

Azza Rashad

Two Short Stories

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My Mother's Eyes

My grandmother's departing eyes fixed upon the vast heavenly expanse, and this was the last thing she said: 'Man sees what he wants to see.'

My mother gently lowered her eyelids without letting a single tear fall, but she burst into tears when your plate of broth spilt and burnt my thigh on the day of Ashura. Do you remember?

Mother spent the whole of that afternoon preparing food. The duck was killed and she prepared fattah with vinegar and garlic just as you like it, in the hope it that would bring back your lost appetite. You were struck by an illness which affected you after we moved to our new home and away from grandmother's house, which in spite of its size seemed to us too small, as Aunt was mistress of it and took every opportunity to torment Mother. She was submissive to start with, but then began to give back as good as she was given; and the sound of their voices raised in argument shook the heart of the house and radiated out into the neighbouring streets, to the point that we became the talk of the town.

You sold the two square measures of land that were your entire inheritance from your father in order to build a small, separate house for us. I still remember you standing beneath his picture, with your head lowered, crying soundlessly.

The picture of grandfather was the first thing we hung up in our new house, which exhausted the money before the final bricks were laid in its walls. You always said in response to the worry lurking in my eyes: 'It will be a balcony so we can look out onto the world.'

You spent most of your time on that balcony, drinking tea and grilling corncobs, which you used to like a lot before you gave them up, like most kinds of food, when you became ill.

You gave up sleeping, eating, and . . . Mother, who had great success in performing miracles, making up her face with powders I had never seen before. I used to think she looked like an Easter egg with

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her loud colours – I didn't imagine then that I would put them on my own face every day as I do now. She began to wear a strange dress with big holes in it that reminded me of a fishing net. That was on the day she cooked a fattened duck for us, and refused to give me the liver before we had all gathered around the table to eat together.

Frustrated, I went out into the world, and I saw her . . . the woman who lived alone opposite us, the one whom I heard our neighbours talking about. They said she came to live in the safety of our land after being abandoned by a city scumbag; and then they made up their minds she had joined a wandering jinn who had caused her to scorn talking to people and wear a transparent dress – strange and shameless. There were also those who declared she was deranged, crazy, so everyone avoided her, even my mother.

My eyes were following her out of curiosity when I saw you at that same moment walking along with confused steps, head down. Were you following her shadow after she disappeared behind the door, left ajar? Her shadow – which seemed to me in that moment tall, wild, and likely to be one of the ghosts they used to frighten us with so we would stop crying. Or were you following a shadow far from her, hidden at that time from my view by my short stature?

One thing I will never forget is that when you reached the house you passed by me without saying a word – as though you hadn't seen me. And when Mother called us and lined us up around our banquet . . . you choked at the first sip of the broth and the bowl fell from your hand, burning my thigh. My mother withdrew to her room, bewildered, crying; and after I swallowed my pain and followed her, I saw her tears falling, the colour of the broth. I felt at that moment as though the broth churning about inside me would be the last. It was as though I was afraid of something obscure, that I had not encountered before even in the most savage quarrels of my mother and aunt; but I didn't realise exactly what.

I saw my mother a little while later hugging the black veil of her own mother as though she had lost her that very minute. She cried a great deal, then dried her tears and came out in her black gilbab, in the company of our elderly neighbour. I heard them whispering strange



things about the Sheikh, who could open the Book and discover secret things.

After a while, her features brightened again. She took a folded paper which she hid under your pillow, and three incense sticks, which she burnt one after the other throughout the following three days. Then she gathered up the ash left over and on the morning of the fourth day threw it into the river. She kept on observing you from afar, as I was observing you, and her and our strange neighbour and the ghosts of distant space. [101]

Gradually your lost appetite came back. My mother cried out for joy when she thought you were cured. She poured a cup of water outside the house and stood plaiting her wet hair in front of the window, receiving the congratulations of our good neighbours.

You finally got better . . . you laughed, and chattered and slept. You ate so much that there wasn't enough left for us . . . you laughed so we laughed, but your absences from the house increased after you got your new work. Apparently your absence was necessary for half the week on alternate weeks, so we just praised God for all things.

