

The Girl with Braided Hair

Rasha Adly

Translated by
Sarah Enany



First published in 2020 by
Hoopoe
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt
One Rockefeller Plaza, 10th floor, New York, NY 10020
www.hoopoefiction.com

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

Copyright © by Rasha Adly
First published in Arabic in 2017 as *Shaghaf* by Arab Scientific Publishers
Protected under the Berne Convention

English translation copyright © 2020 by Sarah Enany

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Dar el Kutub No. 25913/19
ISBN 978 977 416 987 8

Dar el Kutub Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Adly, Rasha

The Girl with Braided Hair / Rasha Adly.— Cairo: The American
University in Cairo Press, 2020.

p. cm.
ISBN 978 977 416 9 987 8

1. English fiction
823

1 2 3 4 5 24 23 22 21 20

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

Cairo: Winter 2012

YASMINE ARRIVED AT WORK AND headed straight for the Conservation Department. She put on a smock over her clothing, gloves and a mask, and sat down to continue with the painting that she had started work on a few days ago. She reached for it with great care, as it was ancient and all but falling apart. Watching her was Jean Simon, director of conservation at the Louvre, who had been appointed by the ministry especially to oversee and restore the priceless books damaged in the fire that had swept the Egyptian Scientific Institute in 2011. Noticing how nervous and careful she was being, he approached. "A true artist," he observed. "What a shame that the painting has no identifying information."

"Yes," she responded. "There are a lot of portraits out there of Egyptian faces, but there's something about this one that's different."

The director gazed thoughtfully at the painting. "I believe it is the first time I have come across a work by this particular painter. I don't recognize his style or the characteristics of his brushstrokes." He took a breath. "When an artist studies under a great master, frequently their brushstrokes will be similar, but this doesn't resemble anyone else's, not even any of the contemporary masters." He smiled. "In any case, don't worry. When you're done with the preliminary conservation, we can do an infrared examination, and it may yield something."

As he left the room, her phone pinged with a message. She picked it up hurriedly. 2, *Left Bank. I'll be there.* Smiling, she put the device back in her pocket.

2

SHERIF DIDN'T EXPECT HER TO text him back, no *I'm on the way* or *Sorry, I can't make it*. He would just let her know where he was. Sometimes she came; sometimes she didn't.

They had met at a conference on architecture. He was an architect who owned his own company, a firm that specialized in building luxury hotels and mansions for the wealthy; she was a professor of art history who specialized in Renaissance, Baroque, and Neo-Baroque art, well-known in architectural circles as a consultant to major construction firms. She had been recommended to him by a consulting architect he usually worked with, who had been forced by illness to excuse himself from working on a project. She had received a phone call from Sherif some days later, asking her to oversee the plans for a new construction project in the Baroque style.

Their romance had lasted a year; he had loved her passionately, and she had whispered "I love you" into his ear a few times. Suddenly, like a light switch flipping off, her love had winked out, all her passion and desire for him gone. His eyes had always held a question; she always avoided answering it. One time he asked her straight out, "Why did your feelings for me change?"

She was truthful and cruel: "There's someone else."

Strangely enough, he did not argue or blame her, but nodded and left. He knew that it was no use talking: he was experienced enough to know how labyrinthine and changeable

the paths of human affection are. He also knew that he was not a skilled lover; he did not string together honeyed words, nor did he purchase gifts and flowers.

They met less frequently; the silence between phone calls stretched longer and longer. Tedium crept into their time together, and her feelings toward him cooled even further. Without realizing it, she had fallen in love with someone else. Oddly, that man did not return her love; he was, however, adept at the art of romance. The question remained, as it always does: should we stay with the one who loves us genuinely, though they be an inept romantic; or be with a master of romance, although they do not truly love us?

She had thought that love—and love only—makes puppets of us all, pulling our strings to take us where it will. However, with the other man, she had discovered that it was not necessary to love in order to woo someone. From the first, he had been honest with her: he told her he knew nothing of love, and could never tie himself down to one woman for the sake of something as worthy as love. Still, she pressed on, swept away by her feelings for him. Something about him attracted her, something charming and magnetic. She never did manage to put a name to it. Then she came to herself, as though slapped awake from a dream, when he told her he had found someone new, his voice ringing in her ears: “I never promised you anything.”

