

# Wafa al-Bueissa

*A Chapter from the Novel*

[24]

## *Hunger Has Other Faces*

Time passes slowly, heavily, heightening the sense of oppression, of torture, of isolation. I watch the clock with the constant feeling that the second hand is stinging me each time it moves with the unvarying monotony that is driving me out of my mind. Night draws me to day and day hands me to night, where I am tormented by sleep as lonely as a life that slips away from me, empty and pointless.

Emptiness, emptiness, emptiness, ennui, discontent. Every day like all the others. Today like yesterday, like the day before yesterday, like tomorrow, as I – asleep, awake, sitting in front of the television – squirm and fidget.

I wander the house. I explore the rooms. I peer out of the high windows at the people scurrying beneath me and am irritated. Sometimes I talk to myself or pull faces in the mirror; I scratch things onto paper – fantasy love letters, vile abuse directed at myself, at Najla, at Mother, at Father – and that's all I do until I can bear it no longer.

I leave the house with permission (or without) and keep walking, walking, walking. I go out and make for the opposite side of the street, where the sea seems to meet the dockside walkways and, for a while, look out at the scene. Other times I descend barefoot to the rocks that rim the tongue of the ocean, holding my course until I come to the place where fishermen and holidaymakers sit scattered here and there, and I hunt about for the rock closest to the sea. I dip my foot in the water, swirling it about as I scatter droplets with my hand.

There, on a rock that I used to visit and on which I had carved the first letter of my name, someone was observing me. From a distance he looked a slender young man with a handsome face. When he drew closer I immediately realized that he wasn't Egyptian. He had foreign features and he was tall, with thick hair and pale eyes, the muscles proud on his athletic frame. He came towards me and hailed me in a Western accent: 'Good morning.'



'Morning,' I answered him shyly.

'The sea's calm today.'

'Yes.'

He was clearly making an effort to speak a bit of Arabic.

'You don't look like an Arab,' I said. 'Where are you from?'

'I'm Turkish.'

'Really?'

'Turkish-Cypriot.'

'What are you doing here in Alexandria?'

'Relaxing.'

'Here? You've left Cyprus to come and relax here?'

'Perhaps you're not aware of the conflict in Cyprus between Turkey and Greece.'

I shook my head and he changed the subject: 'You're Egyptian?'

That was one of the questions that was bound to annoy me. I had never felt any sense of attachment to any geographical area. What did Libya mean to me? What did Egypt represent? Nothing, the pair of them: mere motherlands that had perfected the art of dishonesty and slow death. Rejected and out of place is how they made me feel, but I replied nonetheless: 'Yes.'

'You've been out here for some time. What are you doing?'

'I just love the sea. I come for a walk here every morning.'

He was dangerously attractive and spoke English fluently.

'My name's Dogan. I'm a Muslim; Turkish-Cypriot. I'm staying in a little furnished flat in Sidi Gaber.'

Why did he say he was a Muslim, I asked myself? Was it because he had noticed the cross on my chest?

We were strolling along the shore towards the Zanqat al-Sittat market when he abruptly inquired: 'How old are you?'

'Nearly seventeen.'

I gave myself an extra year to appear more mature in his eyes.

'Great. You're a woman, then.'

A pause.

'May I invite you to join me somewhere quiet where we can sit?'

I didn't hesitate for a second.

[26]

Two days later I was with him at a nightclub. Just before sunset I got ready to go out. I was waiting for him where we'd met the first time, and from there we took a cab. I found myself outside a cheap joint in Sayala. Raucous with music and staggering patrons, the surfaces of its ancient tables etched with wrinkles, the establishment's dun palette lent it a faint gloom that made it seem even more cramped. In a distant corner, hard by one of the toilets, where there were long queues inside and out, I found myself by his side, clinging to him. He ordered beer and it came in tall glasses topped with foam, along with mezze.

The beer was sharp and extremely bitter and made my throat burn, but I soon grew used to the taste and slowly but surely relaxed in my chair until I found myself swaying to the music. He asked me to dance with him and hauled me roughly from my chair, shouting: 'Come on!'

