

Alawiya Sobh

A Chapter from the Novel

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It's Called Love

I turned off the light, stretched out on the bed and slipped off my panties. Closing my eyes, I surrendered to his kisses. He felt hot and sticky against me, his sweat was soft and dewy, shining on our bodies like stars in the night of the room. His warm caresses set the blood pulsing through my veins and his kisses ignited my passion. Welling up with desire, my body arched up toward him, as he lay on top of me, eyes shut, his large hands dancing up and down my limbs.

He had often visited my dreams, but now he was here in the flesh, kissing me all over, in my own room, and my marital bed. No Saleem, just him and me, alone, his hands and his mouth in turn exploring my body, teasing all my senses, making me soar to the sky.

The thought that I was cheating on Saleem didn't cross my mind. I had no thought of Saleem whatsoever.

His smell filled my nose, the rounded slant of his shoulder gleamed before my eyes. 'My pussy, my pussy,' I heard myself crying over and over again. 'It's yours, come, come inside me now,' I cried, just the way he used to tell me to, so that he could come. Waves of pleasurable contractions swept over me, flooding my pelvis, and then the storm of excitement slowly subsided.

When I opened my eyes, there was no one there: just the quiet stillness of the night – and my fingers down between my legs. Realizing that I had been masturbating, my eyes scanned the corners of the room.

Despite getting married and ending my relationship with Hani, my fantasies had not stopped. Sometimes, when I was alone, I would close my eyes, part my lips softly, and hold my breath. And as I released it slowly over whatever part of my body it reached, I would fantasize it was his breath, and the fingers of my right hand became his fingers. I would wet them slightly with my saliva, and touch my nipple, and feel it was him who was touching it, and that I was on top of him, or underneath, and then I no longer needed to keep my eyes shut. He



would be there. Directing my hot breath to my chest and with the help of my hand, I would feel his hot skin across my body.

How I always dreamt of a love child with him! Once, I dreamt that I had given birth to that child, and was stunned as I examined what he looked like as the doctor held him, fresh from my womb.

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Another time, I dreamt that I had a little blond girl by him and that we lived together, in an unfamiliar house. Carrying the baby girl in my arms, I said to him: 'Look, Hani, it's your daughter.'

His presence permeated my whole being, giving me pleasure, but also painning me. When I realized that the feeling was just illusory, I decided to erase all my feelings for him. That had been impossible until our meeting again in the winter of 1978, when he came to Beirut to spend the Christmas and New Year holidays; after our relationship resumed with added intensity, he decided to spend the rest of the year in Lebanon.

That year, as we became physically close, each of our bodies found their repose in the other, and our mutual desire led us into a journey of self-discovery.

There are many things I try to remember but can't.

It's as if my memory is the top of a steep mountain, from which I fall every time I try to climb up. Over and over again, I set off on the ascent, but like a worm crawling across a branch, fall blindly and then start up again, to no avail.

Then the memories sometimes flood back, and I no longer remember anything else. I now recall that I wrote about that meeting in my diary, and read the entry to Su'ad. When she heard what I said about our second parting, her hand flew up to her chest, the way it always does when she is upset by something. She doesn't say anything, just recoils inwards, and seems at a loss for words, looking like someone straining to recall the entire alphabet, in vain.

That morning, I was on the balcony, sipping my coffee. It was raining, the droplets trickling down the skyward edge of the window like falling tears, or little percussive incantations, dancing on the breeze. Contemplating the rain – how it was wet, how it fell, how it was al-

ways there – I thought about the enduring mystery of life. As the rain abated and my eye caught the split-second gleam of another bolt of lightning, I was left with the same feeling I always had that it was the harbinger of a sudden and crushing event.

[118] That morning, Su'ad had come over and I'd read her a poem I had written the previous night. After I'd finished reading, she had looked at me with those still-sparkling black eyes and luminous smile of hers, and asked: 'Did you know Hani's in town?'

'What's that you're saying?' I answered, the colour draining from my cheeks.

'I saw him at the Rawdah Café yesterday, and said hello to him.'

'What was he doing? When did he get here? And who was he with?'

The questions reeled off my tongue before I fell into a stunned silence. Then I changed the subject, afraid that I would hear something unpleasant. I started telling her about my two children, but I think my words were all jumbled, just like my thoughts.

Within a couple of days, I got a call from Hani, who said he had tried not to contact me, but couldn't bear it: how could he be here in Beirut and not see me?

I went to meet him in a small café that none of our acquaintances frequented. Whenever I saw him after a long break, it was as if I had regained my spirit. And it was only when I sat across from him at the table that I felt the blood pumping in my heart. I could feel myself blushing, the pink flush colouring my cheeks, my ears and the tip of my nose. We talked about all sorts of things: his studies, my two children, the war; we steered clear of the subject of our relationship.