She went back to Sherif and cried on his shoulder. Generously, chivalrously, he listened. “Don’t ever blame yourself,” he told her, “if you genuinely loved him. Emotions are the most beautiful thing one can possess.” He told her, “It’s enough that he lit the fire of love in you, even if he didn’t intend it. Such feelings are rare. This is why we must be grateful to anyone who makes us feel them, ever. There are people who live out their lives in the illusion of eternal love, deliberately forgetting that love is the result of complex and changeable chemical reactions.” What he said made sense to her—after all, she had loved him once, and it was over. Wasn’t it?

3

THE MEMORY WAS REPLAYING IN Sherif's head when she walked in; she found him lost in thought, in another world. "What are you thinking of?" she asked.

He jerked up, finding her already in the seat opposite his. He smiled, "You."

"Oh? And what were you thinking?"

He did not reply; she did not press him. From the way his eyes lit up at the sight of her, and the unsteadiness in his voice when he spoke her name, she could not doubt that he still loved her. It would have been cruel to twist the knife. They had not spoken of the subject since the last time they talked, when they sat facing each other at a café on a rainy winter day. Back then, he had asked her, "Why have you changed so much?"

"It's because of you," she had responded truthfully.

"How?"

"The way you love me," she explained, "it's . . . the spark is gone. You're cold, and the cold is in us now, too. It's too long between calls and between dates. We meet at the same places, say the same words, order the same things. The logs in a fire-place need to be stirred up every once in a while so the flame will burn bright, but you've let the fire go out."

"It's funny," he had said, "that you say 'the way you love me.' Isn't it enough that I love you?"

"No," she'd replied, "it's not."

Back then, he had not argued with her. Maybe, as she said, he was not adept enough at the ways of love, perhaps he didn't know how to keep his woman's heart aflame. When they parted that day, he had meant it to be for always; but she'd called him weeks later, telling him she missed him and wanted to see him. Before she hung up, she had said, "Sherif, I think my life was meant to have you in it." It wasn't about romance: their relationship had deepened to the point where her life was unimaginable without him. There was nothing in it for him but to fold his passions inside and play the part of the shoulder to cry on, the person to talk to. We all have someone like that in our life; sometimes we don't quite know what they are to us.

He ordered two espressos. When they arrived, he asked her how she'd been. Her eyes glistened: he knew there was something important. "I'm working on an unsigned painting by an extraordinarily talented artist. What's strange is that the painting was never a success. It isn't well-known or famous at all, although it belongs in a top-tier art museum."

"What I think," he said, "is that the chance for success comes once in a lifetime. If you let it slip by, it's lost forever." He took a sip of his espresso. "Be sure of it: opportunity comes once in a lifetime."

She appeared to catch his meaning, and so did not contradict him. Instead, she gave him the innocent smile he liked so much, the one that revealed her inner child. Was it only her smile he was fond of? He loved everything about her, from her large eyes and thick brows to her plump lips, loose, wavy hair, and shining bronzed skin. He loved the expressions on her face when she talked: her eyes had a way of widening and then narrowing, and unlike any woman he had known, her beauty came from her simplicity and her allure from her ingenuous nature.

They were used to sitting in comfortable silence; he enjoyed reading the language of her eyes, and she could read

his body language in a nod or a lift of his eyebrows or the way he steepled his hands; so what need had they of talk? Eventually, he looked at his watch. "It's 3:30. What do you have planned?"

"Nothing," she said easily, "I'll just go home."

"I need to get back to the office," he said. "I've an important meeting at four." They rose to go. She wrapped her scarf around her neck while he put on his coat. "Where's your car?" he asked as they walked outside.

"I thought I'd walk today," she said, "I could use the exercise."

"Do you want a lift?" he asked. "It's kind of windy."

"Let's see where it blows me."

He ran his hand over her hair by way of goodbye, and left.



4

HER EYES FOLLOWED HIM AS he crossed the road to his car. He walked straight and erect, striding confidently across the street. No woman could resist him, from the soft, pleasant huskiness in his voice to his deep, piercing eyes that seemed to see into you. But for all that, he'd let the flame burn out.

Her phone rang in her coat pocket. "Grandma!"

Her grandmother's voice was breathy and halting, but commanding as usual. "Don't forget the cat food!"