On a small uneven wooden dance floor he spun me around and enveloped me in his powerful arms. He began carrying me around, caressing my body and running his hard fingers across my back. A faint dizziness passed over me and I started to stumble, panting and moaning from his rough touch and the hot breath that seared my neck and cheek. He was bold to the point of insolence, coarse and insensitive, groping me with unrelenting lechery.

After a while we returned to sit at our table. I was panting from exhaustion and exhilaration. I looked around me and noticed large groups of young men and women wearing the strangest outfits: some tatty, some hardly decent. I was the only well-dressed person in the place, but nobody paid any attention to me apart from my companion, whose fondling was growing ever bolder. He offered me a cigarette and I began to examine it, turning it between my fingers then raising it to my nose and sniffing.

'Do you smoke?' he asked delightedly.

'No. It's the first time that I've been to a place like this or tried any of this stuff.'

He was astonished: 'The way you held that cigarette made me think otherwise. Fine, so try it.'

He sparked a flame that danced before me. My uncertainty didn't last long. I had never felt courageous before now, though the reason



for this may have been the strong beer I had drunk, which had left me elated.

I placed the cigarette between my lips and took a powerful drag that quickly set me coughing.

He looked closely at me and said: 'Let me teach you how to smoke a cigarette and drink a beer. These things should be done with a sense of occasion. Watch.' [27]

He took the cigarette from me and dragged it slowly over his lips, then as though kissing it, clamped them together. He took a deep pull into his lungs, his head thrown back, trapped it briefly in his chest, then expelled the smoke. Next he raised the glass of beer, briefly inspected it, then sipped with relish, licking his lips in what seemed to me a strange manner, like someone wooing beer rather than drinking it.

'Now copy me,' he said.

I took the cigarette and did as he had done, but I coughed heavily. The cigarette was searing and inflamed my chest yet I savoured the sensation that followed a couple of drags. It felt as though I was on a swing, the world around me swaying as I alone stood still. Then he passed me the glass of beer.

'Sip it slowly. Enjoy yourself. Give it a chance express itself.'

I took a number of small sips from the glass then a huge gulp, thereafter alternating between drinking beer and smoking. I don't know what to say: I was drunk that day, but I was as conscious as can be. How? I don't know how. I don't know.

That evening with Dogan: Ah! In that atmosphere soiled with filth and every conceivable form of vile abuse, with the raucous beat, the music that bit into the mind, and cigarettes filled with who-knows-what, a feeling I didn't understand passed suddenly and powerfully through me. Something was sweeping me on, something that made me lose control and left me weeping quietly and continuously. Gently and with a strange passion, I wept. I began to sob, my tears falling onto my lap as I sat hunched over myself, clutching my glass and my smoke and refusing to part with them despite the tremor coursing through me.

I was fully conscious of my condition, aware of myself and the totality of what was happening to me. I wasn't crying from sadness, nor from pain, nor regret, nor revulsion: I wanted to cry and cry and

cry and cry. I just wanted to cry, more than anything else in the world.

[28] He came closer and, clasping me roughly, began to kiss me. I pushed him away. Fire flared in my body. I rose to my feet, the glass of beer in one hand and the cigarette in the other. Suddenly I wanted to laugh. I began to laugh and laugh and laugh, cackling in a high-pitched voice that attracted attention. I laughed until my laughter became a screech. What had come over me? I felt aroused, as though fingers were stroking my hips. I sat down in Dogan's chair, rocking to prevent the hysteria that had possessed me from sending me to the floor.

I looked at the beer glass and cigarette I was holding.

Crazily, I thought: 'Will I laugh more if I mix the two? Will taking them both at once heighten the delicious sensation that's enveloped me but which I've no idea how to prolong?'

Without missing a beat I stubbed the cigarette out in the glass, licked the outside clean, then began gulping it down until it spilled onto my chest and clothes. Dogan cackled as he got up to take the empty glass away.

'You wild child! I can't believe you've never done that before.'

