also spent at home—days that were disturbing and exhausting for his household. Her mother sat down near him, but far away enough to give him room to spread his temper unimpeded. She handed him the round pita loaf and he divided it in two, before shouting for Lutfi, through his phlegm: “Lutfi! *Get up!*” Lutfi stood up, while Ayid shrank back under his heavy blanket, hiding his head with its spiky, close-cut hair under it completely.

With a big piece of the bread, folded over, Mousa split off one of the pregnant, sunny eggs in the frying pan, scooping up the entire egg and devouring it. Afaf poured the tea for him in a thick glass cup, then returned it to the teapot and poured it again, the liquid now thicker and darker red. The steam from the brewed tea hung in the air of the room, its aroma blotting out a stale stench. Rabia stretched her hand to the plate of tomatoes and took one quickly, as if pilfering it; she followed it with a small piece of bread dipped in oil and za’atar, chewing slowly. Mousa turned his eyes to where Ayid lay, curled up. He took a long, preparatory sip of tea. He called Hawwa, who was helping Sajida fold Lutfi’s heavy mattress, and was stuffing his heavy blanket into the metal cabinet that held the covers and blankets. Her father’s voice rose over the creaking of the hinges as she pressed on the bulging cabinet doors with her youthful body, so they would close over the piled-up mattresses.

“Hawwa! Check on Ayid.”

Hawwa sent a pleading look to Sajida, who covered half her face with both of Lutfi's pillows and hurried into the other room with them. Hawwa surrendered to the morning obligation, on this morning that was colder than usual. A small piece of plain bread was still hanging from her mother's fingers, as she embraced her with a look of fear mixed with compassion. Hawwa bent over Ayid, who had adopted the position of a corpse thrown randomly in its place. She inserted her hand under his blanket and probed the parts of his body, with a movement that conveyed both thoroughness and deliberation. She withdrew her hand from under the cover and half looked into her father's eyes: "He's dry!"

Mousa got up from the floor like a spring suddenly released. Rabia put out her short arm to turn him back: "Finish your breakfast!"

He shook off her arm and walked to Ayid's mattress. With the edge of his bare foot he pulled back the heavy blanket spread over the cowering body of his son. Ayid bent his legs while clenching his eyes shut. Mousa inserted the broad, cracked sole of his foot between his little boy's legs, feeling the cold dampness below his belly and examining with his toes the spots of urine in the middle of the mattress. His roar pierced the morning in the apprehensive house: "Afaf! The strap!"

Rabia half leaned on a knee, trying to stand up. He forbade her forcefully: "Stay where you are!"

Rabia sat down again, where she was, cross-legged, pressing her fists into her legs, which felt weak and numb. A huge tremor shook Ayid's body. He tried to gather in his scattered limbs, in an attempt to reduce the area of his flesh exposed to the pain, raising his thin arms to his face. Hawwa was preoccupied with covering her brother with his blanket again, and her father pushed her hip with his heavy, stony foot, making her fall on top of him. Rabia pleaded with him to let them go this morning, but the blows of the strap fell thick and fast on Hawwa and Ayid, by turns or together. Hawwa tried to

cover Ayid's austere body with her full flesh, its softness apparent under her nightgown, so the blows of the strap flying through the air fell on her hips, her back, and the tops of her arms. Each stripe produced a long moan, as if she were pulling it out of deep pain, cutting across Ayid's screams, which bumped against the ceiling of the room. Her father glared at her: "Shut up! I don't want to hear your voice!"

Rabia was getting up again. Mousa shot her a warning look to deter her, before wrapping part of the strap around four fingers and bringing it down again on their bodies, which clung together. Hawwa put her closed hand over her mouth, pressing hard to stifle her moans, while her body trembled violently. Ayid buried his head between his arms completely, closing his mouth over his suppressed screams, which took the form of a drawn-out groan at each blow that missed Hawwa and landed on his legs or back. Rabia wiped her feverish face, as pain enveloped her body with each sting of the lash shining on the bodies of her two little ones.

When Mousa had finally had enough of them, he came back to the steeping cup of tea that waited for him. Still standing, he gulped down what was left of it. He inspected his empty pack of cigarettes, crushed it, and threw it on the table. His eyes followed Lutfi, who had deliberately remained in the bathroom until after the morning ritual of the lash was over. Now he sat on the edge of the pallet and wiped up what was left of the eggs in the skillet. Mousa's eyes besieged his firstborn until their eyes met. He said, "Give me a cigarette!"