Her grandmother was ninety and suffered from senile dementia: the only things that kept her alive were her cats and whatever fugitive scraps of memory she had left. Whenever Yasmine looked at her, her conviction increased that time was a tyrant. Could this, she wondered, be her fate? An old woman who forgot more than she remembered, whose hair had all fallen out except for two white tufts on the right and left, her face furrowed and lined with wrinkles, her eyes dulled and pale, peeing into diapers like a child? Heavens, what a fate. And yet, her grandmother was lucky: she had a loving granddaughter who cared for her and her cats. Many people that age had no one to take care of them. Yasmine had once thought of putting her into an old people's home, especially because she traveled a lot to exhibitions and conferences, but every time it occurred to her, she pushed the thought away and hired a nurse instead. And every time, she would come back to a torrent of complaints from the nurse about her

grandmother, “that old woman who’s always screaming and never stops giving orders.”

Yasmine knew that her grandmother liked to run a tight ship, and nothing was ever good enough for her; she was used to it by now, and excused her grandmother’s foibles as the failings of old age. The one thing that upset and saddened her was when she picked up the phone and entered into long one-sided conversations with people long dead, telling them about the events of her day. The doctor had told Yasmine that it was to be expected. “But she can’t remember recent events,” she’d said to him worriedly, “and these old numbers are still stuck in her memory, and things that happened all those years ago.”

“Long-term memories are easy to access,” the doctor said, “if they are bright in the mind.”

Yasmine accepted reality. It became routine to hear her grandmother dialing a number at four in the morning and launching into a long conversation with a long-departed friend, recounting the events of a day in her life that had taken place years ago, and telling her how her husband and children had loved the special meal she had cooked.

She turned left onto a long, narrow downhill street that sloped toward the Nile. Every step seemed to propel you downward, shoving you into the face of the river. On either side were beautiful old buildings and villas, most of them deserted. It was strange not to see a single modern building all down the street, as though this was a place that refused to be touched by wrecking balls. Since Zamalek was built, when Khedive Ismail had divided up its land among that era’s elite on condition that they erect structures in fine artistic taste, its buildings had remained untouched. Their opulence and history struck her anew every time she passed them: a strange feeling came over her, as if she could hear the footsteps of the people who had lived here walking through time. Even the supermarket on the street was one in name only, and was more of an old-time grocery store. Everything in it evoked a

bygone era: the floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves on the walls, the sausages hanging by cords from the rafters, the incessantly rotating ceiling fan—even the goods on sale seemed on their way to extinction, brands that were hard to find anywhere else. The owner, seated on a wooden stool, tallied up your purchases with pen and paper and handed you a handwritten receipt. On the top of the paper was printed, “Abdel-Aziz Nakhla & Co., Grocers—Founded 1930.” She found it quite natural, in that place with its contents, to be transported to another time.

She needed to find a real supermarket to buy cat food. Stepping into the supermarket was like coming back into the present: the gleaming display, the shopping carts, and the register with its credit card machine.



5

WHEN YASMINE TURNED THE KEY in the lock, her grandmother was screaming as usual, praying to the Lord to deliver her from her suffering. Dumping her purchases on the kitchen table, Yasmine went straight to her. “What’s the matter, Grandma? What happened? What suffering?”

“Let me scream in peace!” her grandmother snapped. “My diaper hasn’t been changed since this morning! And what do you call that? Isn’t that what you might properly call suffering?”

Although they had a maid who also cooked, and would have been happy to change the diaper, her grandmother refused to let the woman see her naked. She insisted that Yasmine change her, bathe her, and do her hair as well. This was one of the things that made Yasmine periodically think that putting her grandmother in a home would be an excellent idea, and decide to do it; but moments later, she would find herself shaking her head violently, as if to throw the idea out of it. *No, no, I couldn’t.*

The diaper changed and the table set, dinner was dished out. The two of them sat facing each other at the kitchen table. “In that white shirt, you look a lot like your mother,” said her grandmother.

Yasmine smiled, chewing, but said nothing. She had no desire to get into that subject, as it always led to painful memories and strong disagreements.

Clearly, though, her grandmother had decided to upset her today. “If she were alive, poor thing, she’d have been sixty-five. But she chose to leave at forty-five. What a woman she was, so vibrant!”

