

T*he child
was fascinated
by the
colours
that flowed*

from the paintbrush in her mother's fingers. Every day. Every dawn. The wife of the doctor in a small farming town awoke. Shook the sleep from eyes swollen with palm and orange pollen. Complained about the allergies caused by nature's finer things. Rose while the sky was yet veiled in darkness. And without drinking her morning coffee, without so much as a glance at her sleeping family, headed for the easel propped in a corner of the patients' waiting room. Took her place before the window overlooking rocky, rose-colored mountains. And began to weave its details onto the taut canvas, with a patience understood only by those who knew of the terminal illness that would not let her live much longer.

The child marvelled at her mother's colours. How they spread over the canvas, gradually taking shape, until a town nestled there in the mountain's lap. A town with houses of

mud and adobe, roofs of tile, and wooden floors. Surrounded by gardens and orchards. Its green land ploughed by the wind, penetrated by aqueducts, pungent with vegetation and wild mint.

The child wondered, as she dressed for school and reluctantly drank her morning milk, how her mother was able to bring the town to life in her painting in spite of the bars across the window obstructing her view.

The mother's hand moved with a slow patience that gradually evaporated as the sun rose, in anticipation of patients' early arrival at the clinic. She would finally withdraw, taking the easel, the tubes of paint, and the brushes soaked in turpentine, and leaving behind her on the canvas the vast rubber tree from the yard outside, bent over by its own weight, the rustle of palm trees it took two ladders to climb, and the remains of birds' chatter at the ablutions basin in the courtyard of the mosque nearby.

The child took up her satchel and set off for school, marvelling at her mother all the way. In class when the teacher had asked her to draw an eggplant, her fingers had dragged and stalled. She had resented the plump mass with its purple-black coat, its green hat that on paper became a dark charcoal circle. And her fascination with her mother's painting had grown. There shades of purple flowed into one another, tint by tint, exactly as they did on the rocky face of the Mount of Temptation outside. Forty days, the devil had spent in those caves, putting Jesus Christ to the test. When he failed, he tumbled down to the plains below and turned into a grain of salt. Forty days, testing the young Jesus. Maybe the woman completed her portrait of Jericho in forty days. Maybe more, maybe less, I don't know!

1967. My mother, the wife of the doctor in that small farming town, was gone. She didn't live to cram herself into the tiny car that carried its load of passengers across the bridge to the east bank of the river. The doctor, rushing to the hospital to offer his emergency services, returned dejected after finding the beds empty and the corridors deserted. Even the ambulance driver was gone, having piled his family into the government vehicle and left. The father went to the police station to request a weapon, only to find the cells deserted, chains in a pile by the

door. He saw a line of tanks moving at full speed away from the battlefield. When he tried to flag them down, he was nearly run over. At that he finally succumbed to his friend's prophecy of disaster, threw his children and some neighbours into the small grey car, and set out for the bridge and the east bank of the river.

Small bridges. Napalm. Its burning smell, like the smell of molten asphalt. Dark metallic planes pounding the hundreds and thousands of refugees fleeing from the camps around Jericho. Fallen bodies by the roadsides, trampled by the desperate feet of others running for safety. Rumours of what the invaders would do to captives worked to create a hysterical madness. Napalm. You cannot imagine the odour of napalm.

Boiling asphalt, bubbling on human faces, limbs, blackened skin.

There. Here.

Here. Or there.

There was no longer a here nor a there.

Simply. No return. Said the invaders.

A year. Two years. Ten.

In the years that followed, the girl was to wander until she was dizzy, and in all the distant lands she wandered through, she saw neither tree nor sky that resembled those of her country.

Many days passed, and she came at last to a bewildering city. A city of towering buildings, burnished glass, and spacious boulevards. The city was called Beirut.

In Beirut she came to know a sea the colour of liquid turquoise. She tried faithfully to memorise it, to learn its many different states. But that was hard enough to do in ordinary times, let alone when nights were lit with explosions, and days echoed the sound of shelling off walls and through alleyways. Even on New Year's Eve the flaming shells continued to fall like rain. The sky was spattered with mortar shells fired by militias in celebration of the new year.

Her only escape was to breathe in the smell of the sea that hung in clouds of mist above the shore. She went to the railroad tracks that had once led to Jaffa and Haifa, and walked along

them, now that the trains had stopped running, taking in the fragrance of stone. Stones shaped like Roc's eggs, artillery shells, dinosaurs' eyes, or like the most modern of sculptures, fashioned by nature millions of years ago.