Lutfi soaked a big piece of bread in oil, dipped it in the za'atar, and ate the bite slowly. He followed that with an olive, stripping off its moist flesh in his mouth before throwing the pit on the table. Rabia poured the steeping tea, now a deep red, for him and for herself. He tried to avoid his father's eyes as he reached for the last tomato wedge, saying, "I don't have any!"

Hawwa spread the blanket over Ayid, who continued his suppressed groaning. She curled up beside him, hugging her

chest and crying; the tears stung her red cheeks. Her father coughed up the phlegm sticking in his throat, collecting it with noisy snorts and whinnies, then spat it into a little flowerpot sitting on the sill of the room's one window, which was closed. In the past it had held a stunted green plant, which had turned into a dry, woody branch planted in a dark mass of mud amid cigarette butts. As Lutfi chewed his bite slowly, Mousa brought his face close to him and motioned with his eyes, saying, "Search in your socks. You might find a cigarette or two."

Lutfi stretched out his leg and took a pack of his Gold Star cigarettes from the top of his sock, where they were hidden beside his foot, a little above the ankle. Mousa snatched the pack and took five cigarettes, lining them up in his empty pack of Reems. He tossed Lutfi's package back to him, then asked, "And the money?"

Lutfi stifled his wrath as he took back his cigarette pack and counted what was left in it. He looked at his mother, who was opening the neck of her galabiya with her fingers. He lowered his eyes to the floor and took a sip of tea, then another. Then he answered, without lifting his eyes to either of them: "Yesterday I gave Mother five dinars."

Rabia pulled aside the collar of her galabiya, surrendering to Mousa's commanding look. She plunged her hand down to her chest and pulled out the folded bill, which had not yet had its fill of dampness from one of her full breasts. Feeling loss and emptiness in her heart, she gave him the money, and chewed a piece of dry bread from among the crumbs of the meal collected on the table.

It took them some time to absorb the fact that he had left, at last, and that the air of the house was free of his voice and his odor, and that the oppressive feeling that accompanied his presence had dissipated, or at least thinned. Anticipation crouched on their shoulders as they closely watched the final minutes before he disappeared from their day, while he put on his reddish-brown boots with corrugated soles and shanks

lined with thick broadcloth, as well as his heavy fatigue jacket and his black leather hat lined with fake fur. The hat had two broad flaps that hung down from the sides to cover his ears, making him look like a hunting dog, with his cautious gait. He opened the door of the house and stood on the stoop, separated from the lane by three steps on one side; he lit a cigarette, holding the smoke in his lungs before breathing it out; he raised the collar of his jacket to cover his chin, and walked away. When the street had swallowed him up, a different life crept into the house, one that was more bearable.

In the kitchen, Sajida pumped the handle of the kerosene stove several times to compress the air, until the fire caught, and its crackle deadened the sound of the morning call to prayer. Hawwa filled the tall, cylindrical aluminum bucket with water from the faucet in the bathroom and carried it to the kitchen, walking like a penguin with wide steps, and making a great effort not to tip the bucket to one side or the other. Her well-muscled arms held the bucket by its two handles; the lashes that marked her back and her arms flashed with pain, increasing or lightening according to the movement of the heavy water in the bucket. She raised the bucket with all the strength she could muster and settled it on the grate of the stove, so the crackling, cawing circle of flame spread out over its bottom. When the water had boiled, she extinguished the stove, wrapped a piece of fabric around each of the bucket handles, and carried it to the bathroom, even more slowly and ponderously this time. She was careful not to tilt it, but a few drops of hot water from a light jolt stung her hands; she swallowed the pain. Ayid sat on the low wooden bath stool, hugging his arms around his trembling body. Hawwa put the bucket on the cold bathroom floor. "I'm cold!" Ayid said, and she took him in her arms. He yelled from the burning of the lashes that gleamed on his arms. Hawwa rubbed his shoulders and his back until some warmth crept back into his delicate flesh, then she stripped off his pajamas, soaked in cold piss.

The steam rising from the bucket formed a warm, smoky cloud. Hawwa took off the galabiya she wore over a white, short-sleeved cotton blouse and navy pants of a cheap, polyester-blend corduroy, which stretched to allow her well-rounded bottom and fleshy thighs to expand at ease. She folded over her pant legs several times, to just below the knee, then filled a metal basin three-quarters full with cold water from the faucet, and added enough hot water from the bucket to make it bearable. She measured the temperature of the water with her elbow, and poured the warm water over Ayid's shoulders. His body recoiled for a moment, until his flesh became accustomed to the refreshing soap and water. Hawwa rubbed his prickly hair with Nabulsi soap, then scrubbed his back, stomach, arms, and stick-like legs with a loofah covered in soapy foam. He moaned at the places where the loofah stirred up the sting of the lashes, but it wasn't long before he surrendered to that feeling of limpness and a certain serenity that comes after great pain.

