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Hani al-Raheb (1939-2000)

# The Epidemic

*Excerpt from the novel*

The place is beautiful. Perhaps the most beautiful place in memory, and certainly the prettiest in the village. Nobody can remember when the people made it a place for their dead. Radiant wild flowers spread around the hermitage and the graves. Some of the graves are stone shrines decorated with markers identifying the dead. Others are barely visible above the ground. Most of the graves are so old and decayed that the only sign of them is the flowers that have sprouted above them. A breeze blows through the cemetery, roaming among the graves, then heads toward the village carrying fear and memory to the living. To the north of the hermitage is a huge oak tree bordered by an earthen arch which drops down to the edge of the surrounding forest. To the east a curved path reaches for Al-Rameem Valley and the distant mountain range. To the south the landscape slopes down to a dense thicket bordering the big river. Westward stand groves of fig trees, the main road and the eastern part of the village.

Behind the square opening between two clusters of mountains, the sun is slowly sinking. The redness of the orb intensifies with its slow descent. It blazes as blood boils and disappears above the surface of the sea without evaporating. As it reaches the line dividing the lips of the sea and the sky, the sun appears its true enormous size, inciting the fears which precede death. It emits the final beams to touch the water's surface, cross the plain and penetrate the mountains. The sunbeams fade at the foothills. The hills become taller and develop peaks. They disappear and become valleys. Then they are perpendicular to the surface of the water, as if Mother Nature had gasped one day and her mouth remained open.

Ten years ago he indicated to me that he preferred to befriend the dead, so he went to the hermitage – there atop a cliff that jutted out of a smooth mountain peak. The villagers said the secret and the evidence had been revealed. There he stayed, getting closer to God and distancing himself from the people. The villagers became more modest in their daily lives, obsessed with a renewed feeling of shame because of his ability to transcend life and befriend the dead and their inability to overcome their self-deception. They said that manna would inevitably come down to him from heaven to help his soul overcome his body and his body overcome his soul. Indeed, they said, it had come.

He did not react when he heard that a war had broken out of a type that humankind had never experienced. The limited news reaching Al-Sheer was outdated and unreliable. He knew that the war was everywhere, that it might consume everything and kill millions of people. It might reach his hermitage one day. His daily routine did not change. He continued following the sun and synchronising his movements with its own: he rose with it, revolved with it, and turned westward toward the village when it set. He slept in the silent hermitage among the graves after sundown. That day while the sun was



still hanging on the horizon he left as usual, from his place, for the village. He was entirely white – his hair, his clothes, his shoes and his rosary. Only his eyes were black.

When he arrived in the eastern part of the village all the children ran into the alleys and the news spread like wildfire: the Sheikh had come. The men poured into the main street, the women stood on their doorsteps. But the children were confused. Within seconds the main road was blocked off, so they scattered in many directions, making the only sounds in the fearful quiet.

The first of the men to reach the Sheikh and kiss his hand was the lucky one. He retreated as fast as a squirrel. Moments later the quiet was disturbed. No longer did anyone wait in turn. They crowded together and pushed each other. Some of them fell to the ground. Some of them missed the opportunity to kiss his hand. The women left their doorsteps. The Sheikh decided that the time had come to stop, the disturbance had become intolerable.

He stopped. They stopped. They dispersed. They encircled him. A silence like the one at the hermitage and the graves prevailed over the area. It spread fast from one area to the next, and the next. At that point his fingers left the rosary and his arms rose slowly straight out to shoulder height and his hands dropped. He walked.

Everything became still. They approached him silently to kiss his hand, as if they were going to offer to an altar their loyalty, a kind of atonement for still being alive. But the Sheikh seemed about to fly away, ready to leave the silence behind him.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century the land of the Al-Sindyan family went as far as the eye could see: from the top of the Al-Sheer mountain to the sea. The

head of the family used to wear a white turban and a loose long-sleeved white garment. He strutted on the road leading his ten strong sons born of only two mothers. They wore sharp and terrifying daggers on their belts always. There were other landowners but they all sought Sheikh Al-Sindyān's protection. Not only because of his extensive property holdings and large family, but also because of the religious status he inherited from his forefathers as guardian of the law and morality of the people.

