

Adania Shibli

An Excerpt from the Novel We Are All Equally Far From Love

[110]

The Second Degree

As if the beginning is an end

For no sooner than we begin does an end come

She forgot to chop the chicken; she had put it whole in the pot which had started to boil by now and it was too late to take it out, so she began to jump around in the kitchen, hitting herself, hating herself.

Then she started, with deep and deliberate contemplation, to look around herself slowly, searching for another mistake she might have committed while she had been thinking of him. She had put the vegetables in a pot that she needed for the rice, but this was a tolerable mistake. She pulled out the chair and sat down, her gaze fixed on the criminal pot while the flame under it rose up persistently and indifferently. At least no one was at home.

She got up again to fetch a cigarette and smoke it in the kitchen. She would try to quit smoking.

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When the drone of the refrigerator began to vie with the sound of the unchopped chicken as it boiled above the fire, she started to contemplate the ring placed on one of the fingers of her left hand, which had since swelled up around it.

Unbelievable, how she no longer loved him. How very long ago that was. She felt as if she was freed from suffering, the details of which she had now forgotten. All those night-time lectures that he used to give her, then lie down to sleep, while she would lay down to cry. All the wrong he had done her was enough for her not to feel guilty when she fell in love with another man; rather, she felt pity and nothing but pity. Even his appearance had changed, he had become more decrepit. He had thinned down as well and changed his hairstyle, which made him look more idiotic.



It was good for his health to be loved.

As for her, she could not believe that after what she had lived through all these years, she would fall in love with a man other than her husband, and completely erase the latter from her life, except for his one meal after he returned from work. And the left side of the bed. [111]

Three months ago, she suffered spasms in her left shoulder. That shoulder was the one next to her husband and his malice on the night that he showered her with innumerable abuses, showing no restraint or mercy. She had been certain it would not anger him when she asked if he would not mind keeping open the children's savings account designated for their future university studies, as the conditions in the country were not comforting. Perhaps it would be better for them if they took out a loan from the bank. He wanted to buy a new car because he was sick and tired of spending all his weekends in garages.

She could not move it, her shoulder, any more, after that night's talk. The doctor, who did not know anything about the bitter soap opera that was her life, said it was due to a nervous shock that had struck her unexpectedly and recommended that she go for physiotherapy sessions immediately.

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She went to the first session driving the car with one hand, because her husband was busy, and moreover, did not believe her.

She lay down on the narrow white bed, with her eyes shut, expecting him to begin at any moment.

When did love strike?

From the very beginning, when he asked her: 'Did I hurt you?'

That was like an ancient question that no longer would occur to anyone that she knew. And even if he had hurt her, this question had removed the effect of any pain, previous or forthcoming. But the answer choked in her throat and all that came out was a murmur that resembled a 'no,' so he posed his question again. This time, she tried hard to say 'no' and raised her head. Just then, the spasms intensified and a small groan escaped from between her teeth. He apologized. She asked him not to.

From the beginning then, it seemed as if the treatment targeted not

[112] only her crippled shoulder but also her shattered heart. And what she believed to be the worst that could have happened to her started to transform itself, how she did not know, into something beautiful that made her feel she was regaining her sense of humanity. Therefore, and after all this, she had no choice but to love him.

Then they went back to chatting about Phoenicians in the North and others in the East.

She was fascinated by everything related to ancient civilizations and the beginning of monotheistic religions. Such topics were well suited to the lifestyle of a frustrated woman in her forties, who worked outside during the day and at home at night; topics that drifted in and out of her life without changing any aspect of what she had been living for the past fifteen years. Except that she felt ashamed to openly declare these interests in front of anyone, let alone her husband, who did not even hear her asking him whether he wanted coffee. As for her children, they anyway had to live through enough terror on account of their homework.

And so, when she didn't find anything to say to the man with the hand that was passing over her, and she found that she had suddenly started to remember how her husband had barely touched her all these years even when they made listless love, she would start talking to him about the Phoenicians, and he would respond to her with the Assyrians.

He asked her if she knew King Solomon, so she asked him back: 'Personally?'

He burst out laughing.

This was the first time she heard him laugh. She had tried in the past few days to imagine his laugh, but she never imagined it the way it came out just now, as it surged into her ears and touched her very depths. At that moment, she spread a smile onto her face, a smile with no limits.

She never laughed with her husband and her husband did not laugh with her. If he did laugh, he laughed at her. He used to ridicule her. His laughing would stir up the pain in her shoulder, bring tears and a feeling of suffocation in her throat.