At eleven years of age, Hawwa was a mature woman, plump, fully fertile, her flesh plainly visible and pliable, slack and yet solid at the same time. She was only three years older than Ayid, and yet she seemed like his mother. Ayid was skinny, with a mousy figure, bowed down. His frame turned inward and his limbs inclined to hunch over in sleep and when he sat, and that made him look constantly frightened. No one knew whether his fear had imprinted itself on his body or whether the fear had arisen from the nature of his body as he grew, and had then bent his spirit. Whichever way it had happened, Ayid was afraid of anything and everything—afraid of rain, coupled with angry thunder and lightning; afraid of the dark night in the street, when he would clutch his mother's hand tightly and walk hurriedly, fleeing from imaginary footsteps that might catch up to him; afraid of the darkness of the night at home, when Rabia would get up on still, black nights and feel her way in the gloom, looking like the ghoul that eats children and sucks their bones in the stories Afaf told him and

Duha; afraid of how his father looked when he came home at the end of the day; afraid of his father's face looking at him; afraid of his father's eyes boring into his eyes; afraid of his father's voice calling him: "Boy!"

Ayid would flinch, but he was careful to answer, "Yes, Yaba!"

On the days when the cold was greater and the piss more abundant, so that his clothes were almost completely soaked, Hawwa carried him to the bathroom. He lay in her arms like a nursing child, his face clinging to her full breast, engulfed in the smell of her morning flesh and aware of a sense of safety in her embrace.

Hawwa was growing every day and every hour. She was ahead of Afaf and Sajida, and beside her, Duha seemed to shrink ever faster. It worried Rabia, especially when Hawwa's breasts began to form, like two pomelos in their early winter yearning. She cut a piece of cloth two yards long and half a yard wide and bound it securely, swaddling her breasts, nearly flattening them. Hawwa told her that she couldn't breathe, so Rabia said she could loosen the band when she slept. During the night, when she lay on her mattress near her sisters, Hawwa abandoned caution and spread out her body, heedless of the darkness and its possibilities, so all of her curves bloomed, even those hidden during the day, and she became a woman.

During the day, Hawwa's body could lug and tote what her sisters and even her mother could not, so her strong, firm frame was put to use for all the hard labor. She carried Ayid's heavy mattress up to the roof, climbing two sets of concrete steps that jutted from the walls in one of the corners of the kitchen. The steps were neither level nor even in size, and over time some of the edges had broken, so they held lurking dangers. One day her foot slipped on one of the upper steps of the first set, as she was carrying a tub of laundry, and she fell backward with the tub, to the bottom step. For a few moments she couldn't get up; her eyes were fixed on the kitchen ceiling.

Her mother and her sisters rushed to help her, frightened. But Hawwa pushed up her prone body and stood erect, as if she had never fallen down. She collected the scattered wash and started up to the roof again to hang it out. Then she came down, folded Ayid's mattress and blanket, loaded them onto her back, and took them up to the roof.

Ayid cried on the day Hawwa was married. He was still wetting himself during many winter nights, and during some summer nights as well. He realized that Hawwa's wonderfully sturdy body would not be there in the mornings, to cover most of his body and take most of the stinging lashes for him.

Now Hawwa cuts through the narrow streets of the camp, with which she shares a close acquaintance, in some places an intimate one. The walls of the houses, bearing the signature of misery, poverty, overcrowding, and the inarticulate, injudicious writings of the time, exude the odor of defeated life and exhausted people, who have surrendered to the vicissitudes of their days. As much as possible Hawwa avoids walking in the narrowest lanes, where the odors of exhaustion and coercion stagger together with the smell of frying oil, depleted from repeated use. She likes the wide streets that face the sun, the air, and the sky more comfortably.

With its two parallel rows of wide buttons, descending from the chest to the middle of the hips, Hawwa's coat reaches to the top of her ankles, and flows in a wide skirt from her buttocks. The coat emphasizes her firm figure, her chiseled waist, and the harmonious distribution of muscle and fat in her body, now in its forties, amid flaring fullness in certain places. The edge of her silver dress shows below the coat. When the air strikes her towering form, the skirt of the coat, split in back, swirls around her on either side, and the small, intensely red flowers with a faint touch of silver that are scattered over her dress seem to glow. Hawwa raises her eyes to the ripe sun, intensely yellow, imprinted in the bowl of an

intensely blue sky. The copious sunlight that spills everywhere over the camp keeps its heat frozen within. The sun seems like a drawing, still and completely silent, while the icy air rages in the streets, striking bodies violently.

