

Mansoura Ez-Eldin

Two Short Stories

[44]

Conspiracy of Shadows

Always the same scene. Under a giant mango tree a man was digging the dark soil, while beside him lay the body of a young girl. Her hair, matted with congealed blood, was stuck to her long neck, and her clothes were torn in more than one place. The man wiped away the fine, burning threads of sweat that ran down his face and continued his task, totally absorbed.

When he had finished his work, he jumped down into the hole and began to stamp down the soft earth, flattening it with his boots. Then he went and dragged the body close to the hole and gently stripped it of its clothes, to reveal white skin that was now turning blue. He embraced the girl and stroked her hair and her back with hands that moved slowly over her body as he held her closer and closer. He carefully laid her out in the grave, then heaped earth over her until the hole was completely filled. Then he levelled the site, put a large granite slab over it and scattered some dry herbs.

I don't know why they appear in front of me, or where the man goes with his slow steps. I just take a long puff on my Gitanes before throwing it on the wooden floor and stamping it out with my shoe, as I stare at a horizon that promises nothing.

'Get yourself seen by a psychiatrist,' suggested my plump colleague at work, as she greedily munched a hamburger. And with that, she regarded the matter as closed. Meanwhile, I started to detach myself from life every time the scene unfolded in front of me, surrendering myself to it completely in order to see the girl's features more clearly, for example, or the face of the man who seemed to want to turn his back on me for ever. The scene, though, just kept repeating itself and I left it without being able to grasp anything definite.

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It sometimes seems as though she is about to reveal something to me, but after suddenly raising her head and looking at me, she quickly pulls



back. I have got used to this gesture in the two weeks since she started working with us. A few minutes before she comes in, I can almost feel her hurrying along the winding, interconnecting corridors on her way to the large room where we work.

She throws open the door like someone fleeing an evil pursuer. 'Good mooorning,' she says, in a theatrical way, deliberately drawing out the sound to attract attention. No one takes any notice of her, though, they are all bent over their desks behind piles of files covered with dust. She walks on between the two rows of desks facing each other until she reaches her own seat at the back. At once, the files pile up in front of her as if of their own accord. She tries to contain her drooling as she flicks through the yellowing papers, glancing at the other people bent over their desks before immersing herself in her own private world, careful the whole time not to look in my direction.

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I know full well that she is completely unaware of my eyes following her, and even if she were, she would never realise what lies behind it. Something attracts me to her and makes me afraid of her at the same time. Something fills me with a burning desire to embrace her or give her a hard slap, or bang her head against the wall until the blood spills out. Every morning she does exactly the same things. If it weren't for her changes of clothes and hair styles, I would think it was just one day going on for ever. She moves between the desks with a self-confidence that provokes me, her shrill voice bursting into song. After finishing work, she takes her things quickly and leaves as if she has important tasks to see to.

I have never discussed with her the strange things I see happening around me, or the girl and the man I feel are always with me. Once when I tried, she replied in an off-hand manner: 'Get yourself seen by a psychiatrist.'

For some reason, I was almost certain that this woman had some connection with it, even though she didn't realise it herself.

The first time the scene with the girl and her gravedigger unfolded before me, I rubbed my eyes hard, stretched my hand out towards them and touched space. But the scene wouldn't go away.

I had just woken up. I told myself that what was happening was just the hallucination of a man not yet awake, but it wouldn't stop.

[46] The scene began to dog me, unfolding itself over and over again of its own accord. I also started to hear the sound of strange footsteps in the flat, where I live alone, footsteps that would become a lot louder, then suddenly stop. I have started to doubt my own existence. Sometimes I believe I am invisible and that my surroundings are unreal. I try to touch them to check that they are there. I managed to touch everything I came up against except for the man and the girl who had visited me for the first time, then I went to work and found a new colleague who reminded me of them. And something about her is like the girl lying beside the grave.

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When I was ten, my father dragged me into the garden of our house, and stood in front of a tree with a thin black trunk and straight branches. He said it was a pear tree. He said it as if he was someone imparting an important secret, and gave a devilish laugh. I was gripped by fear.

The so-called pear tree could not prove it was a pear tree, even with a single fruit. It simply blossomed insatiably. It would be completely covered in fine white blossoms, then quickly shed them all in one fell swoop during the night, so that in the morning I would be surprised to find a bare tree and hundreds of dead flowers on the ground.