He was determined to cling on to me and I let him. As though he were mauling me or carrying me off in a raid, he tortured me, letting me go to inspect me, before returning to his ferocious kisses.

Exhaustion exercised its tyranny and I asked if we could go. After much insistence he relented and before we left I went to the toilets. I washed my face, straightened my hair, brushed down my clothes and walked out.

That day I returned home not nearly late enough. I felt that I could face whatever lay in store. The moment I got to my room I sprawled on the bed, fighting an acute headache and violent trembling. To my amazement I fell asleep instantly, fully dressed.

With Dogan by my side I entered a phase of enjoyable delinquency. The liquor I drank with him furnished me with a unique blend of new sensations. The rocking sensation I experienced entering a state of drunkenness delighted me. The delicious dizziness that enveloped my mind, leaving me lurching around, though motionless, never left my thoughts for an instant: like a swing that rocked me back and forth,



now shaking, now spinning me around. Then there was the sensation that crept like a column of ants into the base of my skull, ticklish and uplifting: a euphoria and a joy that afflicted me after no more than a couple of beers taken with hashish-filled cigarettes. I felt my senses come alive, my desires kindle. I was ecstatic with a heavenly delirium. I saw things around me bundled in wrapping paper and proffered to me as gifts. At times my surroundings would take on unusual colours, as if I were watching rainbows drift through the room. Once I stood on a table at that same bar and tried to grab one, at which Dogan, and some of his friends who were sitting with us, laughingly hauled me down. Then he poured iced water over my head and I screamed at him.

[29]

How beautiful it was to fashion my own bliss for myself, there in my private world with wine and smokes stuffed with inferior hashish. I would escape to this world of mine, a world where I fantasized that I alone was queen, free to expel or welcome whomever I desired. It transformed me into a different person: more dazzling and courageous, and perhaps more insolent, too.

With time I taught myself how to drink. To avoid violent hangovers and vomiting at dawn I controlled the amount I drank. Naturally, expensive drinks like Martini, brandy, vodka and fine wine weren't for sale at our bar; it offered beer and whisky in addition to a vile local distillation that I would mix with water, juice or cola. It still managed to carry me off to the world I loved.

After Dogan's departure I felt an intense emptiness envelop me, and a loss that cast its shadow over my life. With him I had spent my time at play, capering about, escaping all I despised in my life. I was a frequent visitor to the bar. Many times I sat there alone, though to avoid the embarrassment of having to order things I was unable to pay for I fell in with the lowlifes and loafers from the poor and marginalised neighbourhoods. But they weren't Turks. They were Arabs and gypsies of any number of nationalities.

The gypsies enjoy a poor reputation in Egypt. They specialize in gambling with cards, fortune-telling, black magic and female circumcision, and wear ridiculous costumes held together with large, crudely worked stitches. They always gave off an impression of profane vulgarity and how agreeable I found it! Their world was new to a girl like me,

raised amidst worldly comforts, wealth, affectation and social pretension, eternally surrounded by aspiring ambassadors and consuls, scions of a vacuous social elite with their hateful rituals for eating, drinking and making love.

[30] My companions belonged to a bohemian world. They hated everybody, proclaimed revolution against everything. They felt no shame in speaking freely, no matter how obscene or unfeeling their words, and thought nothing of their vulgar and immodest winks and gestures. Some of them lived in spontaneously formed groups that might specialize in theft or prostitution.

Some tried it on with me. One of them once pinched my breast; another scraped a calloused hand across my naked thigh. Others weren't attracted to me, or that is what they would claim. I was always the wealthiest and most cultured person at the table and I may have represented to these individuals the social classes that treated them so dismissively. Yet in the eyes of many I spied open desire.

I drank with them, I smoked hashish. Their world gave me pleasure, embodied all the desire and rebellion I lacked in my own, but in their company I encountered a problem of identity. I resembled them in my rootlessness and indifference, but my well turned-out appearance, my education and the mannered politesse I had absorbed from my own world set me apart.

*Translated by Robin Moger*