“Grandma, please, let’s talk about something else.”

“But that bastard of a father of yours,” she plowed on as though she hadn’t heard, “it was all his fault! It was him who drove her to suicide, it was, and as if that wasn’t enough, he didn’t even have the decency to stick around! Ran off like the worthless coward he is.”

“I told you a hundred times, she was depressed. That was why. Nobody *makes* anyone kill themselves. It was just . . . a thing that happened.”

“And who was it who made her depressed, eh? Wasn’t it him? Lousy womanizer! With her best friend, yet. It’s enough to make any woman kill herself.”

“She could have gotten treatment and started fresh. You just said it yourself—she was beautiful, attractive, full of life. She could have made a new life, she could have tried to forget. It was her choice to close every door.”

Her grandmother sighed. “I can’t believe it either, that such a beauty, such a success, would end her life for that Casanova. But he was the love of her life. Ever since her first year in university, she was his girlfriend. Do you even know what that means? And she married him the minute she graduated—she’d never known another man!” Her grandmother chewed her food, lost in thought. “From the first, there was something about him that set me on edge. Eyes like a fox, he had, cunning and wily.”

“Why not blame the woman who made him do it?” Yasmine sighed. “You said it yourself—she was her best friend. That’s low, if you ask me.”

“But it was your father’s fault more than anyone. He knew how your mother adored him. He should have cherished that love, cherished his family.” She set down her fork on her

empty plate. “And her best friend, of all women! Couldn’t he find someone else? Did it have to be her best friend?”

Yasmine pushed back her chair with a clatter and started to stack the empty plates. “It was Mom’s fault they got that close.” She carried the dishes over to the sink. “She was the one who let her into her home and let her get close to her family. She shared all her secrets with her, everything she did, everyone she met, what happened, what was going to happen—all the details of her relationship with Dad, and the rough time she was having with him.” Clattering, she stacked the plates, then started on the glasses. “She let her spend time alone with Dad whenever she came to visit—sitting and talking to him while Mom was in the kitchen cooking. And she even insisted that Dad drive her home! She practically put out a welcome mat for them to have an affair.”

“Whatever the temptation,” her grandmother insisted, “if you’re loyal by nature, you don’t give in.”

Yasmine’s hands stilled on the dishes, lost in a faraway corner of memory. She could still remember that Jezebel—skimpy clothes, bright red lipstick, overpowering perfume, and throaty, silky voice. Mom was just the opposite—she dressed modestly and everything about her was soft—her prettiness, her voice. How hard would it have been for Mom to recognize that that woman was doing her best to get close to Dad and entrap him? They tried to hide what was going on, never suspecting that a ten-year-old could recognize the gestures and glances that went between them, the whispers that gave it all away.

Poor Mom, making dinner for them in the kitchen while they flirted. God, could they have let her down any worse? What kind of pain must she have felt? What a dagger through the heart. No wonder she couldn’t stand to go on living.

As usual, talking about it brought nothing but pain. The whole thing was like a wound covered in ointments and bandages to stop the bleeding until such time as it might

heal—only it never did. Every time she recalled it, the bleeding would start again. Yasmine went into her room, slamming the door.

“There are faithful men! You must know it!” Her grandmother’s yell came through the door. “Don’t let it turn your heart against them all!”

“Don’t worry,” Yasmine muttered with a sad smile, not caring whether or not her grandmother heard. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

6

THE NEXT MORNING, SHE HEADED for the office of her former art history professor, Mahmoud Anwar. A good-looking man in his fifties, he had a smattering of white hairs at his temples and unparalleled expertise in the history of art. He was forever researching and seeking out new knowledge. She told him about the painting, and he promised to help. "I'll come by the lab after classes," he promised, "and take a look at it."

Afterward, she went to the lecture hall to teach a class. "Art history," she began as she had many times before, "is not only a matter of taking an interest in the piece of art itself or its provenance, its date of creation or the life history of the artist who made it. It is everything that surrounds a work of art: the political, economic, and social factors that eventually led to its production. You can be sure that your research into the history of a painting will lead you down many exciting avenues you had no idea even existed."

After class, hard at work in the lab, she startled to find Professor Anwar standing right behind her. "Let's take a look at this priceless treasure of yours," he said.

