

Latifa Baqa

A Short Story

[15]

Bad Soup!

Last night's soup was very bad. I thought of telling Fatima about it before leaving the house; she might make better soup next time around. I quickly put on my coat and burst through the door, almost treading on the child. I bang the door behind me; the child is crying. My eyes slam into the sun outside. At the bus-station, the sunrays are slowly petting the faces. The bus arrives at last, crawling under the weight of a people of a special ilk, all of whom agree that it is Monday – the beginning of a new week.

'Ouch!' I scream; someone has trampled on my foot. What a morning! I'll start with the lady who owns the electric appliances store. She's promised to look into the matter, and to receive me at 9.00 a.m.

I stand in front of the shop window to quickly tidy my dishevelled hair ruffled by the bus passengers. Everything is in good order!

'I have an appointment with the lady who owns this store. She said she'd receive me at 9 o'clock.' (I glance at my plastic watch; it is 9.00 a.m. sharp.)

The doorman is fat and unfriendly, 'The Madam is not here!' he says.

'But she's promised to help me, and she gave me an appointment at ...'

'Come back in an hour,' he says, cutting me short.

The thought of going for a walk around town to discover its morning crosses my mind. I burst out laughing – What morning and what evening! What a lousy day! I remember my cousin who is a 'zeffat' in Lille – France. 'Zeffat' means that he returns to Morocco in the summer, clad in an old suit, ironed immaculately to hide any traces of its former French owner, and that he brings cheap presents for all the members of the family. My cousin cannot stop talking about France, what a paradise it is, and how life there is a dream made real. 'There are plenty of jobs,' he would say. 'The salary you get is in proportion to

the work you do; work is available in abundance; you can work twenty hours a day if you so wish; you're paid full salary up to the last minute you have worked; just picture with me . . .'

[16] But who is spoiling my stroll around the city? I glance at him; a silly smile animated his face. I stop and start walking the other way. He does not say anything. He looks like the boy who, along with the other boys, was involved in the 'rape' of Si al-Hadj's she-ass. Poor guy! His looks, which appeared so insolent just a moment ago, are now gradually fading away before the now derisive impression glistening in my eyes.

'Haven't you found any other she-ass to rape, except Si al-Hadj's?' I ask him, keeling over with laughter.

Si al-Hadj is the tribal leader; he owns a black she-ass with bright eyes. It was harvest season; when the men went out to the fields, the wretched youngsters had already decided on their programme for the evening.

In her eyewitness account of the she-ass scene, Aisha, the snub-nosed little girl, said that when the boys were penetrating the animal with their little things, the she-ass was grinning and its eyes were brighter than usual. Later on, Mmi Iada,¹ who enjoys these kinds of things, related that there was a very strange glow in the animal's eyes. Every time she walked past a group of men who included Si-al-Hadj among them, the owner of the she-ass, Mmi IadaI, would say: 'Some problems are of my own making; others are caused for me by my she-ass.'

Enraged, Si al-Hadj would heap words of abuse on her: 'Away with you, ugly crone!'

Still strolling, I walk by a bookstore window where I see many books that I haven't read yet. I remember the hungry character in *Days of Lentils*. He would walk into a bookstore, purchase all the books he wanted and leave. Can I do the same? I go straight to the shelves on the right: history books, novels, science books, and books on religion. I turn to the opposite side: science books in all fields. I pick up a book by Barthes, a copy of which I had seen in the window of the bookstore. I read the back cover. My big handbag is open.

'I'll just let the book slide quietly into the handbag. I look at the



cashier. He's busy with one of the customers. No problem at all. This is great! Ah, the upper floor! Why is that guy looking at me? He's smiling too?'

I pretend to be busy in the hope that he will get bored and look the other way. At that very moment, the bookstore assistant walks toward me and asks me if I am planning to purchase the book. I raise my head and level a glance at the man on the upper floor. I return the book to its place and storm out of the bookstore.

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'Is the Madam back?'

The doorman flings me a scornful look as if he owns the place and says that she is not.

'Even though it's half past ten!' I remark.

'I said the Madam is not here yet; she may not come at all; besides, we have no vacancies. We have two cleaners who do the daily cleaning.'

Daily cleaning! What's there to explain to this Devil? Shall I tell him what the Madam told me? Shall I tell him that I'm fed up with the soup of my brother's wife and of the screams of the brood which my brother and she have begotten over a period of nine years at a rate of one child a year? Or shall I inform him that I didn't come here to be a cleaner, that I am clean, that the situation has become unbearable for me, and that I hold a BA in that real fable they call 'sociology'? The fat doorman is busy with some clients.

'Come back tomorrow!' he says.

'I certainly will! I'll ask my boss at the bakery for yet another morning off. And I might find the Madam in her office!'

At home, I forget to tell Fatima what I thought about the last night's soup – that was no different from all other the soups she has made. What is this idea of mine that she should improve her soups, which has been growing in my mind since I don't know when? My brother does not notice that the soup is bad; that the screams of his pack of children are getting worse; that the price of his cigarettes has increased threefold in two years; that he hasn't laughed in a long time. Fatima, who finds all this quite natural, never stops peeling carrots and turnips with to make soup every night. What about me, what is it exactly that I want to change? Is it the fact that I work at a modern bakery for a monthly salary of three hundred dirhams?² Ah, I remem-

[18] ber! There is my cousin, the zeffat, who has spoken to Fatima about his wish to get hitched to me, in spite of what has been said about me and my being thirty-one years old, of what he has heard about my ‘masculinity’ and my immeasurable self-conceit. My cousin also says that he will return to the country once and for all for this very purpose, that he will rent a house for us, and that I won’t have to work.

‘This is the solution!’ he says. ‘You’ll be the lady of the house, just like all married women. You’ll sweep the floor, wash clothes, have children (the most important thing is to be able to procreate, so that he won’t reconsider the matter) and cook.’

Cook! Cook soup every day! The kind of soup that Fatima makes? ‘Fatima, your soup last night was horrible!’ I scream.

‘Really!’ she says, ‘So what! Your brother gulps down anything.’

My cousin must be ready to swallow anything, too: the soup, the increase of the prices of sugar, bread and cigarettes, and the never-ending screams of his kids.

‘To hell with you, bald Cousin!’ I shout.

My shout startles Fatima, who is sitting beside me changing her son’s clothes.

‘What! What! What did you say?’ she asks.

‘Nothing! Nothing at all.’

Translated by Ali Azeriah

NOTES

1 Mmi means ‘mother,’ like Umm.

2 Around \$30 or £18.

