

Bursting in without knocking,

my daughter, dressed-up, wearing perfume. She was obviously waiting for Abla to come down, watching for her on the floor below, behind the half-open door, in she came straight afterwards, with the keys. Still in bed at 11 o'clock at your age, father, aren't you ashamed, she spoke without looking at me, I pulled the sheets back up over my hips, she threw open the windows, wafted away the smoke disdainfully, tidied up the cushions around the rug, put the *houka* away with a clatter, a real morning storm. I leant back on the pillows, letting go a sign of contentment, smiling at the heavens, why shouldn't I.

She went out on to the balcony, I heard her let out a little cry, then she came back in, have you seen what's hanging on the washing-line?... she went on mumbling, she repeated have you seen... Red panties as if the words strangled her, suffocated her. I waved an indifferent hand, that set her off, first she spoke very quietly, like it was a secret, so long as it stayed within these walls, within the family that is, no-one would say anything father, oh yeah sure, God they never stopped going on about it, her voice suddenly picked up, tears forming, but holding back, the neighbours mustn't hear, fine, upstanding, my daughter, prim and proper, God-fearing, worries about what people say, then she really let go, this time you've gone too far... just look... these red panties, a *jirsa* on our name, our shame hanging in full view, she

likes phrases like that, she went out again, came back, didn't dare take the panties down, didn't dare touch them. She put her head in her hands, this has gone on long enough, father, long enough... this affair's got to stop, you've got to pull yourself together, be yourself again, like you always used to be, mother's not been dead a year and you're... you're... you're... suddenly she wheeled around to face the curtain billowing in the breeze, the sweet breeze of January.

Lying back on my pillow, I watched her from behind, sobbing silently, the big act, I didn't budge, I'm not here. After a bit she calmed down and came over to the bed, I could see her out of the corner of my eye, she was different, the expression in her eyes had turned to bitter anger, she bent over me, stiffly, her breathing short, ready to spit her bile. Just look at yourself father, do you think that tart is after your beautiful eyes, your athletic body, your Greek profile, your rippling muscles, your virility? Look at yourself, go on, look at yourself in the mirror, she hissed, you're past all this kind of thing, you're 79 with grandchildren, do you hear me, it's your money she's after, this market-woman, this degenerate, this woman of no... I stopped listening. Abla's got breasts like melons, her hips heaving bounty, she speaks to my senses, her smile just like dew-drops, I would never have believed it, never.

When Mona died, God pity her soul, I no longer felt like going downstairs and outside, I was tired, that was my whole life wrapped-up lying there in the living-room, my life as a family-man, respectable, beyond reproach.

My daughter living on the second floor with her family, my son on the first, they used to come round every evening. How are you keeping, still in mourning, poor mother, you're eating we hope, they got me down. Except my granddaughter, Ibtissam, eleven years old, full of life, she came whenever she wanted, stayed without speaking for hours on end. That was Mona's dream, the whole family in one house, my house, if Abla hadn't turned up I would have gone mad.

You're not even listening to me, you don't listen to me... those were her parting words, she turned on her heel and went out, knocking over a chair as she went, she slammed the door so hard the walls shook.

Slowly, things quietened down again, I felt a shiver of pleasure. I sat on the edge of the bed, stretched and slipped on the blue satin dressing gown, I would never dare think of such a thing, it was Abla who gave it to me. Without looking in the mirror I went over to the balcony, silently, unable to speak. That's where she was, on the other side of the rue Ahmed Iskander, I watched her from behind the tulle curtain, she was freshening-up her lettuce stall with water, a bowl on her hip, her free hand moving as if sowing seed. She looked up to the balcony, too late, the blue satin gave me away, she started waving, I had to show myself, I waved back, she clapped her hands, beside me her red panties floating in the breeze, my way out.

She made signs for me to send down the basket, I let out the rope over the balustrade, she took two large handfuls of loquats, held them to her breasts, ran across the road shouting they're the first of the season, she blew me a kiss, ran back through the traffic, what a kid, hardly forty years old. It's thanks to this basket that our romance got started.

We were still in mourning. I woke-up one day and my appetite was back, there was nothing to eat. I called to her from the balcony, shouted my order, oranges, lemons, potatoes, onions, she came right up to the foot of the house with my order, I could see her breasts from above, she gave a tug on the rope when it was ready, I put the money in the basket. Same again the following day, and the day after, at the end of the rope her eyes raised towards me, a smile to brighten my day. I didn't need anything else but I asked for a lettuce and some aubergines on the fourth day, me who never touches them. Eight days went by without exchanging a word, just looking at each other, heart throbbing. One evening I asked for two water-melons, ripe and juicy, the rope snapped, she had to come up.

The door again, my son, I might have known. His sister, she's the hysterical one, with him it's sincere regrets. Father, I must speak to you, a serious matter, father, are you forgetting where we live, a new loudspeaker has been set up on the minaret, every day more women are wearing the veil, people are talking, what will they think, you've stopped coming to the mosque, when mother was alive... I was watching the clock in the dining-room. In another seven hours Abla will close the stall, fold up her apron, I'll hear her delicate footsteps on the stairs. There are

some things that you... certain objects that you... you're not listening father... poor fool, nothing in the world would make him say the word, red panties, that's too much for him, I know him, he lives by the book. I've still got some life in my veins, didn't know it was there, she blew life into the embers, no-one like her for lighting the *houka*, we laughed so much she wet her panties, had to put them out to dry.

I didn't notice my son go out, which is more and more the case, I woke from my day-dreaming, he was gone, how could he understand. Me, nothing had ever happened to me, could easily have died without ever having lived.

I've forgotten what happened today, I must have slept, on awakening it was 4 o'clock, time to get ready. I filled the bath, shaved, took out a tie, a starched white shirt, my polished black shoes, I was putting on my braces when the bell rang, too early for Abla, it was Ibtissam, looking shaken. Why does it have to be like this Grandfather, crying on my shoulder, why do we have to change, I didn't know what she was talking about. I carried her in my arms to the balcony, she still had her satchel on her back, I took it off, she was sniffing. I sat her down in Abla's chair, my princess, I put the cloth on the round table, washed the loquats and brought them out, lit the candles although night had not yet fallen.

Gradually she calmed down, I watched her bite into the orange-coloured flesh. I let the time go by. She started telling me without looking up, they got us together today at the end of school saying that now we're in high school, grown-up, we should stop playing with the boys, that all that is over. I looked at her and she looked back, I said softly that's horrible, she nodded, fixed her gaze on the dish of loquats, knitting her eyebrows, then she whispered without raising her eyes, you know Grandfather when they said that, I thought well, I'll have to turn back into a little girl again, it's the only answer. I said yes, or an old man, if we're going to get away from them.