And as the days went by, it was as though we hardly saw you; until you cut us off altogether, and you left us.

I used to hang your picture up in front of me for many years. I would fill my mouth with saliva and spit it at you every evening, because you left us on a moonless night, without concerning yourself as to whether we would sink or swim.

I used to conjure you up in my sleep, and you came to me shrouded in a halo of mistrust. You tortured me for many years. Although I had no proof against her apart from a few half-words and snatches of sentences, I never dared say to Mother that I had heard our good neighbours whispering about your elopement with that woman.

You came to me in my sleep, and I slapped you until my hands were numb and you vanished; afterwards I began to cry. In the morning I wandered streets which led nowhere. They brought me from unknown boulevards to ones even stranger to me. I kept my eyes peeled for a face I resembled in the endless stream of faces flowing past until I lost my way, and lost myself, and I returned to my mother. I found her talking about you as though you had just come back to us.

I needed many years to forget the little girl I was . . . I had to get rid of the black down which linked my eyebrows and kept growing back so I could obliterate the picture of you that was carved into me, and move on . . .

[102] My colleague at work told me I didn't speak much – though she didn't confess that she was afraid of me because of that. And our new colleague complained he didn't know how to dodge the bullet aimed by my eyes every time I looked at him.

I look in the mirror and I see you, standing and clinging to my vocal chords, or a renewed fantasy of revenge straying through my eyes, unabated in its excess by the thoughts passing through my head that some misfortune had perhaps befallen you and made you leave us in that contemptible manner; even death would be no excuse for your long absence.

You alone know how much I needed you and how much I suffered in my battles with myself so I would stop waiting for you.

You alone made me see how I did not resemble my mother – whom, whenever I wanted to row with her, I would tell that you would not be coming back; and she would fly into a rage, insisting that someone had 'bewitched' you and that God was capable of healing you and bringing you back.

My mother, whose gaze never left the door, waiting for you, never omitted to set aside your portion of the fattah made with vinegar and garlic that you like, and always kept a tenderness for you in her heart – which, thanks to you, I would never know.

My mother, who, when I mocked her Sheikh who was no good at reading, closed her eyes for a long time, then muttered strange words and shouted furiously: 'Curse the devil and sleep.'

I close my eyes to the letters scratching at my eye, writing before me a bewildering question with no answer: 'Why does man see only what he wants?'

The Night . . . When All Is Quiet

No sooner had her feet passed the door of the hospital than she began to divide the way to her house into three sections as she used to do,



taking pleasure in a game she had mastered in order to challenge the boredom of the fifteen minutes which must elapse before she reached home.

The first part began with the high wall, which ran along the half-destroyed pavement, and the distressing gloom; the gloominess was only dispelled by the fragments of conversation thrown out to her ears each night, between people of whom nothing appeared but their shadowy faces, made jagged by the iron bars over the small distant windows; and others who stood on the pavement to speak to them and then moved on afterwards, free like her, just like her.

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Between the two sides of the wall, she would sometimes hear passionate, emotional conversations, and at other times quarrels which reached the top limits of verbal abuse and threats. But on no night did she stop to ask herself the question she dared not articulate: 'Who are the prisoners? And who are the free?'

A burst of light would rouse her from her thoughts on the second section of the way.

Here, when you were passing by the New Era Café, you would hear curses and ripostes, laughter and fear and negotiations, between young men and old, policemen and lawbreakers, breadwinners and market playboys, and thus the clamour would continue and then be swallowed up by the empty streets in the last section of the way, which was the least frightening for her as she knew it like the back of her hand.

In the vicinity of the low wall of the Bar'i house she would hear the mother cursing her sons as 'men in twisting their moustaches, and nothing else' – to quote her her mocking words – who had sold their fathers' workshop and frittered away the money.

A little later, the anxious voice of 'Good-name' Al-Shaji would come to her, nagging at his wife for the entire alleyway to hear in characteristic musical sentences, beginning with his pockets which she emptied every morning and ending with the Sheikh, who sat as the look-out at the threshold of the house, disclosing precise details, which ought to be secret between any man and his wife; and thus the way ended quickly and she found herself in front of the door to her flat.