In those slow times a strange group of people migrated to Al-Sheer. No one knew anything about their history or origins. It was said that this group came from as far away as four days by donkey. That was not unusual; it was part of the way of life for people to move around. They also were strong men. Once they had bought some land the villagers grew afraid of them. One thing about them stood out: a brown goat accompanied them and lived in their house with them. It was said that they drank its milk, ate its cheese, sold its droppings and braided its hair. Before long the villagers called them the Goat family. One day the Goat family held a banquet in honour of the Al-Sindyān family.

That evening the village was quiet except for the barking dogs. The ten sons came. They walked through the village three abreast, with the eldest in front. Outside the house their hosts welcomed them profusely. They took their guests' outerwear and belts and led them to the room of death.

No one knew exactly how it happened. Except that that night was called the Night of Blood. The Al-Sindyān sons suddenly found themselves hostage, bound tightly with strong ropes. Then their hosts sent for Sheikh Al-Sindyān to come and witness the death of his ten sons.

It was said that they seated him on the floor on a straw mat, or something like it. It was said that they slew the ten sons one after the other over the knee of the Sheikh.

After the Night of Blood the Goat family invaded the Sheikh's property, which was close to the village, and lived on it. A few years passed before they could attract village peasants to work the land they occupied. By the time they were able to attract peasants to work for them there, the middle letter of their last name was dropped, leaving a surprising improvement in the meaning of the name. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Izz was the bright young man of the family. He rode a strong horse that came from Najd. He rode around the green hills and grey plains, even though he had always lived only in the city.

Sheikh Al-Sindyān was seventy years old. He did not cry. He did not speak. They let him go.

The day following the Night of Blood Sheikh Al-Sindyān awoke as if nothing had happened. He went to the fields. He prayed under the old oak tree. He watched the sunrise. He drank from the spring. He listened to the songs of the birds. He contemplated the trees for a long time and touched the blossoms of the white flowers that dropped from their branches. When his men gathered around him he was sitting under the oak tree. He told them he wanted to marry and asked their advice.

They were pleased to oblige. That evening he married a young lady, seventeen years old. Nine months later his wife gave him a son. Sixteen years later the son married for the first time. Forty years later the son killed ten strong men of the Goat family.

1916: The First World War reached Syria.

During the retreat of the Turkish army, destruction prevailed in Greater Syria in a way unknown since the Turks' entrance into the country four hundred years before. The crops failed and surplus foods were stolen. Livestock was gone and money was taken. Men were hanged. People wandered around, trying to elude death. Tens of thousands. The more people, the more victims. They left their houses and roved the land. From the deserts and the coasts they poured into Jerusalem, from Beirut and Houran to Damascus, from the mountains to Hama and Latakia, from the plains to Aleppo. In the streets the only audible word was "bread, bread". Along with their scant, cheap possessions they carried deadly disease. Among these, typhus held the strongest grip on them. Lice found fertile ground in their heads and under their arms. Typhus spread faster than people died. And they died faster than was expected.

People gathered in the city squares and cried, "bread!". There they slept and lived and disappeared. The bread did not come. In no-time the swollen bellies of the dead caused the belly of the earth to bloat and the cemeteries to expand. The dead were transported quickly in carts pulled by donkeys. In the best of situations they were pulled by mules. On reaching the cemetery, a cart would be turned around to dump a gelatinous, phantom-like load into a pit twenty metres wide and three metres deep. The burial process was slow. It allowed the lice the opportunity to crawl out of the pit, and the dead the chance to raise their heads and survey the landscape before dirt was strewn over them.