Later, we wandered aimlessly through the streets, without noticing much of anything – just meandering from place to place, avoiding the fact that we were both now married. I didn't have the slightest inclination or desire to go home. I imagined us holding hands as we walked, but we did nothing of the sort.

This was the first time I hadn't let my husband know that I would be late coming home. Before parting, Hani and I agreed to see each other again soon, or at least to be in touch, but we found all sorts of excuses to avoid doing so. At times, I used the pretext of one of



the children or my husband being sick, while he resorted to being tied up with obligations. Truth be told, over the course of our phone conversations, it was always he who was trying to avoid another encounter.

I knew he loved me just as I loved him, and never doubted it. But I sensed his fear regarding any resumption of our relationship, just as he was aware of similar apprehensions on my part. At times, I even asked myself if he would come back to me out of vindictiveness because I had married and turned my back on him when he had wanted me to wait for him. Besides the fact that he was constitutionally incapable of such a thing, what he explained later on was that he had never been certain whether his feelings for me were those of true love or a strong infatuation.

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After several weeks of hesitation, he finally gave me the address of a house in Sanaye'h¹ that belonged to a friend of his living in Paris, who had given him the keys.

The first time I went there to see him, I pictured how he would open the door, where I would kiss him, and how I would nestle against his shoulder – and how in his heightened state of arousal, he would yield, without inhibition.

Sitting down in the living-room, I felt apprehensive. My body was taut with tension and my eyes darted around the walls, avoiding his gaze. When he came up to me and led me to the bedroom, I followed him like an automaton. However, no sooner had I sat on the edge of the bed that the blaze of all my pent-up yearning dissipated – my hands felt frozen solid, and despite the heat of the summer, I told him I felt cold, that I must be sick. I shied away from any sexual encounter, and left hurriedly saying I would be in touch with him. As I made my way home, it felt as if shards of glass lined my throat every time I swallowed. While my desire to go to bed with him was overwhelming, I had not done so: what would happen if I could never leave him again? What would happen to my family? And what if having sex with him was just a conditioned response, and nothing more?

The following week, we agreed to another rendez-vous, and when I went to see him, I did so without the little dramatization of our

meeting in my head, my only thought being that whatever happened between us would be spontaneous. My frame of mind was to be responsive and positive, and casting aside anxiety and nervousness, I was open to all possibilities, without any expectations.

[120] Opening the door for me, his eyes flashed fire – the intensity of his lust was such that it felt as if he were eating me with his gaze. His groin was swollen with desire as I stepped inside.

That was a year of tempestuous meetings.

Before going to see him, I would stand staring at myself naked before the mirror. I examined every inch of my taut, alabaster body, as if I meant to go to our meetings unclothed. During our trysts, he pointed out to me that he was completely unaware of what clothes I had on, and hardly even noticed my underwear. At times, I would smile to myself in the elevator wondering whether to take my clothes off there and then and go into the apartment naked. No sooner would I ring the doorbell that he would start undressing me, and I him. I'd be unbuttoning his shirt, while he unzipped the skirt or trousers I was wearing, our hands pursuing their mission so feverishly that we were unable to tell who was undressing whom. As soon as our clothes fell to the floor, we each took a step back to contemplate the other's nakedness before getting into bed.

It was the first time that we went all the way, and in the instant I surrendered my body to him, I felt as if I had entrusted him with my innermost self.

That first time, after our relationship resumed, I could not tell whether my tears – which he didn't notice lying on top of me – were for sheer joy or whether I was already sad at the prospect of another separation. Maybe it was both.

I didn't feel as if I were giving away my body to him or that he was taking anything from me. I felt as though he were acquainting me with my body, and I was acquainting him with his. Lying on top of me, he told me how his desire to penetrate me was driven by a raw longing to return to my womb; letting out a deep sigh, and smiling, I clutched him by the mop of hair over his forehead and pulled him to me.

Listening to him talk in bed, it felt to me as if his voice was made



flesh in all my senses, and that the whole world was contained in his caresses.

Running my fingers across his warm chest, I could feel the sparse hairs (now tinged with white) that he had sometimes shaved back in our university days, thinking that a hairier chest would be more appealing to me. To me, the pores of his skin were like windows that I heard opening up to the wind of love.

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With my exquisitely heightened senses during these encounters, my thought was that it was not possible for flowers to bloom in total silence, without making the slightest sound.

His body hair, which I had taken to be a sign of virility and one of the indicators of a man's masculinity, seemed to me like lilies of the valley – their flowering formations carpeting his slender body, shimmering across the expanse of his skin like a sheet of water that tenderly nurtured the flowers as they hummed into bloom. And for a moment, they seemed like tiny violins bowing a tuneful melody.