He used to make her stomach churn when he made her discover



yet again that she did not understand anything. She needed him, no, she had started to need him to be certain even of what she felt. Then, with time, she made mistakes no longer only in her opinions but also in her questions. Therefore, when 'he' asked her whether she knew King Solomon and she answered 'Personally?' she was asking in all seriousness. [113]

But, luckily, he laughed.

She rushed out to the car and began to drive as fast as possible to reach home and read what was written in the Book of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, as if King Solomon had just finished his two manuscripts and here they were, both hot off the press, and not three thousand years old.

Three thousand years since the King had loved that shepherdess; three thousand years since her heart had been stirred with a similar desire; since she had rushed home; since her heart had nearly slipped out from behind the steering wheel; since she had commanded all the traffic lights to turn green at once.

And sayeth King Solomon that there is nothing new under the sun.

But for her, even the sun itself was new. To love. To sleep, then wake up and still be in love. To bathe and be in love. To cook, and be in love. To drive the car, and be in love. And to love the sun.

Her mundane life was not equipped to take in all this energy, so she had to expend it in a small project, newly established behind the house. Three beds in which she planted mint, parsley and basil. With time, these three beds transformed themselves into a considerable break from the life that she had been living without respite for years.

At last, she was now able to be with herself, as she had been once before she metamorphosed into a wife, then a mother. She held the soil. She watered the beds. When the weather was hot and the sun was above her, beads of sweat would gather on her nose. Then she would rest in the shade and remember how he passed his hand over her, time after time.

And it was her husband who won the first bunch of mint, which ended up floating in a glass of tea in front of him, while they both forgot the harshness of his earlier ridicule of her 'agricultural project'

accusing her yet again of feigning possessiveness. But how could she not give him the first bunch of mint?

[114] She sat at his left in the living room. He was smoking, she was smoking and he was talking. Everything he was saying was boring nonsense, but she nodded in agreement from time to time. Suddenly, he looked straight at her and in a sneering, threatening tone said: 'You've become stronger!'

She replied with a smile. He then added: 'You'll pay the price for this strength.'

He went out of the living room and she remained to the left of the void he left behind, thinking about this man whom she had spent her whole life with, and to whom she had given her love, all her love. She would not let tears find their way into her eyes, which were fixed on the door that he had just shut quietly.

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She sat down to write a letter to him.

She held a pair of scissors and started to cut the jagged edges on the right side of the page she had torn out of her daughter's Arabic notebook, then began to look for a pen with a nice nib that was not too wide. After long hours, composed of five minutes here and five minutes there, which were given to her by a world jam-packed with duties and requirements, the letter was ready. Perhaps inadvertently, it was just in time for her last therapy session. It was a letter in which she had decided to be herself finally, even if she was quite scared of appearing like an idiot.

She folded it twice; each fold ran carefully parallel to a line on the page. Then she hid it under her husband's socks, this time on purpose, since normally he did not bother to give a single glance past the pair he was about to wear. If, in spite of this, his natural field of vision was forced to include a white sheet of paper, then he would not bother opening it, and even if he did open it and saw her handwriting, he would not bother reading it. And she relished the thought of his indifference and lack of interest in her. It amused her, for the first time in her life.



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'I never believed that writing would be harder than speaking. Can you imagine? At any rate, I love you. You might be thinking: what was it that brought me to your path? Isn't life already hard enough without all this? But this is what really happened to me. This is not equivalent to a declaration of war or anything along those lines, but rather, of what is nice and what makes life worth living.

[115]

'You must be nervous right now. In any case, life is very short, so why don't we live it day by day and enjoy the beauty of existence whenever we can? And I absolutely don't believe that social norms are stronger than emotions.

'For that reason, I can't stop myself from imagining us together. I imagine that I am holding you very close, pressing my hand into you and feeling your breathing. I implore you, don't get angry with me for writing these words, or thinking of them. Just read them.'

He told her that she should not feel this way towards him.

She went out of the clinic, and since she could not bear to do anything else, started walking. She passed by her car, then by other cars, until she had crossed the whole parking lot to the other side. There, in a courtyard concealed behind some buildings, she found a wooden bench and sat down on it. She began to look at her elegant black clothes and the gold necklace dangling around her neck, to which some woollen threads from her sweater were clinging. She started to remove them carefully. After that, she proceeded to think about what she might possibly cook this evening.

Translated by Suneela Mubayi