One day her cousin arrived from the Occupied Territories. She had just returned from her job at the magazine archives near the Green Line, exhausted from darting into the entrances of buildings to take refuge from shelling on her way home. He came into the kitchen and prepared a dish of fresh green fava beans. "Do you remember?" She looked at the steaming beans and said, "No, I hadn't remembered until just now." And she discovered that she had forgotten the taste of home-cooked food in this busy city, where one made do with a quick bite or a sandwich in passing.

Then, in a gesture no-one had made since her arrival in Beirut, he asked, "What gift would you like me to bring you?" This was the custom among relatives in her homeland: he was offering to bring her a gift of her own choosing. She reflected, looking deep into her soul. "I want a bird," she said. "A golden yellow canary."

She had grown accustomed to the chirping of birds at dawn as she lay worried and wakeful after a night of shelling. Only when she heard the chorus of birds in the morning was she finally able to sleep. At such times, she felt the city was like the gigantic oak tree near their home in Jericho, thronged with birds that you never knew were there until everything else was quiet. And the only time Beirut was that quiet was at the very first light of dawn.

Her cousin left, promising to send her mother's painting of Jericho. And every morning the canary's song filled the house at the crack of dawn, weaving itself into the first rays of silvery light, till the sunlight was transformed into tapestries emblazoned with lilies of gold.

But soon the canary began to need a family of its own. An orange-feathered female was brought in, and immediately settled herself on top of five eggs.

Four. Then five. Then!

All over again!

And the eggs never hatched!!

She asked, and they told her that that year, Spring 1981 in Beirut, hundreds of canaries were unable to breed because of the intense and continuous shelling.

She was amazed. The sounds of war had become background noise, a part of the place. People no longer asked about the type of shell, its size or its colour, unless it fell on the street they happened to be on. It was as though the bombs had lives of their own, better lives than humans had. People lived on coincidences; chance meetings on the streets were considered happy occasions that took the place of visiting. There were no longer such things as parties and visits, in that year when booby-trapped cars multiplied like mushrooms after rain.

All that was left were the endless nightmares, office buildings, apartments, houses, crashing down on people's heads. And when the children in her building could no longer go down to the street to ride a bike on the pavement or walk to the corner store for sweets, it became necessary to take care of the canary family. Perhaps hatching the eggs would help entertain the children.

She discussed the matter with the neighbours when they gathered in the stairwell during bouts of indiscriminate shelling from the East Side. And so it was that the female canary was sent to the home of a pigeon breeder in a nearby building. An expert on birds, he was to marry her off again, this time with better results.

Before the first visit from the canary family, which had produced a new batch of eggs that were beginning to hatch, a relative arrived from Palestine, carrying the painting she hadn't seen for fifteen years. Birds soared in Jericho's sky. Grapevines clambered along the roadsides. Armies of ants marched under trees and among cornstalks that waved like lazy straw fans. Swaying branches mingled with the taste of wind and the scent of subterranean water pouring into the gardens.

Early every morning she would look at it before going about her daily affairs. Opening her eyes, she would pluck herself out of the nightmares caused by a permanent power outage. She listened to the distant echo of shelling, trained her

ears to the hum of fighters staging mock raids over various parts of the city. The singsong cries of street vendors peddling fresh vegetables floated up to her balcony, along with the smell of gun oil and of the garbage that continued to pile up as city workers remained on strike. Her body would dwindle to minute particles of light, so sharp was her desire to be absorbed into the space of the painting. Closing her eyes, she touched the brambles she had been warned against touching as a child, inhaled the aroma of honeysuckle bushes that spilled profusely over the town's fences. And then. She returned to where she was.

On the day appointed for the canary family's return, there were no longer any canaries, nor any hatchlings, nor even people for that matter. That July a formation of Israeli jetfighters swooped down over a row of buildings. And in the hell of wailing and condolences that followed, the widowed women, children crippled or paralysed, people wandering distracted in search of a missing father or brother or friend, what ate away at her in secret was what to tell the children about the new canary family they had so eagerly awaited. How does one explain, to children, that canaries can be killed in an air raid?

There was less sky now, cramped as it was between the sandbags stacked on the pavement and the mounds of earth designed to protect from shelling. Terror drifted like black smoke through alleyways and into the entrances of buildings. The city shrank towards the sea, till all that was left was the Corniche, thronged with people seeking a breath of air in summer or a bit of warmth in winter. Makeshift souks were set up in tents opposite Le Rocher, with tape decks blaring the voices of the latest singers. Meaningless words, meaningless music. With a Lebanese friend, she entered a tent selling miscellaneous items. She tried on some eye shadow. "Which looks better," she asked her friend, "the brown or the silver?"

