

My First and Only Love

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A father's advice to you, my children:
I fought with destiny and destiny is capricious;
It is subservient to those who are patient.
If misfortune strikes, it is defeated by determination.
It is malicious when it senses weakness
And generous when confronted with strength.
A young man's shield is his honesty,
Decency, and strength to ward off afflictions.
The best weapon against misfortune is a reputation
That is praiseworthy wherever he goes.
My children, reduce your downfalls if you can;
A mistake might rob you of your virtues.
Do not return empty-handed—
The actions of a young man outlast his fortune.

—Abdel-Qader al-Husseini

1

I RETURNED TO THE FAMILY home to repair what was crumbling and being eaten by termites. I wanted to turn the house, the family home, into a livable place, a place to be remembered for its historical significance. I couldn't bear the possibility of life away from home anymore, sitting in planes and airports, and starting anew wherever I went. I had lived in Amman and Beirut; then I went to London, Paris, Washington, and Morocco. I finally returned to the West Bank. It is annoying to feel you are treated like a human parcel while moving between airports. As soon as you settle down in one place, you have to leave and start all over again. As soon as you get used to a place, you have to leave, to go to another place, and another one, continually, without an end in sight.

A colleague in Cairo invited me to have tea in her house. There I saw books and bookshelves, dusty books and pots of creepers and ferns in a derelict corner of the house. I saw a small garden behind the house where a million-year-old tree stood, and where a cat was sleeping quietly and peacefully in its shade. I was envious of the cat, the tree, and the house. I asked my friend about the age of the house and the number of years she had lived in it. "Ten," she replied.

"Ten years in the same house!" I exclaimed.

I was born in this house, and so were my mother, Widad, and my grandmother, Zakiya. This house has seen many generations come and go, an occupation, and a terrible earthquake

that turned our city upside down. The house was surrounded by destruction, splinters, and thick dust. Occupation is akin to an earthquake, and so are immigration and desolation and everything people leave behind. Some family members left, some died and have become a memory from an ancient past, like our travels; in other words, their lives have become a series of trips, phases, and human parcels continually moving through stations, trains, airports, and places.

I was here from the beginning of history—I mean year after year, fifty years, sixty years; numbers do not make a difference in the span of time. But as a human being I am a dot; rather, a comma on a new line and in a new paragraph. However, what was written on the first line in the past remains with us like history, and so do memories, our childhood memories, and our old photos taken before the wrinkles, before the downward movement of the lines in our faces and the dimming of the twinkle in our eyes.

I lived here when my grandmother was as old as I am now, or probably younger, much younger. She was still in her forties. At that time, in the late 1930s, a forty-year-old woman looked old. Women in their forties wore their hair in braids—some were reddish, dyed with henna, others were gray or white, a yellowish white. Their dresses were gray or brown or navy blue, without trimmings or flowery prints, in a simple cut that never changed. A dress that looked like a sack, without any special design. In short, a woman at forty was a grandmother, a *hajjeh*, a mother-in-law, an old woman.

My grandmother was not at all old at that time. She was a mother to me, and my mother was like a sister. I was young and lonely, living in an environment filled with the stories of heroes, martyrs, and battles. The word *revolution* spun around us like the hands of a clock, like a scorpion that never stops moving in circles. It begins at the top, then descends and goes back up to the number twelve, exactly like a pointer; it moves in a circle only to return to the same number, then goes down again.

There was no one living here in those times except my grandmother, my two uncles—the third one was in Saudi Arabia—and my mother, Widad. Who would stay here? Everyone had left, emigrated, and become a mere memory. Here I was, many years later, returning to repair the damage caused by the earthquake and the damage that existed before the earthquake and after the earthquake. I wanted to renovate the house and return it to its past splendor.

My grandmother used to spend time in this spot every morning, sitting on a mattress stuffed with soft wool and covered with a striped honey-and-mulberry cotton case. It was located below the eastern window. But when she got up for the dawn prayer, she usually sat by the *kanoun*, prepared her coffee, and sprinkled the fire with cardamom seeds and orange peels to cover up the smell of charcoal. She would prepare a delicious traditional breakfast of white *nabulsi* cheese, *za'atar*, olive oil, *labneh*, and halva.