As soon as she put the key in the lock she heard the cries of her

children and the usual shouting of their father, and before the few minutes had passed in which she needed to catch her breath, her life-partner had put on his best clothes and gone out. Like every night.

[104] She quickly began to prepare dinner for the little ones and do the housework which bored their father. Finally the children were in their beds, ready to sleep after she kissed them and wished them sweet dreams.

Then her own time began ... no, it hadn't started yet! Hurriedly, she tidied the room which had become disordered, and while she was doing that put the radio on and began to sing. Then she remembered that her voice didn't agree with her troublesome neighbour, so she became quiet.

It was almost midnight when her own time began ...

With a hesitant hand, she drew a 'honeycomb' box, which she had bought from the shop next to the café, out of her bag and looked at it, then put it back in the bag, and once more took it out ... she thought for a moment, then began to undo the box, and undo the cellophane.

The picture of her father on the wall opposite her bed made her jump, and she saw his eyes fixed on her ...

Yes. She had loved him intensely, and detested him intensely also.

Ah ... the great father ... she slipped into his room, and into his heart, with the smile she made especially to soften his heart, when everyone said he had no heart ... except for her.

His room, perfumed with the scent of honeycomb, and his strong, probing eyes, detecting everything that came within his orbit, and his deep, decisive voice and his moustache ... 'I'm so proud of your moustache, father ...' All that gave him a majesty and splendour which awoke love in the heart and fear in the hand which stretched out timidly for school fees, which he gave generously, without hesitation.

She left his room and knew he had sent someone after her to follow her from a distance. Indeed, as opposed to her mother, he never refused her slightest request. Except in matrimony ...

'Is marriage a game?' She could still remember the voice of her mother, trying to convince her he was doing it all in her best interests.

She began to suck a piece of honeycomb, sighing ... now the sweet taste began, and the smell ...



The smell of honeycomb, which never left her father, until he was washed and wrapped in the shroud. Did she – after all these years – still look like him?

She began to laugh, until her hand – which was rooting about in the depths of her bag – hit upon the memorandum which the manager had signed that morning, and flung at her with his nose in the air, without saying a word.

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He doubtless knew that all his decisions on regulations and systems were impossible to implement ... but what was it with his nose? She felt the taste of the honey flowing into her stomach ... and the bitter taste of smoke flowed onto her tongue ... she started to sigh and turn over on the bed....

She saw herself cutting the head off her father, the nose off the manager, and a leg off her husband, having forgotten her doubts about him, until they were renewed today this evening by her colleague with the small eyes and the sharp fingers....

She saw herself rise and destroy everything ... the bed ... the hospital ... the prison, everything. She felt the bitterness of the smoke arriving suddenly in her stomach, and ran to be sick ... It hurt, and she felt her insides spewing from her mouth as she discharged them with resignation ... and when she realised she hadn't yet died, she returned to her bed, where a thick cloud of peacefulness enveloped her, relaxing the set of her face from within. A number of pictures were floating to the top of the pile of her thoughts ... the faces of her children, and the pleading eyes of the patients as her colleague, the nurse with the sharp fingers, pricked them with the needle; the stern faces of her father and her manager; the smile of her husband in the wedding picture ... ahhh ... why was he so handsome in that wedding photo....

She sighed deeply, then cried to herself: 'I'm not the lamb they think I am, and they're not the wolves I think they are.'

She began to laugh to herself again, listening to the voice inside her which was still capable of putting up a fight: 'The game isn't over yet ... I'll beat them all.'

She folded the memorandum purposefully, and returned it to her bag. On her face, she sketched the smile with which she would face

the manager in the morning, and when she saw the time had passed, 1 am, the time her husband was due to return, she forgot the pain in her stomach that had not entirely ceased and rose to put on her red nightdress

[106] She began to dab on perfume and take down her hair. She thought about him for a long time before he came

He was very close, but in spite of that, she was powerless to see him, to see what was inside him

The hardness of his features saddened her and her misgivings increased. Her eyes fled from his, which had been looking away from her for a long time, and she asked him: 'Who did you spend the evening with?'

He answered her with the same hardness: 'Nobody'

She lifted the red nightdress slightly up her thighs, and said to herself: 'Now we'll see.'

Translated by Jenny Steel

