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Butrus: A Distant Hazy Face

A SHORT STORY
TRANSLATED BY NADA ELZEER

While my grandfather looked after his personal affairs, I would turn to another who went by the name of Butrus, and whom I had pictured as a dark youth with smooth long dark hair and sharp eyes. Butrus was the son of the priest of the Church of Our Lady Rebecca, or 'Saint Rrebecca' as Edith haughtily insisted on calling her.

He was seventeen years old when, on 22 March 1976, he came to visit my uncle. They both went off to the banks of the Nile. My uncle returned a short time later, petrified, while the other settled into the coldness of the riverbed. That evening, I came into the world.

My grandfather would gather us around him and start telling us the story of my uncle's friend who was enticed away by the fairies and how his parents went off to the Nile in search of him while people gathered on the river bank to help or watch. By midnight, they had still not found him, so they walked away with their lanterns, and throughout the following week kept returning to try to find him. But the boy had dissolved in the water "like a grain of salt", as my grandfather said.

The boy's father went back to where he had come from. Meanwhile Butrus remained like a corner-stone in the history of our family. His story could be relied upon to frighten the children whenever the need arose, with the occasional embellishment. And so, one would talk about his bicycle, which he had dragged along on his last visit to a school friend. On another occasion, his glasses and the

chemistry book he was holding would be the main features of the story. I was the only one to enquire what Butrus looked like. Grandfather answered impatiently: "He was tall and well-built, and had blue eyes like the English."

But I insisted that he was pleasantly dark with sharp features and bright eyes. My grandfather replied sarcastically: "And how would you know, Miss Know-it-all?"

Angry, I shut up.

When I recall my grandfather now, I see a wicked person who used to tease me about not having a role in his tales and who wanted to monopolize the power of story-telling that granted him extreme, though temporary, importance.

Butrus's ghost was the loyal companion of our childhood evenings. It was enough for a mother to utter his name for the children to start crying from fear.

A year after he drowned, his ghost started to wander in the fields surrounding the river. Grandfather insisted that the ghost appeared every time he lingered by his banana trees. It was Butrus "himself" reading his chemistry book. And when Grandfather approached him, Butrus would say: "Why are you so late, Uncle? You must go, lest you be harmed. How is your son Mohammad? Please give him my best and tell him Butrus would like to see him."

Having completely captured our attention with his words, Grandfather would then add that he had obtained a binding promise from Butrus not to harm any member of our family.

I used to tell my friends about

Butrus, embroidering the stories in my own way. I would say, for example, that he had appeared to me and given me Solomon's ring which I was keeping in a secret place and using to realise all my dreams, or that he had told me I was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. They would yield to my stories with some fear and much bewilderment.

At high school, I met beautiful Edith who had jet-black hair and eyes that left one's heart in pain. I once asked her about the priest of Lady Rebecca Church whose son Butrus had drowned. Her black eyes glistened and she replied with a kind of aristocratic hauteur: "You mean 'St Rrrebecca'? I don't know, maybe, but that was ages ago."

Edith never paused over such details. She moved on to another subject and never even asked about Butrus.

Her French was fluent, and her eyes knew how to conquer eyes that faced them, before withdrawing their gaze, leaving only the pain of incomprehension. Edith, who pronounced the letter 'r' the French way, and who came to our town because of the work of her engineer father, mocked everything around her. Her laughter was defiant and she made gratuitous humorous comments about those around her, like a gambler who faces the loss of all his possessions with an indifferent smile. But I once surprised her crying as she spoke about the Virgin Mary. She was mumbling with a deference that was at variance with her usual abandon, an abandon that knew how to tempt hearts and win their compassion by displaying with

calculated precision a kind of weakness.

Edith had been envious of the Virgin Mary. When she told the priest, he stroked her hair with his hand and uttered words that she forgot as time went by although she could still feel the shudder they sent through her as she uttered with him and the others: "Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb."

I knew from the beginning that there was some mysterious link between us that had brought us together. My question about Butrus was the way I reached her, and her tales about Mary and St George, whose pictures I saw on the walls of her room and in her wallet, and about Salome and Esther, the proffered Host for our friendship.

Beginnings have the lure of discovery and endings a bitter taste. This must be what Butrus realised as he settled, to his surprise, in the depths, and what Edith came to realise as she was bidding me farewell, shedding tears that she described in her first letter to me as "vulgar", saying that the whole scene was vulgar in spite of ourselves. As for me, I felt the pain of endings when I went to her later to win her back.

Whenever Grandfather was not invoking the name of Butrus, I would be telling her long tales in her room, which was full of the pictures of saints while she would be opening my mind to names like Flaubert, Hugo and Rousseau and reading French poetry to me which she then translated. She seemed even more attractive when she smiled triumphantly at her feeling of superiority, a feeling that neverthe-

less incensed me. But she seemed small and uncomfortable before the admiring looks that her darling “Peter” gave me. Peter, whom I used to call Butrus, welcomed this name with serene laughter, saying: “What’s the difference? I’m going to call you ‘Marianne’, how about that?”

Peter left Edith alone but that was nothing to do with me, for all that linked me to him was the resemblance between him and the picture I had drawn in my imagination of a boy who lived in the distant past and who drowned on the day I was born.

One distant day, she sat next to me in her room, which suddenly seemed very narrow, and told me that I was closer to her than the Virgin Mary and all the pictures she kept, and bade me farewell with tears, and she later described as vulgar.

But there seemed to be malice in her gift to me of a photograph of her and Peter, claiming that she had no

photographs of her alone, adding: “And this way I can also get rid of the last picture of myself with Butrus. Isn’t this how you like to call him?”

A while later, I paid her a visit. She was there before me with her amazing presence, her light darkness, her captivating look and a feeble sadness in her eyes, a noble sadness that reminded me of the pictures of women saints that hung in her room. But she was far beyond my reach, despite our desperate efforts to keep hold of that which bound us together.

As I was leaving her, there was a distant, hazy face looming before me of a boy who went by the name of Butrus, a face moving away from me of a friend named Edith, and the mocking laughter of my grandfather.

*Translated from the author’s short story
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