My mother usually woke up in a bad mood and uttered an unfriendly “Good morning.” She would sip her coffee sitting on a small straw-seated chair near the fire. I usually sat at her feet to have her comb my hair into two braids that fell behind my back. My grandmother would ask her gently, “Shall I make you an *arous*?” My mother would not reply but I would ask my grandmother for a “*labneh arous*.”

The word *arous* usually triggered my grandmother’s journey with dreams—what she had dreamt last night and the meaning of the dream. She would begin with my grandfather, then the forgotten dead, mentioned one by one, and then she would turn to the living, to my uncle Wahid, then my uncle Amin and my uncle Samir in Saudi Arabia, followed by my mother, and finally me. My mother would hurry to finish combing my hair, while my grandmother asked her, “Do you hear me, Widad?” I would hear my mother blow steam through her nose, then give me a light, painless tap on the back and say quickly, as she got up, “I heard you, I heard you.”

I would rush to my grandmother while my mother hastened to put on her uniform and headscarf, saying as she moved toward the door, “Today and tomorrow I am on guard,” while my grandmother shouted after her, “Take a small bite, something to put in your stomach. Have pity on yourself! Shall I make you an *arous*?” She would have the *arous* ready as she called her, but I would end up eating it.

My grandmother would then look through the window, beyond the jasmine and the poppy tree, and whisper sadly, “Poor Widad, she is not lucky.” I would ask her quickly, to help her forget her sorrow, “What about me, Grandmother? What will I be?”

She would reply, gently but somewhat sadly, “*Arous, arous*. Take this *arous* and eat it.” I would reply angrily, “No, Grandma, I mean when I grow up what will I be?” She would smile and say, “A bride. A bride dressed in white from head to toe.” I would ask, concerned, “You mean I’ll wear a uniform like my mother’s? No, Grandma, when I grow up I want to be—” And I would stop because I did not know what I wanted to be, and because I saw my grandmother wipe tears from her eyes and mumble some Qur’anic verses. My heart would ache for her and I felt extremely sad.

On that summer morning, after my mother had left for work, my grandmother said, “I saw it in a dream. God only knows.”

She was immersed in her thoughts, looking through the window. I watched her, examining the color of her eyes, her tightened lips, her skin color, and the parting in her hennaed hair. The hair that she sometimes neglected, revealing gray like chalk lines. Her hennaed hair, on the other hand, looked like corn cockle flowers and contrasted with her skin, which was as white as marble, accentuating her blue, clearly visible veins.

She whispered, “Last night I saw your grandfather in my sleep. He told me to go visit your uncle Wahid.”

As I had gotten used to this kind of talk, I did not ask her how a person who had died many years ago and had turned to dust in his tomb could tell her to do this or that. The souls of the dead roamed around her everywhere, and I took her with me wherever I went: to religion classes and Qur'an-memorization gatherings, to calligraphy and sewing lessons, and even to my history and geography lessons. I graduated from level five and I memorized Sakakini's books, *The ABC book*, *The Clean Boy*, and *The Golden Sun*, all by heart.

I begged my grandmother, "Would you take me with you?"

She replied forcefully, "Of course, of course! You are grown now. You are moving to level six without a remedial exam. You are intelligent. Give me a lemon peel; your grandfather used to like the smell of lemon."

I rushed to give her the lemon peel because I wanted her to continue depending on me. I wanted to be with her everywhere she went. I continued to observe her face lovingly and eagerly while I ate the *labneh arous*.

She was distracted again, and looking through the window she said softly, as if talking to the deceased, "His soul is in the house and his eyes are with me. He can see me."

"Can he see me, too?" I asked.

She smiled as she turned the coal in the *kanoun*, shaking her head, "Sometimes, sometimes."

"When? When I misbehave or when I am well behaved?"

When the conversation turned to that topic and my mother was at home, she would shout from afar, "We have had enough talking about spirits and all this nonsense! Let's live like normal people."

My grandmother would whisper, "Poor Widad! I wish you better luck than her. Her luck is rotten, may God help her."