Hawwa buries one of her hands, softened with Vaseline, in the pocket of her coat, and with the other she holds her black leather purse and a thick green plastic bag, bearing the name of a shoe store, which is carefully closed. She hears the sound of strong, successive blows and lifts her head toward the source. She sees Umm Said beating a multicolored carpet hanging from the roof of her house, with a long cane that ends in an oval of woven bamboo.

“God give you a good morning, Umm Qais!”

“Good morning, Umm Said!”

Umm Said’s head is wrapped in an orange wool scarf. She complains to Hawwa about the past days of profuse rain, while continuing to beat the damp carpet. The roofs and the floors leaked, and the carpets got wet, and the sewers overflowed, and rot crept onto the people in the house.

“It really killed us, Umm Qais!”

Hawwa lifts her head and smiles in agreement.

Umm Said complains of many other things unrelated to the days of rain, but that resulted from them or are added to them. The bus that Abu Said uses to carry supplies to the school cafeterias broke down, and the washing machine broke at the most crucial time, and her son Said’s wife has been sulking with her family for a month. Then she lowers her head, as if she wants to whisper in Hawwa’s ear from above. In a voice wrapped in rage and powerlessness, she says that her husband’s sister has been staying with them for over a week. She came from West Bank with four of her children. Umm Said stretches out her neck and presses it with her palm, in a meaningful gesture, saying, “A person could suffocate, sister!”

Hawwa consoles her: “God help us all.”

Hawwa moves on, giving herself to the hopeful December morning. In some spot deep inside she feels happiness, just as she feels that she loves this wintery morning without needing any reason to love it. With her eyes she sweeps the iron doors of houses, painted with cheap, immoderate, unruly colors, breaking the monotony of the gray surroundings, the walls and the streets: green with the vigor of mulukhiya when the leaves are first picked, edged in cream; mustard yellow with a frame of black; rust red with an apricot-colored lattice for two small windows above the door; sky blue with an arabesque design in pistachio; and amber with edges gilded boorishly, as befits the aesthetic aridity of the place. Hawwa contemplates windows cracked open enough to allow the nectar of the day to creep into rooms still shaking off the slackness of sleep. Her gaze passes over the haphazard maps of Palestine, drawn with red spray paint, like spots of blood plastered on the walls, and the words “Long Live Palestine!” and “Gaza Resists!” next to drawings of hearts of various sizes and colors, with arrows piercing them, some of them crooked. A favorite Fairuz song runs through her head. She hears it clearly: “I belong to my love, and he belongs to me. O little white bird, don’t ask me! Let no one scold, let none be shocked—I belong to my love, and he belongs to me.” Rapid footsteps follow her from behind; they come very near. She starts, and looks to the side. A man in his sixties passes beside her, his face and eyes lowered, carrying a white translucent bag with bread in it. She silences the song playing in her head. When the man and his footsteps have moved far enough away, she once again plays her piece of Fairuz, and the song blazes anew in her spirit: “My love called me, saying gone is winter’s gloom, the dove has returned, the apple trees are in bloom. . . .”

The flow of the song in her head converges with the vibration of her cell phone, announcing the arrival of a message in her mailbox. She slows her steps and puts her hand in the pocket of her coat, picking up the phone carefully. Heat rises

to her face. She stops for a bit to contain the light tremor that runs through her body. The tempo of the tremor is always the same, and it's not bothersome. In fact, the tremor can be exciting and enjoyable, and it's sometimes accompanied by a little perspiration. She even intentionally delays opening the message, keeping the tremor and its effects in her body for the longest possible time.

"May your morning be happy." Hawwa reads the message, and wipes the screen of the phone, which is smeared with her fingerprints. She embraces the few words once more, then closes the message box and returns the phone to the warmth of her coat pocket. She wipes her neck, perspiring from the remains of the tremor, under her scarf, and a gust of cold air strikes her. She lifts the collar of her coat, covering her neck, and walks on.

"My love called me, so I went right away. He stole me from sleep, he took my rest away. His way leads to beauty, and I'm going his way. Oh sun of love, spin our story today. . . ."

On the way an idea shines in her mind, not breaking the flow of the song in her spirit; a pristine idea, clear as the sun and the blue sky and this crystal morning: how beautiful life is! How very beautiful, at times.

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All That I Want to Forget

by Bothayna Al-Essa, translated by Michele Henjum

Sarab

by Raja Alem, translated by Leri Price

Gaza Weddings

by Ibrahim Nasrallah, translated by Nancy Roberts



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