I watched him surreptitiously as he followed with care the tree's progress. I thought him inscrutable, but loaded with interpretations I had picked up from the horror movies he would force me to watch without saying a word.

As time went on, I transformed him into a ferocious mythical beast. I only really got to know him on that distant day when I had first to run my hand over his face to close his eye. I ignored the steps that are usually followed in this sort of situation, though, and put my ear to his chest. There was no trace of a heartbeat. I embraced the body that was laid out beside me, burying my face in it. Death penetrated me unmercifully, a pitch-black darkness took hold of the room and I imagined that the man lying beside me was shaking violently. I hurried away.

I went to check that the door was closed, then retraced my steps. I



sat on the edge of the bed, looking at the man's features, at his enormous nose and wide eyes. I noticed, perhaps for the first time, the handsome cut of his strong jawline.

I knew that it was my last and only chance to possess him, to find out his true nature as he lay alone, stripped of his authority, but I didn't. Instead, I fell into a long faint.

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A small brown sparrow came in through the half-open window and landed on the wooden floor. It took three steps, then flew to the top of the room and perched on the electric light cord that hung from the ceiling, watching us from above.

I hid my face in the ample breast of my plump colleague to avoid the eyes of the sparrow she had not noticed.

She was trying to help me, but I had completely lost the urge. I gave up trying, drew away from her and lay on my back watching the sparrow on the light cord. She did the same. She did stretch out her hand, though, to feel the bed between us. She wouldn't look me straight in the eye but made straight for her clothes that had been thrown carelessly on the armchair. She dressed herself lazily, lit a cigarette, and stood in front of the window, smoking with her eyes closed. She kept pretending to be looking at the sparrow while I was watching her out of the corner of my eye.

After she finished her cigarette, she picked up her bag and left the room without saying goodbye. I heard the sound of the front door being slammed hard and didn't see her again after that. I looked for her everywhere without success. When I asked about her at work, they gave me strange looks.

I discovered that I didn't know her address or telephone number. I hadn't realised that before as I'd been used to seeing her every day.

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Things have started to distance themselves from me. I am aware of them like an oppressive, receding memory that I can't get a grip on. I have started almost never leaving my flat or speaking to anyone. I just stare at the walls, watching the pale shadows dancing there. I prick up

my ears to catch the obscure sounds and slow footsteps that wander around me.

[48] My father has become a distant phantom whose memory arouses no resentment in my soul. Nothing remains of my colleague at work who escaped through my fingers but a gold chain that she left behind when she walked out on me.

The man is still digging the earth with the girl lying quietly beside him. Before they disappear completely, I have started to notice a silver ring that I found among my father's things.

Headache

The sunlight hit you like a truth you were trying unsuccessfully to ignore. You woke to find yourself on the Corniche, sprawled out on a wooden bench that had stood for years fixed to the ground.

It was nearly seven in the morning and the cold air was searing you, while your head felt like a piece of ice shattering under a powerful hammer.

You remembered you'd been walking along drunk with your friend at three in the morning, when suddenly you decided to flop out like that until daybreak. You weren't ready to face a father who'd curse and scold you before throwing you out of the house, when his nose caught the smell of the vast quantities of whisky your friend had bought from the Free Zone for the two of you to swig. It was a drinking ritual that wasn't complete for either of you unless the other one was there.

He failed to persuade you that you shouldn't sleep in the street in this bitter wintry weather and after a heated argument, as always happens when the two of you get drunk, he abandoned you with a laugh. You could find no excuse for this when you sat down later. You were racking your brain to remember the details of what had happened since you took the first swig from the bottle of Red Label until he left you and got into the first taxi he could find. You let out a yawn as you struggled to move from a lying position to a sitting position on the wooden bench and smiled with the contentment of a man who has woken to find himself in his own warm bed. An old beggar was sleeping curled up a few yards away and a large cat crossed the street.



Meanwhile, you were busily trying to work out how many people had greeted the light of day sprawled out where you were now, since the time when someone had installed a number of benches – perhaps for passers-by like yourself to sleep on – and he too had passed on to God knows where.

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But why should you bother about the number of these idiots with this headache that's practically splitting your head apart? It's a good thing you've decided to go home on foot. A walk in this foggy morning weather might help you wake up. Why are you rubbing your forehead like that?

