

My mother told me I was born the year

our cow Abla produced two calves. My mother's memory was infallible. She remembered everything down to the smallest detail.

"That very year", she stated, "we received villagers on two occasions. The first time was to admire my baby boy; the second was to assure us that Abla had well and truly given birth to two wonderful male beasts."

I replied to my mother: "If I can trust the birth-date on my identity card I was born in the month of July, while calves are generally born in the spring."

My remark threw her. She frowned, searching her memory, then said:

"I'm sure about the first time. It was on the occasion of your birth. I remember it as though it were yesterday. The weather was not at all summery. We had a fire in the hearth."

"So what", my father butted in, "there was always a fire in that hearth to cook and to heat water."

My mother didn't appreciate his remark. To be fair, she had never appreciated his remarks.

My father showed himself to be a good husband by staying in the background, tucked away in a corner of the room or the yard, deep in his own thoughts.

I've always wondered whether, during their whole lifetime together, my mother just once felt any affection for her husband. And I've always wondered by what meeting of circumstances my seven brothers and sisters and I arrived in this world.

My father talked very little. Perhaps that was because each word he uttered annoyed his dear wife. But, then, perhaps he hadn't much to say. After every hostile exchange he escaped with his Koran. He retreated to his favourite corner of the yard, reciting texts from the holy book in a loud voice, rocking his body as if in a trance. I've witnessed that scene a hundred, a thousand times.

If I remember correctly, I only once heard him rebel. Following a particular bout of mother's aggression, he confided in me: "I'd divorce her for sure if I wasn't worried about what people would say."

That day, angry in a way I'd never seen before, my father overstepped the bounds by daring to dream of divorce! Luckily for him, my mother never knew.

She hated him. And she told all and sundry, devaluing their father in the eyes of his children.

She wanted us to share her hatred. "He's good for nothing" she taunted him incessantly. "He's an imbecile who's never been a success."

"Oh yes I have", my father whispered, "my children are my success."

"Luckily", she said quickly, "I'm here." She turned on him. "Just what have you ever done for them? Tell the children. You had a good plot of land which you stupidly lost. I also had a good plot, but you've lost that too. A peasant? The only thing you inherited from the peasantry was a plot of land you couldn't even keep."

However, my mother never dreamed of leaving him. Never, even in her foulest moods, did she show any desire for that.

"I'm here for my children" she frequently explained.

"Without children a woman has no reason to exist. She's fated from birth to produce children. She creates them by some kind of miracle and lives for them and through them, nothing else."



Mother died two years to the day after the death of my father. She was in Karim's house when she departed this world. My mother never showed so much courage as in her last years. Although seriously ill, she quite forgot how to complain. She embraced Allah night and day, resigned to the idea of rejoining her husband beside their Maker. She closed her eyes, accepting the inevitable with an expression of relief.

"I'll die before peace returns" she said in despair at being confined to the house and parted from those who had brought her such happiness.

"Next-door neighbours are worth more than far-away family" she often repeated, somehow explaining the bonds between those who lived in our area. I wouldn't be trespassing on her thoughts to add that our old quarter had a Christian majority; to her, a good Christian neighbour was worth more than a fellow-Muslim miles away.



Mother, peace has returned. Step by step, Lebanon is rebuilding its whore's destiny. The petrodollar is back in charge, while in Beirut gold can't buy you land.

Mother, peace has returned - bringing life with it. But in the euphoria of reconstruction nobody quite knows what happened to the war or, more exactly, why it was fought. Life has returned and everybody chants "Vive la vie!"

Is that a reason to forget everything? Is that a reason to believe that the misery is behind us and that the weapons will always remain silent?

I would love to think so, but how can I? Peace isn't found in silent weaponry, particularly when many still refuse to bundle hatred into the truce.

Mother, you were a profound believer. Now, alongside your Maker, you have perhaps learned a little about the intolerance which propels the living and precipitates their downfall.

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