With a smile, she rose to show him. He was always like that, with his own way of speaking that sometimes drew the mockery of his students. Carefully, she placed it on the easel.

He slid on his spectacles and crouched close, scrutinizing it first with, then without his glasses. He seemed to be looking for something. Finally, he shrugged. "To tell the truth, I don't see

anything inspiring or absorbing about this painting,” he admitted. “It’s the same as a hundred other paintings of Egyptian female subjects painted in the nineteenth century, the ‘golden age’ of Orientalism. They were mad about drawing women with ‘Oriental’ features and clothing they saw as exotic.”

“Yes,” Yasmine shook her head, “but there’s something different about this one. Look at the girl’s clothes. They’re a mix of Oriental and Western. She’s wearing a *gallabiya* with vertical stripes, but that thing on her shoulder is a lace scarf. Egyptian women weren’t wearing those kind of fabrics in that era—they were unavailable in Egypt. And there’s no signature or date on it.”

“What’s so odd about that? Maybe the artist wanted to do something unconventional, so he made her clothing a cross between East and West. He could have just imagined the lace scarf.” The professor straightened. “As far as the signature goes, he may have forgotten to sign it. Or perhaps he was unknown and saw no point in signing his work, as it would have gone unrecognized one way or the other.”

Yasmine gestured to the background of the painting of the girl, which depicted several houses with wood-carved meshrabiyyeh windows. “You can’t tell what neighborhood this was painted in. Islamic architecture was everywhere in that era, and they used meshrabiyyehs as a motif. It could be anywhere.”

Anwar leaned in again, peering at the image of the girl. “Was she that lovely in real life?” he sighed. “In any case, you can do an infrared examination, it might help.”

It was the same thing Professor Simon had said. Changing the subject, Yasmine began to speak of work and study, after which they made an appointment for the infrared examination.

After Professor Anwar left, Yasmine sat at the painting alone, working, wondering why she was so preoccupied with the girl in the picture. Anwar was right: she was no different from a hundred portraits of Eastern women painted in that

era, the product of Orientalists' boundless fascination with Eastern women and a world they saw as exotic. A dark-skinned girl with kohl-rimmed eyes and long, black braids lying gently across her shoulders: what was so special about her?

She went back to work on the painting, scraping off a fleck of the black of the braids that had faded from damage. Gently, she scraped off the faded area. It was odd: this part was thicker than the others, as though the artist had mixed it with another medium. Suddenly, something strange appeared beneath the color.

She touched it with her fingertips. It felt like human hair.

Yasmine drew in her breath sharply. "What the . . . am I going crazy?" she said aloud. She fumbled for her magnifying glass and peered through it at the exposed fleck. It was indeed real hair.

With exceeding gentleness, she scraped the color off the braid. Then she touched it again. It was human hair, hidden by the artist under a hard layer of something carefully mixed with his black pigment. A smile of renewed confidence formed on her lips as she thought, *I knew my feeling was right*. From the first glance, she had known there was something unusual about this painting and this girl.

Cairo: July 1798

A girl, slender like a stalk of rattan, her skin an unusual color, not white and not dark, but the color of saffron dust. Lips red as cherries, hair black and thick like a waterfall, a spring in her step like a leaping deer. Her gestures, smooth as a butterfly's. She wore a *gallabiya* of vertically striped silk, her hoop earrings echoing the curves of her body, which indicated she was just coming into adulthood. She was in that awkward stage between a child and a woman: too old to run and play with the children, but as yet unwelcome among grown women; she was lost between two worlds, the world of childhood she had not yet left behind, and the world of womanhood she was yet to enter.

SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

My First and Only Love

by Sahar Khalifeh, translated by Aida Bamia

The Magnificent Conman of Cairo

by Adel Kamel, translated by Waleed Almusharaf

A Recipe for Daphne

By Nektaria Anastasiadou



hoopoe is an imprint for engaged, open-minded readers hungry for outstanding fiction that challenges headlines, re-imagines histories, and celebrates original storytelling. Through elegant paperback and digital editions, **hoopoe** champions bold, contemporary writers from across the Middle East alongside some of the finest, groundbreaking authors of earlier generations.

At hoopoefiction.com, curious and adventurous readers from around the world will find new writing, interviews, and criticism from our authors, translators, and editors.