The village of Al-Sheer was protected from the disaster. Perhaps it was the only village protected from it. Not because the Turks were too tired to penetrate the clouds to reach the flat peak of the mountain; no one believed that. The Turks were capable of moving the moon. No. Al-Sheer was safeguarded because Sheikh Al-Sindyān never left the village. Among the villages throughout the country, from the sea-coast to the eastern forests, Al-Sheer alone was graced by a man with God-given mercy who received daily manna from heaven. He changed none of his habits. He continued following the movements of the sun. He was seventy-eight years old and walked without a cane. When he died the village fell silent in sadness. In the days leading up to his death, they suspected at first he was only secluding himself. Three days passed during which he disappeared into his hermitage. On the sixth day, typhus drove 'Um Kahla to her death. They had thought she was immortal. They remained certain but for a silence which cloaked them. Just before morning prayer some of them heard a great cry and awoke. A few saw a burst of light shatter the sky and flood the universe. They had no clocks to tell how long it lasted, but it was enough for a few of them to see Sheikh Al-Sindyān climbing the heavenly towers while the light explosion transformed into songs glorifying God.

In the morning four others died, and for the first time the Turks were able to cross into Al-Sheer. They killed eight people. The silence was a warning. Suddenly an entire world collapsed. It was as if a thunderbolt had struck and left nothing but terror. The day the Russian Revolution broke out, the inhabitants of Al-Sheer joined the human procession crawling from the villages toward the city: fleeing death; carrying their death to the city.

Sheikh Abdel Jawad Al-Khayyat was one of them. He carried Ahmed Salim in his arms; he was sick. The moth-

er carried Daoud; he was an infant. As for Salih, he walked between his parents. The undulating land around them seemed like a city without houses. A family here and a family there. All walking with those slow, wandering steps motivated only by fear of death.

Nobody greeted anyone, but in their proximity they became accustomed to fear and despair. Some of them had come from distant villages and they began to scratch their heads violently in front of the others, searching for lice. Catching one bug and crushing it between two stones was a joy to be discussed, and made them believe in living long enough to take a few more steps. Another victim fell, a young woman. Her face had appeared swollen four or five days earlier. She reddened with fever but kept walking. The fever rose and walking became difficult, but she continued. On the seventh day she fell. Her relatives hesitated for a while and exchanged guilty looks. Their eyes filled with tears when they forced themselves to leave her behind.

The front lines of the troops reached the main road and breathed a sigh of relief. But Sheikh Abdel Jawad stopped. The small family was weary and Lattakia was still far away. Suddenly there was a torrential downpour which drowned the land, the exhausted bodies and the space.

The family sought refuge under a half-destroyed stone bridge. Its huge, unstable arch warned of complete collapse at any moment. Under the arch the husband, wife and children huddled together and watched the heavy rain. They stood without moving. In the wide expanse of land, mountains, sea and sky, the five people seemed like insignificant objects, meaningless, and perhaps lifeless.

They stood, partly sheltered from the deadly rain. The couple avoided each other's eyes. To delay facing the inevitable, the mother began checking Ahmed Salim's head for lice, then moved to Daoud, then to Salih. Sheikh Abdel Jawad looked through the sky - pierced by the rain - without seeing it. Man and wife took temporary comfort in the painful delay. They turned from each other in deep silence.

Finally, the inevitable moment arrived. Sheikh Abdel Jawad said, "What shall we do?"

His wife shook her head in resignation. "Whatever you wish."

"We can't continue like this. The city is far away."

Choking with tears, her eyes embracing the children, she said. "It is your decision."

This realisation left him speechless. He looked around him, a little angry because he had to decide. He looked at the distant, foggy sea and at the sky teeming with rain. He could not bear to look at his children. As for his wife, she bared a breast and pushed it into Daoud's mouth. She watched her husband with quiet, burning anticipation.

He turned to her, his eyes averting hers, and asked with a little more determination than necessary: "Which one?"

"Whoever you wish."

"Ahmed is sick. I'm afraid . . . Oh my God! What an experience! We struggled with him for five years . . . Leave him? Should we leave Daoud? He could have typhus. We take him to the city and he'll die. We leave either one of them here and they'll die. Oh my God! Oh my God! I must have committed a great sin. I do not know what it is, but you are now punishing me for it. Leave Daoud?"

