

The Last Supper^{*}

By: Zaki Darwish

Darkness fell very quickly that evening. It was always like this on the last days of fall; as soon as the sun, white and pale, left the edge of the sky a sad silence prevailed, followed by sudden darkness. From far away winter was pointing with fingers of cloud and wind. Rare birds lost their direction, buffeted by electro-magnetic and sound waves. Basing their prediction on the humidity of the small piles of table salt they stored, the old people said this winter would be a harsh one. The meteorologists, however, said that rain would be scarce, basing their predictions on climatic phenomena in areas thousands of kilometers away.

The household was at a peak of activity that fall night, a rare case for this time of the day. The youngest of his six daughters did not leave her father's side. She chattered, hopped like a lark, flew like a thin butterfly, and circled him holding his hand. He did not know whether to be sad or to smile. Strange was the condition of that girl. It wasn't obvious if she was preparing to greet her father or bid him farewell. The only sure thing was that she was perfectly happy. Small smiles stirred all around when she opened the sheet of paper listing the gifts that she wanted. She started the list with "a small Barbie;" but, if it weren't possible, she wouldn't object to "Sally." The list got bigger and longer. She couldn't read and write yet, but her five-year-old mind let her repeat the list in order by heart, in a tone reminiscent of birds' chirping. She didn't give a damn about grammar or proper pronunciation. As to the other daughters, the pleasure on their faces decreased in accordance with their growth in age, and the eldest seemed closer to sadness than joy.

^{*} This short story was not published before.

Those experts who had already been abroad at least once gave comments on the weather of distant countries. They advised him to take as many warm clothes as possible; as a result, his luggage was stuffed full.

On that night the signs of coming winter were clear and easy to notice. The vine's leaves fell directly on the table at the center of the courtyard, a place surrounded by bushes filled with withering flowers. They looked like trees in a cemetery, and seemed to stir the springs of grief, their beauty pure melancholy.

The wife accepted without complaint the burden of hospitality. She was a small woman with precise features. Her face seemed thinner lately; there were black wrinkles under her eyes created by constant wakefulness, standing for long hours in the kitchen and running between the guests, the kitchen and the small courtyard.

She worried and fretted more about her husband more than herself. He spared her many tasks by performing them himself. The image of him carrying the bags of fruits and vegetables up the stairs never left her. She would watch him from above; he looked smaller bending over, his hair falling over his face. He seemed most miserable and exhausted. That night, the image of him climbing the stairs was persistent and compelling. Recently, he had begun to complain about sleeplessness, heavy breathing, blood pressure shooting up and down, pain in his legs. He didn't talk a lot about these troubles. He would forget them when he was embracing his youngest daughter, surrounded by the others; he looked then like a magician who took out small gifts out of his pocket. His finances had worsened a bit lately and he was spending more time alone. Fits of frowning would invade him. He became forgetful and would mix up two of more stories; driving, he made beginners' mistakes that risked his life. Still, he never shared his concerns with others. On the contrary, he kept them to himself and

avoided discussing them. He never skimped when it came to his daughters, and that had led him to the point where he was about to drown.

The opportunity came from overseas: a guaranteed job promising profits in profusion! The stint wasn't long ;only one year and he'd be back. Perhaps he could make it home to visit in the middle of that time.

"If only winter weren't coming," his wife wished. To her the trip sounded disastrous and she did her utmost to dissuade him, but to no avail. With lethal calm, decisive logic, and terrible numbers he managed to convince her. For the first time, he told her many things; for the first time, she noticed the slight trembling in his hands, as if his fingers were playing a sad air. Still, she couldn't help thinking of the winter closing in around them. He warned her not to cry, especially in the presence of their daughters (he used to call them chickens), who watched for the first tear to fall from their mother's eye.

He wished his travel had started towards the end of winter. In winter, he was used to leaving his bed when he awoke in the depths of a particularly wet and cold night and going to the girls' room to make sure their covers hadn't fallen off. He smiled to himself while betting the covers hadn't, because the girls moved their beds close together, making one wide bed for all of them to sleep on while the rest of the room was vacant. More than once, looking at them, he had to fight an internal, unjustified desire to start weeping.

How strange! That very week his mother recovered her vitality in a way that scared him. She didn't mention his departure, stopped complaining about life, and gave up talking about the absurdity of living so long it became a damnation. She knew what he suffered from. Perhaps she was the only one who could translate the meaning of his silence and diagnose his worries with extreme precision. The idea of traveling--

any traveling--ironed her out from the inside, but she was obliged to suppress her torture, making her face turn violet. He shared her suffering, knowing that the efforts she exerted to govern the fountains of her pains would cost her dearly once he had left.

That week she regained her skill at preparing traditional Palestinian foods which recently had become rare, from *kubbah* to *mughrabiyysh*. These dishes required two strong forearms and flexible fingers to roll and scrape the crushed wheat. Making such foods also required her to stand for long periods in front of the fire, her weak eyes filling with vapor and smoke. Still, she knew he loved her cooking. Six long months would pass before he tasted such foods again. In truth, he never asked her to do anything special for him because he felt she was no longer able to do the things she'd done in the past. He would visit her every day a moment before or after lunch; he would take a slice of bread—her bread felt like sponge—and eat with it whatever she offered him. Her food had a special taste. He would drink water from the same glass his dead father had used, and drink coffee from his father's small cup. She was always keen to keep the glass and the cup clean and in their regular spot. She was sure he would not travel if she asked him not to, but she did not ask him.