"The brown gives your eyes more depth, but the silver brightens them," she said, "silver makes you look happy."

She didn't have a chance to decide between the silver and the brown. A fire engine roared by, announcing the

discovery of an unexploded bomb on a nearby street.

They ran, before the place was enveloped in black smoke.

She realised she had left Lebanon for good when, after the Israeli invasion of 1982, she found herself exhausted by the dust in a new Arab city. Faced with the loss of all she had known before, discovering how much she missed people, neighbours' voices, the turns of certain streets, cracks in pavements she knew by heart, the different taste in the air, the aromas of things, the colours of noon, she wrote to her Lebanese friend, asking her to send a few things she had left behind. The painting, still on the wall of a room whose floor had been almost completely bombed out. Six months later the friend managed to gather together a few photographs, and send them, along with an old shawl embroidered with birds of paradise, and the mother's painting.

The girl waited patiently for her things to come. To her amazement, everything arrived except for the painting. She looked into the matter, and discovered that the driver had stopped for several minutes at one of the factions' offices in the Bekaa Valley to make a delivery. Could he have offered it to an official he wished to placate? Or had one of them simply been taken with it, like the gunman who had insisted on confiscating a painting of golden swans from a friend of hers when she moved from one neighbourhood to another? Perhaps it was the new and more stringent procedures at the border, recently set up to help prevent smuggling. She had heard that border officials were lenient with those who offered presents. Perhaps the driver had won over some border guard with her mother's painting!

She was unable to locate the driver or the painting. She thought of placing an ad explaining its sentimental value as her only souvenir of her departed mother, and requesting its return, but quickly changed her mind. How could she be sure that the person who had taken it would happen to read the newspaper she chose? And besides, who dared speak of losses these days?

She didn't know how blue could turn into dark leaden grey until she left Lebanon that second time on a ship headed for a Mediterranean country in North Africa. The ship slipped over thick, oily waters, and entered a region of shades of night. Everything inside her glinted and glimmered like lightning

glancing off the blade of a knife. And that knife was severing the cord that connected her to Asia. Dear Asia, close and comfortable as a nest, no matter how far the distances within it. The lapping of water against the ship's hull still echoed in her ears. A violent seasickness still surged within her. She didn't know what she would do, here across this sea of sand. As though she had come from an oasis to a land of endlessly shifting sand dunes.

In the new country she had come to, her longing became stronger, more acute. She could no longer breathe with ease, savouring the air as she once used to.

Shadows fluttered like giant butterflies under the glare of a perpendicular sun. And she had no idea what to do in this new country. She didn't know how to embroider, like the grandmothers who had spent years embroidering harvest scenes and clusters of grapes onto their gowns. It would be difficult; in fact, impossible! Since childhood the teacher had tweaked her ear and scolded whenever she saw the crooked eggplant she had drawn, or the banana reduced by her shaky fingers to a nail paring on a dirty floor. She didn't know what to do with the hands that hung stiffly at her sides. The street opposite her was completely empty, traversed only by a few employees at peak business hours. There were no neighbours with whom to seek refuge in the stairwell during air raids, no housewives with whom to share bread in times of shortage, or split meagre rations of sugar and tea. Here. Nothing but silence. So what to do when work was over and that deadly emptiness assailed her? Birds! Once again she brought birds for the children. But they would never be the same as the birds lost in the smoke of that explosion. What could she do?

She searched the house, found coloured pencils and a school sketchbook, tore out a page. She stood at the window screened with bars in an Andalusian pattern, and wondered, should she draw the scene with bars or without? The house across from her had balconies with wooden lattices, whitewashed walls, blue trim around the windows. The woman marvelled. What were her

trembling fingers doing on the face of the white sheet, its gaping mouth seemingly ready to devour her? What was her hand drawing, plunged among those clashing colours?

She kept drawing. And drawing. Wanting to finish what she had started in order to discover what her hand would do.

I couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe it, the child who had left her country that day across a wooden bridge splintered by fierce attacks. She couldn't believe it, the girl, the woman, who had swayed on the back of a hasty ship over the water between two continents. She couldn't believe what the colours unfolded to reveal, what came of the fever that gripped her until the drawing was complete.

A small farming town was taking shape among the trees. A town with houses of mud and adobe, roofs of tile, and wooden floors. Surrounded by orchards and gardens. Its red soil ploughed by the wind. Pungent with vegetation, like no other place.

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