At such moments, I was overwhelmed by the musicality of our senses.

I knew that one's fingers could do many things, including playing musical instruments. But I didn't know that they could also produce a beautiful tune, as they played on our bodies. I used to think that the purpose of the eyes was to see, and that while the eyes could speak or be silent, I had never experienced their ability to sing and emit a melody. I used to think that the ears could hear love even through closed lips, but here were my ears discerning everything inside me, all the exultation and the trilling joy I felt.

Lying in bed that day, he told me of his desire to live inside my womb, a desire he had often expressed before. He told me something I will never forget: he said that when a man impregnated a woman, the womb was the vacant space for him to express the creative urge expressed in the art of building. The womb, he said, is the place a man comes out of and to which he returns, albeit in a different form, giving him meaning and purpose. He returns thus to the womb as a doer rather than a weakling, and in doing so, he reasserts his feeling of being in control and regains his sense of sovereignty. I remember him saying: 'Nahla, my sweet, human beings are driven to repetition,

and while that drive is deeply buried it seeks to recapture not only the experiences of the past, but also the place of their occurrence. The emptiness man leaves and is left with upon exiting the womb becomes his project to rebuild.'

[122] When he told me of his feelings about the womb, I said something to him that I hadn't even spoken of to my husband. I had only ever told Su'ad about it.

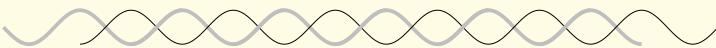
During my pregnancy with my daughter Faten, once the doctor told me the news, the rest of the world all but vanished for me. Even you, I told him, except that you continued to be there in my dreams. During my ob-gyn exam, I could see everything on the screen of the ultrasound, and to me my womb appeared like an inner space that enclosed the universe of my femininity and my most fundamental individuality: a constellation inside of me, with lightning and thunder, and gusts of wind, like when it's going to rain, and the sound of waves crashing against each other. I could hear all of that on the screen in front of me.

It made me wonder about the nature of this space inside me, and how it was like a sky, in which I could see clusters of clouds, or like the sea with that whooshing sound I could hear that was reminiscent of waves. And it made me wonder whether my baby felt safe and protected by the sounds it heard or whether it was disturbed by them, given that hearing is the most developed of the senses in vitro. My emotions were all aflutter as I thought of my baby enveloped in that closed and protective pouch of liquid.

He took me in his arms after that conversation, and told me again that he wanted a child by me.

All the way to my house that day, I felt I was going home stripped of body and soul. But as soon as I entered the door, my face took on its former contours, the one familiar to my husband and two children – the coping smile that I had fashioned out of my unhappiness, which vanished when I was with Hani, reappeared, and my joy in him disappeared. With Hani, it was a smile from the heart that adorned my face – far from him, that smile, like the rest of my features, had become strangers to me.

That full, beaming smile with him, slackened as soon as I got home. My eyes, which practically leapt out of my face in their embrace of the



world when I was with him, reverted to their inward gaze, and without my even noticing, disappeared inside me.

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My joy in him transformed not only my features but the very pulse of my body. [123]

And the vision of his crushed face during our last encounter that year, remained etched before my eyes for a long, long time.

I was stunned when, after a long silence, he told me that he had met a Lebanese girl in Paris, whose name was Sawsan. A student at the university he attended, both she and her parents had adopted him and stood by him, and he was thinking of marrying her.

The news hit me like a blow on the head. The question flashed before my eyes, as my tongue intoned: 'If that is the case, why then did you contact me? What was the point of seeing me, and starting up our relationship again? I don't understand what's going on, Hani...' My voice trailed off as words failed me and I began choking up with tears.

'Oh Nahla,' he answered, 'be realistic, you're married. This girl is a good, decent person, I like her a lot, and I think I could live with her.'

'Well, if it's about decency, my husband too is a decent man, who is good to me and to my parents, and he certainly has a place in my heart. And in that sense, I love him, and certainly don't loathe him. But you represent something completely different, and I don't think I could continue like this with you if you got married. I couldn't bear the thought, it would drive me crazy. In any case, if she feels about you only one-tenth of the way I feel, your mother must have prayed very fervently during Lailatul Qadr.² You know, Hani, that your mother doesn't love you as much as I do. But if you like her, then it's up to you.'

'While it's true that I like her, you know that YOU are my dream, my very life. Would you turn your life upside down and make the drastic decision of leaving your husband and your children, and coming away with me? Think about it, I am up for it. But if your answer is no, then it will be the second time that you give up on me.'