That night she concealed her suffering behind a flow of talk, jokes and ironic comments. Rarely did she have to hide such feelings. He always was next to her. He never went away from home for a long time. She understood when he had to be alone. Lately, she noticed that he hardly ever left the house after his work. Something was worrying him, she knew that. He had lost his usual gleefulness, but he hadn't given up any habit relating to her. He would still call on her before he left for work and upon his return from work; he was the last one she saw before she went to sleep. She would tell him that he had six daughters and a wife and they deserved his care more

than she did. He would answer, "If you insist. Now, leave the door open and don't lock it from the inside!"

He would come to check on her several times on a night. He could not sleep; she wasn't sleeping either, although she pretended she was. He would enter the room quietly, watch her breathe, drink a sip of water, and exit as softly as he'd come in. She would be swept by a wave of merriment. "I am not alone!"

Three brothers of his had already moved away and for various reasons not yet returned. So, she had a shrine in every possible direction. She would tell neighbors and friends about those sons, albeit not often, because she was the longing mother missing her absent children. Of course she avoided talking longingly about them in his presence.

In recent days he did not sleep much. She heard his footsteps in the story above her moving from the bedroom to the living room, then to the kitchen and the balcony. Now he was making coffee. That damned coffee and cigarettes! He had the sincerest feelings of friendship towards them, even if they'd gang up together to kill him.

The previous night his movements had been faster than usual. He must have been attacked by one of his ruthless headaches. She was familiar with that state of his, which had in recent years become less frequent. He totally lost his nerves when the waves of headache hit. In response, he would sting his temple with a hot cup of tea or a lit cigarette, saying that a bad pain could be conquered by a worse one. He would buzz and flit like a bee for two or three hours until the pain calmed down. Only then could he sleep soundly. He would usually not remain in bed for long, but when he did she stayed awake with her door open.

Road accidents, especially during the rainy nights of winter, bit at her heart. Eventually he would get home but he never forgot to maintain his habit of visiting her

to say goodnight. "Sleep well! The cold is very severe. Put another cover over yourself." Then he would go to bed.

That night he looked at her in pity. Her cheeks were newly flabby; the glamorous spark in her eyes had disappeared and she complained about always feeling sick in autumn. She busily moved her weak gaze between his brown and black bags, which for some reason resembled small coffins.

He was thinking how he was abandoning her and all of them to a winter already showing its tough side. He was especially worried about her. Could she pass through this cold time in peace? He wished that something important and sudden had happened to stop his journey, which was looking uglier and uglier as the time for it approached. He stared at his watch, its hands flapping with unfamiliar swiftness. Five hours were left for the plane to take off: two hours to get to the airport, two more hours before the plane took off. He had only one hour left to draw sustenance from this unending spring of love.

They all went to the mother's rooms. Everything was placed on a sheet on the floor. That was how they always ate, sitting in the way that Westerners called "Eastern." A sad flash seemed to flare from every utensil: the spoons, the cups, the plates. Every utensil was quietly content in its extreme cleanliness. They ate silently; even their spoons didn't clang against the plates. It seemed as if the whole world was leaving. He recalled the storm of crying that had flooded his mother after his father died. She wasn't known as one who gave free rein to her emotions: usually her emotions were locked inside her chest. What revealed them was a congestion which turned her face violet—that, and a swift shiver in her lips. After his father died, nobody knew where that tempest came from, what lit that tremendous explosion; no one could ferret out the source of his mother's gloomy hymns and flowing poetry. For

two hours she had drawn from the depths of ancient knowledge hymns and poems which could melt solid stone. She addressed the dead and the living, those distant and those near. No one but she made a single sound. All the women who were present with her agreed that she was not the same woman that they knew. Some said, "If all of this had remained locked up in her, it would have knocked her out!"

He thought: "That is exactly what she will do once I leave!"

The last-moment preparations were performed with suspicious quickness. He washed his hand, choosing a bar of olive oil soap. His mother had made that soap, years before, when she was still able to stand over a fire.

She did not shed a tear, but she looked shorter, thinner and completely miserable.

The car set off. She did not shed a tear.

"May Allah make it easy for you!" she said. Then she added, "All of you!"

The lights were lit in the courtyard, the chairs were scattered crazily like corpses. Everywhere, it was an unfamiliar mess. Everyone left. No one stayed but her. In her head, there was humming and buzzing. A sudden storm came from the direction of the sea and the leaves of the vine rained down, making a rattle that sounded like choking. The buzzes and hisses got louder. She could no longer stand upright. She tried to put the chairs in order. She couldn't. She tried to take the cups inside. She couldn't. A jet plane passed overhead. She tried to sit down but before she could get to the chair, she pitched forward to the ground. The light of the lamps in the courtyard dimmed gradually, then vanished. The universe was filled with thick, thick darkness.

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--translated by Jamal Assadi and Martha Moody