

Wafa Malih

A Short Story

[73]

No!

No. I do not like being the agonized target of sympathy, nor being wrapped in a cloak of compliance and surrender, she whispers to herself, attempting to smother the rebellion burning inside her.

She feels a cold draught of air wafting, with the echoes of songs, through the window of her room. The fresh breeze anoints her small body.

She strips off her clothes. After taking off her trousers, she contemplates her right leg and turns her face towards the closet, picking out a shirt and another pair of trousers. She scrutinizes them for a moment and then puts them on. Forcefully slamming the door behind her, she moves towards the living room with deliberate, stumbling steps. She collides with her father's gaze, so cruel and harsh. Lowering her eyes, she withdraws to a corner, knowing she can endure no more.

He yells at her gruffly: 'You, you cripp . . .'

This upsets her mother, sparking feelings of exasperation and anger, and she intervenes: 'Please, that's enough! What do you want from her?'

'I want her to prepare tea for me; I see she's not doing anything. She has not got anywhere with her studies, nor in any job. All her sisters, God bless them, advance along their professional paths, and she stays dependent on me. What shall I do with her?'

'You're just ruthless. She's your daughter. If you're not willing to show her compassion, then who will?'

She goes into her room and shuts the door, seeking shelter behind its walls and suppressing her inescapable anxiety and the silent harrowing sorrow in her chest that will almost certainly end with hot tears streaming down her cheeks. Something inside her forces out her question: 'Is my handicap my fault?'

As her insides boil with despair she contemplates . . .

She divides her gaze between the corners and the walls, letting her

eyes rest here and there, searching for something that will connect her to the surrounding world and revive in her her buzz of fascination with life to free her from the interminable silence.

[74]

She opens her bag, taking from it a brush and white paper. She hugs them with tender indulgence and sets them down, seeking help from the imagination of her brush and its colours. She shakes off the weariness that welled up in the darkness within her, halting for a short while to examine her drawings. Her eyes gleam with pure, gentle elation, and she calls out to her mother and sisters to share in her pleasure. Her mother hastens to inquire what is going on.

‘Good news, God willing,’ her mother says as she looks at her daughter’s drawings. Her face beams with joy to see them, but she adds: ‘Daughter, this thing – will it buy you bread?’

‘The important thing, Mother, is that I breath, I live,’ she replies, trying to suppress her feelings of despair.

‘By God, I don’t understand anything,’ says her mother, raising her voice and sitting beside her, running her fingers through the braids of her daughter, who lays her head on her mother’s shoulder as a feeling of numbness washes over her and she stares into nothingness. Her face seems fatigued and sullen. She murmurs to her mother, turning to look directly at her: ‘Please, Mother, tell me about when you were pregnant with me, and about my birth as well.’

She wants to reclaim the details of her first birth through the renewal of a second birth, through which she will be able to witness her emergence from her mother’s womb and also from the womb of the world. Since there is a clear difference between the two cases, she will rely on moments of imagination to evoke her new birth.

Her mother’s voice comes out trembling and slow as she relates stories about that time that well up in her memory, which happened so long ago but are still so fresh in her mind:

‘When you were inside me, it was different from when I was pregnant with your sisters. You were like a stone, not moving. I felt burdened by you, as if what was in my belly was lifeless. I called to you and heard your voice, weak, whimpering, and I heard the thumps of your feet and hands on the walls of my belly playing a symphony of life. Your father and I quarrelled and he punched me in the stom-



ach. After that, doubts and fears seized me, until the day to give birth arrived one sultry summer morning. I felt sharp pains piercing the sides and walls of my belly. A bad smell came from my mouth. At that time, my neighbour was a midwife, and she helped me deliver you. She helped me bring you out into the light of life. The pain of labour was minor compared to the pain of giving birth to your sisters. However, afterwards I suffered greatly from pains that changed my body.' [75]

As soon as her mother finishes speaking, she becomes contemplative and silent, quietly watching her daughter, who is still staring into nothingness, chanting: 'I am the daughter of an era that has burdened me with the weight of female infanticide.'

Within moments, relaxation grips her. She remains distracted for a short while, deceiving her memory and rousing it from light slumber. Then her childhood memories, shining with the colours of innocence, reveal themselves to her. She recalls how mischievous she was when the neighbourhood children called her crippled, and tried to drive her away from their play circles. She did not understand the meaning of the word and paid it no heed. Rather, she insisted on playing with them. She found a trick to attract their attention: storytelling. She told them about Hdidan, the Thief, and Aisha Qandisha, stories she had heard from her mother, that she wove with pitch-black threads of night. She entered the labyrinths of psychological torment when she began to take pride in her approach adolescence and the discovery of her ripening body. On the beach, she realised she was different as she watched the other girls skipping coquettishly into the water in their swimsuits while she was too embarrassed and encumbered by the weight of her handicap. She deliberately deflected all the eager, lovesick glances directed at her as she lay in the shadow of a tree. She spent days taking care of her body – after she had neglected it for long periods of time – examining it with fondness, pitying its smoothness. She would sigh: 'Why did God trouble me with this beauty and then give it a handicap?'

A feeling of intense compassion came over her and she became the silently weeping, delicate woman who treasures in her body the inability to feel pain. Stares of desire do not sustain this. Rather, she

Wafa Malih

yearns for an embrace of a different kind, an embrace that will calm the floods of emotions her senses continually radiate.

[76] The recklessness of the days continues and she feels she is becoming bewildered. However, she collects herself together when something inside her emerges that yields hope and spreads warmth inside her, and pushes her to the beautiful discovery of life's flow.

Translated by Khaled Al-Masri