"As you wish."

"Say something besides this 'as you wish'. Before, you would have told me."

His wife didn't answer. His temper flared. "Say something. These are your children, too."

She remained silent. He watched Daoud holding his mother's breast in his mouth and fingers. Then he looked at Ahmed lying in the dirt. Suddenly she suggested: "Shall we leave Daoud?"

He replied in astonishment: "Leave Daoud?"

"As you have said, we struggled with Ahmed. He is our first child and has no typhus." They fell silent. They fixed their eyes on the infant, as he sleepily took his meal, happy and unaware.

"Ahmed is heavy to carry. Daoud is lighter."

"We'll leave Ahmed."

This time they looked at Ahmed: he was also sleeping unaware. He was beaten by his illness. But as they looked at him they realised how much he meant to them. The first-born. The dearest. Closest to their hearts.

"We leave Daoud."

"Leave Daoud and let's go."

She was angry and cried instantly. He looked at her consolingly.

"Put him here under the bridge. God will be on his side."

She did not put him there. Instinctively she squeezed him and cried silently.

"I told you to put him down. Let's go."

"All right, all right. Let him eat a little more. Perhaps a kind man will find him and take care of him." This is what happened next. The four left their place of refuge and set off in the mud and the rain. They went up the hill and the infant's crying faded away. The mother stumbled, sobbing. She grabbed her husband's back. He stumbled, too, but supported her. A few steps later Salih turned back toward the spot where his brother had been left. Then he caught up with his parents.

"Mother, we have left Daoud."

"Keep quiet."

After a little pause she added: "The angels will come to him and feed him milk."

Salih looked quizzically at his mother's face. He wanted to know why she was crying.

1920: The French Army occupied Syria.

Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Izz found strange the story of Syrian Defence Minister Yusuf Al-Azma. This crazy man, as he called him, led a volunteer mob to an insignificant defeat at the edge of the city of Maysalun. As a result the French Army was forced into a bloody battle and a two-day delay in reaching Damascus.

And he found it strange that Sheikh Salih also decided rashly to fire at the French. What did Sheikh Salih hope to achieve? Another round of revenge against the Al-Izz family, most of whom had already died? Or did he want to destroy the schools that the French were going to build, the roads they were going to open, and the system of government they were going to establish?

After a year and a half of silence, Al-Izz announced to his associates that Sheikh Salih had gone too far. The tone of his voice was calm and sharp. His eyes focused on a tree in the faraway olive grove. The following day he led the first French battalion to a mountain stronghold which the French had not been able to reach before.

1939: Hitler announced the war against the world and Ahmed Saleem Al-Khayyat died.

He was in the prime of his youth and passion, as tall as the men in the Al-Sindyán family. He read books and called himself Ahmed the Villager. His shop was a meeting place for two types of people. One group was the peasants who carried cloth under their arms. He sewed their clothes for them. The other group was the young men who were bored with village life and had received some education. They found in his shop a world bigger than their own rural sphere. Five years before he died he loved a neighbour's girl. 'Um Ahmed got angry because he loved a girl whose parents were not of their own social standing. She was from a far-away unknown village, closer to Tripoli than to Lattakiya. She wore a dress with no trousers underneath that would cover her ankles. 'Um Ahmed also said that her son was more attractive than the girl.

But Ahmed Salim didn't listen to his parents. He did not tell them that he loved her, although he loved her a great deal. Their romance lasted two years. Then he was stricken by a puzzling illness which carried him to his grave. At the beginning he complained of neck pain. The pain increased. Days later moving his neck became very difficult. When he went to his shop his neck tilted as if he were looking to the left. When he sat behind the sewing machine his head was turned to the street.

For a whole year he refused to go to Sheikh Abdel Hadi Al-Rihan. Finally he went, but he did not recover. He went by donkey to the shrine of Saint Jonah. On that lofty mountain-top he spent three days tending the shrine and sleeping at its threshold. He did not recover and returned a broken man. Sometimes he mocked himself bitterly for making the visit and sometimes he staggered from fear of death. Sometimes he was afraid that he had forbidden ideas for which he was being punished.