I never asked my grandmother what she meant by deficient luck, because I knew the story from A to Z. It was the story of my abandoned, forgotten mother and my father's marriage

to a Jewish woman; this was when my mother joined the hospital staff in order to forget what had happened to her. But my mother did not look like an unlucky woman. She seemed happy to me—happy with her work, and very busy. She once took me to the hospital with her because my grandmother had to go to a wake. There, I saw my mother laugh, jump, and move like a butterfly, a white butterfly without wings, in a hat that looked like a crown. She rushed here and there, and everyone was calling her: “Widad! Widad!” A famous doctor asked her who I was, and she told him bashfully, “This is my daughter Nidal.” He said in disbelief, “Your daughter Nidal!”

When we returned home, I asked her, “Why did he say ‘Your daughter Nidal,’ as if he did not believe I was called Nidal?” The name Nidal is given to girls and boys alike. When I was growing up, names such as Nidal, Kifah, and Wisam could be used for either boys or girls and they had a meaning. It was as if the doctor did not believe that my name was Nidal. Why did she insist I call her by her name, Widad? Why did the doctor say, with a malicious tone, as if he did not believe her, “Your daughter Nidal?” As if my name were strange or odd.

They called me Nidal, which means “struggle,” because my name described a certain phase in our history, followed by numerous similar phases. But who chose that name? My mother was still young, and too distressed and preoccupied with bigger worries, and my grandmother was torn between her daughter and her nephew. My uncle Wahid was busy with the revolution and the revolutionaries. Who was available, then? My uncle Amin, the educated one. People used to say he was a “communist,” a “Baathist,” a “Syrian nationalist”; I can’t remember which one exactly. He escaped to Syria, and later went to Beirut and stayed there. In a few words, he emigrated like me, but I returned to settle down in a place that was part of my homeland. I wanted to die here like camels do. Where did the expression “Die like camels” come from? Was

it Khaled ibn al-Walid? Amr ibn al-As or Saladin? Who said it? All those names have a history except mine, because it is an irregular verb like *kana*, *ma-zala*, and *ma-infakka*. As if struggle occurs only in violence and as if violence occurs only with the sword, the gun, and laying mines!

I inherited nothing but my name, which came from an irregular verb, and I carried, in lieu of a gun and laying mines, a small brush with which I painted the house, the family house, photos of the living, nature, and the marketplace. When I was young, they said I was an artist. I believed in art and befriended it; I adopted it and carried it like a sign on my forehead. I confronted the world in order to carry a small brush, colors, music, light, breezes, and *mawawil*.

I drew my grandmother and the sea, I painted the mountain and the river, I drew women in any pose you can imagine. I drew women and men, and festivals without harvests, in fallow lands. I drew the plants and the flowers, I drew still lifes against backgrounds that did not convey the beauty of the flowers. I carried my paintings everywhere I went. I organized exhibitions and workshops. I drew for newspapers and magazines. One of my paintings, a huge one, is on display at UNESCO, a bigger one is at UNIFAM, a third one, smaller, very small, is hanging in a corridor of the Arab League building. I am an artist. This is what is said about me and this is what I have become, and this is how I will die.

I find myself now, at this age and after having moved around like a bee, after all the hubbub and the lights, after the media and the headlines, the magazine covers and the publicity, I find myself without a friend and without a home. I am alone, like a sword. Members of my family had left and I too left, like many others. Who stayed behind? All that is left for me is this house, and that is why I returned. I want to make of this house—the family home, my first home and my last home—a gallery with pictures, paintings, and frames. In short, a museum.

The carpenter said the wood was decayed. I said, “Change it.” The blacksmith said the metal had rusted. I said, “Change it.” The tinsmith told me the conduit pipes were damaged and old-fashioned, and so were the bathroom, the kitchen, and the toilet. I told him, “Remove all that is broken, decayed, and moth-eaten, and carry it down.” Then came the tiler, the glass specialist, and the engineer. I told the used furniture merchant to take everything except the altar, my grandmother’s commode, the metal brazier, and a few paintings.

The work began, and the place looked like a beehive, while I withdrew to the upper floor, eating and sleeping there, and organizing the family documents and the letters kept in boxes. They had left a huge number of documents, photos, letters, and keys. I found a lot in the drawers and the cupboards. I found souvenirs, and my own unpublished handwritten poems. I inherited a house, stories, photos, forgotten poems, and forsaken souvenirs.