That last sentence pierced my heart like a knife. I couldn't listen to any more. I left the apartment, got into the first cab I could find, and

in a strangled, barely audible voice, gave the driver the address of my home.

[124] It was only after the vehicle was in motion that the flood of tears erupted, a hot and salty stream that washed down my cheeks uncontrollably. I thought my tear ducts had burst and that I wouldn't be able to stop crying until their source ran dry. As a sob escaped me, the driver heard and he glanced back at me through the rear-view mirror, saying: 'Lady, please, what I can do to help you? It's a shame for such beautiful eyes to be crying like that! You're burning my heart up with your tears!'

'Do you have children? You know how they can drive you to distraction,' I replied tearfully.

He told me he had five children, but didn't say anything more about them. Instead, he complained about his problems with his wife, as he continued looking at me through the mirror.

'What can I say, lady, but oh the trouble I got! I have a wife who won't let me near her, forever complaining that she's sick whenever we get into bed. You know what I mean ... I'm not getting any! ... Not one little bit! Maybe once a year ... And even then it's like look, but don't touch ... when I sidle up to her, she's stiff as a board, damn her eyes ...'

I really wasn't following what he was saying, lost in the sound of my own thoughts. It was clear to me that I had to sever my relationship with Hani completely, because how could I leave my children? Was I even capable of such a thing?

I could remember every stage of my children's development, how would they ever go on growing, far from my gaze? And how would I still have two forearms, the one for Ahmad to slumber in and the other for Faten to fall asleep on, like two reveries resting in my arms. What would happen to my arms without them? The arms that they would continue to climb even after they had outgrown them, even after I had aged and begun sleeping alone, free of my husband's smell, and of all the other loathsome details of marital life.

How would I ever live without their baby smell?

Riding in the taxi, I recalled how I had become fully conscious of the meaning of fear only when my daughter took her first step. How I



felt as if I were steadying her with my very eyes – as if my gaze were like a cushion, protecting her from falling.

I saw myself at their bedtime, listening to them breathe to ensure they were in good health. And then counting their breaths again once they were asleep, just to be certain they were all right.

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Even if I were to allow myself to forget all of that, how could I forget the nightmare my son had recounted the previous week, when he'd come running from his bed and buried his head in my lap, crying. And how when I asked him why, he moaned and sobbed inconsolably until he finally calmed down enough to speak, and said:

'Mama, please don't go ... and, mama, you can't die without me. I'm frightened of being alone, how can I live by myself without you?'

For a moment, I was dumbfounded by what he said, but then asked him, almost urgently: 'Why are you saying such things?' He said he dreamt I was a candle, and that I was melting and finally the flame died out. And when he tried to grab the candle, there was nothing there. So he went searching for me around the house, but his hands came up empty. Everything he saw was just like a dream and he couldn't find me anywhere. His words were all jumbled as he told me this before bursting into tears again.

I had a vision of my son – now a married man – alone and sad. That day, I knew that if he and his sister lost me, they would always regard themselves as poor and weak, and unprotected.

And with that awareness came the realization that the ties that bind me to my children, while ineffably tender, were iron-clad, and had no rival in the love of my life.

With my tears redoubling as I realized that I would never see Hani again, in the same instant I longed with all my being that the wheels of the car would reverse their course and take me back to him. But as the car proceeded I asked myself: what if our hearts were the compass of one's life journey?

I got out of the cab and began walking away, when the driver yelled: 'Where's my fare, sister?' I went back and paid him.

Going upstairs to our apartment, I conjured up the sight of Hani unable to believe his ears as I told him that we would never see each other again. And as I walked away, he remembered the mountain when

he was a little boy with his father one day. It was a dark wintry night, and the wind howled like an angry giant. Looking at the mountain across from their village, and holding his father's hand, he wondered whether the blowing storm could bring the mountain crashing down.

[126] That night he dreamt that the mountain had cleaved, that a part of it had tumbled down, and that he had gone to it and poked his finger into a piece of limestone hanging off the edge. And that he felt it turn into the shape of a girl. Standing before me as I left, he was visited by the same feeling, that very same fear. Flashing a sardonic, sad smile as I walked away, he told himself it was nothing but the fear of a small child, and goodness knows his childhood fears weren't about to be realized now. But in that instant, he was gripped by the terror of the tumbling mountain, the difference now being that he himself was that mountain.

... That was what he came to tell me later.

Translated by Maia Tabet

NOTES

- 1 Sanayeh is a residential district of Beirut.
- 2 Laylatul Qadr is the anniversary of the night Muslims believe the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet Mohammad. It is the night they consider that their fate in the following year is decided and hence pray to God all night long, asking for mercy and salvation.

