

Dima Wannous

A Short Story

[137]

Sabar

Following her usual Thursday morning routine, Sahar opens her bedroom window wide and begins to devour those of her neighbours. She lets her imagination wander through their curtains, wondering about lives she doesn't lead, until, transported by her imagination, she adds new stories to her already well-stocked store. The view from her window is perhaps the only corner truly Sahar's in the house. The house has grown on her, perhaps even more so than her husband Mahmoud. She knew its walls and its minuscule details. Even the tiles were imprinted on her memory, a bright marble page somewhat eaten away at the edges. Sahar can shut her green eyes and see the brown etchings upon the white marble. She can even describe the modest furniture in clear detail, without missing the couch in the corner near the window, whose colour has faded after a year of Mahmoud relaxing on it every evening.

Her passion for accumulating the details of everyday life has created an anxiety in her spirit that is no less important than any intellectual or national anxiety. The anxiety courses through her veins each Thursday morning. She drags her thin, svelte body soberly to the window, opens it, and pours all her energy into gazing and pondering until noon. She dedicates all her senses to entering a world that she knows nothing about, scooping up more intricate details. She smells the scent of food sneaking into her room like a transparent cloud. She breathes in the smell of sleep chased by women out of their homes with the opening of windows. She inhales the musk of bodies musty after long naps. She glimpses their neighbour who passes by every morning to sell milk, and who disappears on state events to sell posters, banners, flags and bunting. She peeks at him having coffee with his wife in the morning. His thick hair, white but bearing traces of red dye, is flattened by the imprint of the pillow. His flushed face is still crumpled, and his stomach just gets bigger with each passing day.

[138]

Sahar giggles to herself, then worries that God will punish her by turning Mahmoud into a belly filled out with fat and grease in a few years. She evokes his body in her mind's eye, and forces a belly onto it, just to see whether it will suit him. The truth of it is that it doesn't suit him one bit. Mahmoud is not only short, but his flabby body is also covered by such a layer of thick black hair that, even naked, he appears to be wearing a black woollen sweater. He knows very well that she is much more attractive than he is. Her lithe body is perfectly proportioned, and her tall, graceful figure is breathtaking. Her mouth is like a cherry, according to Mahmoud's mother. Her almond eyes are like raindrops, a sweet clear green. Her white skin is soft, tight and clear, untainted by darkness or spots.

For all her wide-eyed staring, Sahar has not once been able to take in her neighbour Sumayya's body in one go. Her pupils cannot accommodate the enormous body, only seeing either its left or its right half. As usual every Thursday, at noon to be precise, Sumayya ambles by in her long black silk robe which envelops a brown body throbbing with stories and folds. She climbs the long, tiring staircase and rings the doorbell, then enters Sahar's home like a whirlwind. Sumayya starts unbuttoning her robe as soon as she presses the doorbell, and by the time Sahar opens the door has often reached the last button. She strides into the room, liberating her body and letting her silk robe flutter behind her like a storm carrying dust and black smoke. Sahar sits back beneath the window preserving her morning memories, silent because she wants the new scenes that have penetrated her imagination to sink in. Sumayya quietsens down, tacitly complicit with Sahar, allowing her to organize her thoughts calmly and carefully.

As usual every Thursday, hajja Maryam comes by to read verses from the Qur'an and drown both women in religious lessons and lectures. Maryam is described as a hajja in the main because she has performed the hajj, wears a veil and is devoutly religious. But when her veil is removed, or her talk strays from religion and the experience of hajj is removed from her life, the impression is completely different. These things intrigue Sahar and Sumayya into listening to her. With a passion for beauty, not religion, they are held fast by her shiny thick hair as she sneaks gracefully into their imaginations with a movement



of her thin, delicate hands, their senses sated by her confident, poised words – for three hundred lira each. At first, Mahmoud refused to pay the fee, but Sahar kept raising the threat of eternal damnation until he relented.

Maryam was a widow who had not remarried after her husband's passing. The religious lessons she gave ended her loneliness and provided her with food and the means for a modest life. The neighbours never hesitated to spin tales about Maryam's refusal to marry a second time. In one of the stories, Maryam was having a secret affair with a rich trader in the Hamidiyyah market and he refused to marry her because he didn't want to ruin his reputation, since his father-in-law was one of the most successful traders of Oriental trinkets. Another neighbour claimed that she had seen Maryam accompanying an officer in Bludan. Sahar always rejected the stories her neighbours told and constantly dusted off her imagination's portrait of an unblemished Maryam. [139]

As usual, the hajja took three strings of prayer beads, made by her brother during his stay in prison, from her leather purse. The women begin to pray to the Almighty. Maryam recites the appropriate Qur'anic verses that Sahar and Sumayya repeat after her, *sadaqa Allah ul-'athim*. The water boils and whistles from the little kitchen. Sahar makes coffee and Sumayya prepares three plates of harissa that Mahmoud had brought back with him from a trip to Homs. Sahar loves the next part of the lesson. The women sip coffee, and after struggling with her guilt, Sahar takes one of Maryam's cigarettes, then rushes to the sink to erase what Mahmoud describes as the nasty stink of smoke. He smokes, but does not like Sahar to, considering it to be a male habit. After that, Sahar sits near the hajja and shyly opens up with questions. Haram and Halal. Heaven and Hell. Good and Evil. And all the contradictions she lives through at her window, in that one corner of the house that is truly Sahar's. The house has grown on her, perhaps even more so than her husband Mahmoud.

As usual every Thursday evening, Sahar spends a lot of time in front of the mirror. She puts kohl around her green eyes, and the green melts into a sea of seduction. Her blonde hair is invaded by a herringbone comb. Her cheeks are rouged scarlet, and her thick lips

[140]

coloured a brownish-red. She strips herself bare of the lessons of the morning and of the haram and halal, and gets down to business. She puts on her bright red dancing outfit, studded with tinkling gold ornaments and embroidered in blue thread that highlights her feminine curves. The outfit is finished off with transparent slippers that add nine centimetres to her height, and increases the authenticity of what is to come.

As usual every Thursday evening, Mahmoud stretches out on the conjugal bed, his body choking with desire. He smokes one cigarette after the other, with an excitement tarnished only by impatience. He chews slices of cucumber and tomato in his desiring mouth, anticipating the Thursday routine.

As usual every Thursday, he puts on a cassette tape of trashy Oriental music. Sahar's waist gyrates madly with choreographed movements. Her bosom heaves, flecked with sweat. She closes her eyes and is transported into a world of strangeness and eroticism. She opens them only when her husband's patience has worn out and the party is over.

'Is prostitution haram, hajja?'

'Not within marriage.'

Translated by Ghenwa Hayek