In any case it was inevitable that he return to Al-Sheer. His neck stiffened up almost completely and because of that he had to sleep in a wooden bed. Sheikh Baha came with his herbs. He stayed for a week making him drink the liquid and feeding him its dregs. It didn't help. They carried him to all the shrines. At each one he spent three days. It didn't help.

A poor wayfarer said to him: "You need to drink the extract from the fruit of the wild thorn tree. Bring me some slices of root." He boiled the slices until they melted and offered the broth to him. It was so bitter it made Ahmed Salim shiver after the first sip. He fell onto the bed clutching his throat. He knew, finally, the bitterest taste in life.

Most likely that was the last time his neck moved. After that he stiffened completely. One day he asked his mother to take him to the doorstep. He felt a sudden desire to see the world outside the house. She realised he was about to die. With tears that felt like the rains, she held him to her aged body. She could barely stand up or see him. She walked him to the doorstep. For a few moments he contemplated the dark sky, the falling rain, the trees and the road. What life remained in him was sufficient only to return him to his bed.

Of course, everyone in Al-Sheer was saddened by his death, but World War II did not stop.

1940: Paris had already fallen and the British forces were entering the harbour of Dunkirk.

Sheikh Abdel Jawad was standing in the courtyard of his house, thinking. He thought that he had been born in 1885, but five years earlier or later would not have made

any difference. What mattered was that people were born, they lived and they died. So what if they did not know their exact birthdays? Eventually mankind would cease to exist, anyway. Death itself did not mean anything to him. His earthly existence was not eternal, so a quick departure from it would be better than prolonging it. He went through a phase during which he loved death because it brought him close to God. He loved the misfortunes it entailed because he knew God was testing his faith. Therefore, after Daoud died under the bridge and Salih died choking on some beans, he named his fourth son, Ayyoub [Job]. But, he hated sickness because it was a form of torture and a disruption of nature. He hated blindness, deafness, broken bones, etc., because they disfigured the absolute beauty of nature. He was born and raised in the lowlands among people who knew humility. His spirit was fortified by the pride and might of the clear winds whistling through the surrounding mountains. And because the calcified land always yielded less than the peasants wanted, he wavered between generosity and stinginess. Because food was scarce, he was content with little. Because the journey was long, he became patient, yet emotional.

He moved between the village and the city at a time when such travel was a noteworthy event. He knew why his grandfather the Sheikh preferred the isolation of the hermitage. He lived in the city during the war and the temporary independence. Then he returned to the village to work as a serf. He went back to the city once again to put his children in school. Nothing changed in his mind about the image of the world. It continued expanding infinitely. It continued as divine revelations of one origin.

That was in the past – when the seasons came and went and he saw them as monotonous, beautiful and joyous. The colours changed in the face of eternal nature with the cycles of rain and drought, the wheat and the harvest, the wind and the calm, the bitter cold and the heat. He had seen the face of nature as immovable, timeless, unchanging. He did not see anything less than absolute in life – not even in death – not even in the sunset. He stood, observing the little boys playing in front of the big house. A strange thought occurred to him.

Perhaps the thought was that Sheikh Al-Sindyán, his grandfather, should have come twenty-five years ago. The death of the Sheikh was like an earthquake. Suddenly he disappeared, but his presence lingered, a symbol of the permanence of the stars and the movement of the sun around the earth.

Suddenly his power to protect Al-Sheer from death failed. Death invaded the mountains, valleys, vegetation and people. Everyone tried to escape instead of meeting it with sad resignation. The distinguished Al-Sindyán family broke up into three families. Sheikh Ibrahim retained the original family name, while Sheikh Abdel Jawad took the name of Al-Khayyat and Sheikh Abdel Hadi assumed the name Al-Rihan. Others took different names. Abdel Jawad was the least fortunate of the three, the most ascetic and the most learned.

*Translated by Bassam K. Frangieh*

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