You've forgotten the way to the tumbledown house with seven storeys. What a mess you're in now! You're sticking to the wooden bench more than before. You almost let out a mocking laugh, but it was nipped in the bud by the fear that suddenly swelled up.

You haven't lost your memory, as happens in those film melodramas with flimsy plots. You've just forgotten your way home, though apart from that you've been remembering everything in the smallest detail.

A thick fog was settling over a small part of your brain. The paths of memory began to expand for a short time, then quickly contracted in on themselves, leading you nowhere. You sat down cross-legged, ignoring the speeding cars, squatting like some ancient scribe, trying to to advantage of the smallest details to recall the things that were eluding you. Dark steps with no precise colour, that you never succeeded in counting despite your unceasing attempts. You used to go up them backwards, with your hand over your eyes, perhaps to avoid looking at Aunt Amal, the daughter of Madame Jean, your neighbour on the upper floor who always walked in a hurry looking intensely serious and who never paid you any attention.

You often made fun of Amal – of the fact that she wasn't married and of how she looked at you. The look had slowly turned into a frown, and you had started to feel an obscure sadness whenever her eyes met yours because she had made you realise that the things that are lost to us are not lost like that, all at once and forever. Rather, they seep away slowly until we come up against their loss in a frowning look in place of the old sparkle in eyes we know well.

Her brother Samih had gone out to play in the street when your

[50] mother asked you to bring her ‘two cloves of garlic from Aunt Jean.’ You prepared yourself for the shudder that would come over you when you entered their flat, which was in perpetual darkness. Aunt Amal opened the door for you with the mischievous look she used to have, and the young boy that was you turned his eyes from her breast which was visible through her flimsy nightdress. She closed the door and dragged you into the bedroom where another woman was lying on the bed, almost naked. Amal dragged you towards her and gave you a long, greedy kiss while the other girl clapped delightedly. You felt that you could hardly stand up, there was so much pleasure hidden in that magic thing, but you also felt extremely embarrassed. Your intuition told you that what had happened somehow or other concealed a deep mockery of you, and you became quite certain of it when her friend shouted in an insolent voice, ‘What’s up, son? Why don’t you grow up a bit?’ Before you realised, you were running down the stairs. You continued to avoid Aunt Amal for a long time, though you had meanwhile found your way to other women, while she became more and more of a confirmed spinster. No one was to blame. Suddenly, your friend’s laugh burst out in your head.... Why do you suppose he laughed at you like that? Try to guess! Have you forgotten the spectre of the woman that flitted before you in that rundown bar? – the ‘champagne lady’ as you called her.

She belonged to your friend originally, until he passed her on to you in a vague fit of boredom ... and you picked her up skilfully like a player receiving the ball. At first, you didn’t have any strong feelings for her, though you kept up your relationship with her for a whole year before he bet you (again, with no excuse) a bottle of champagne that he could take her back from you. If he failed, he’d pay for it, and if he succeeded you’d buy it. You had to pay a tidy sum from your wages for him to taste his success with champagne, and for some time he had to avoid mentioning anything to do with her in front of you, though later you began to talk about her again in passing if the occasion demanded. To ensure the friendship continued, you both persuaded yourselves that what had happened was just a passing distraction. A woman, no matter how important, would never make one of you lose the other. You pretended you had been wanting to



escape from her, while the part he played in this story – often repeated between you, though sometimes with roles reversed – was the part of the noble saviour who had rescued you from her before you were killed by boredom. A relative stability returned to the supposed friendship. But what was it that brought her spectre to dance between you again? [51]

Don't walk so fast, you hardly know where you're going, you've forgotten the way home.

Are you trying to run away from my nagging? Leave your head on the asphalt in the street, then, for the speeding cars to crush. Stop your evasions and tell me the truth about that woman. Don't make do with the few meagre lines you're trying to summarise your relationship with Amal with. Why have you stopped walking? What are these outbursts of raucous laughter from you? Here you are, still walking through the middle of the crowd. Your friend is staggering along beside you, the champagne lady's walking confidently between the two of you, and behind you Aunt Amal is hurrying along undisturbed, with her ridiculous spectacles. You can see yourself becoming detached from yourself, breaking away over and over again so that hundreds of little selves are formed out of you and disperse in the air. That way you can watch the scene far better ... and the variety of viewpoints will certainly assist you.

Translated by Paul Starkey