

RACHIDA EL-CHARNI

The Way to Poppy Street

A SHORT STORY

TRANSLATED BY PIERS AMODIA

She saw him coming towards her, whistling and humming. He stopped in front of her to ask politely if she knew the way to Poppy Street. Not for a moment did she imagine that he would use the second she took to think to snatch her gold necklace and take to his heels.

He had come down the same side of the street that she had been walking on, absorbed in her thoughts. Nothing in his appearance suggested any need for doubt or caution; rather, his elegance aroused respect, peace of mind and even suggested he was well-off. His hand struck her and she felt as if her breastbone had been shaken loose. For a moment she was paralysed but quickly recovered from the shock and turned to him, screaming furiously: "Stop thief! My necklace, my necklace!"

Rage fuelled her anger. She started after him, all the while continuing her anguished cry. People came out from the shops, houses and workshops that lined both sides of the street. They stood there not moving, watching the scene in dismay.

She was quicker than he could have imagined and in just a few moments was able to catch up with him and hinder his way. Perhaps he had not calculated that a woman could chase a thief with such persistence. He began to zigzag. The sun came out and blazed down on people's heads. The light cascaded over his sweating face, making the necklace wrapped around his crooked fingers glitter. It had a dangling gold plaque, with the Tower of Babel on one side and the Dome of the Rock on the other. Throughout her life she had repeatedly mislaid her jewellery without being sad for long, or even concerned about the value of what she had lost. This time.



however, she felt as if her soul had suddenly been wrenched from her body.

Teeth clenched, she caught up with the thief and stretched out her hand towards him, her fingers almost managing to grab him. He turned to her, his body spiralling, but his right leg bent behind him making him lose his balance and enabling her to grab the hem of his shirt. She seized hold of him, thwarting his movements as the shirt rode up across his dark back. He tried to escape her powerful grasp but was unable to do so.

People swarmed around them like bees, but no-one made a move to help her. They stood there dazed as if they had lost their minds. She broke into another wave of anguished cries, as if imploring help: "Thief! Let me have my necklace!"

Suddenly he drew a knife from a hidden pocket in his trousers and turned towards her, brandishing it in her face. She became aware of the scuffle of feet as the people backed away. Voices raised around her, warning her what to do:

"Move back, he's armed!"

"Fool! He'll slash your face!"

"You're weaker, how do you dare?"

"Stubborn woman!"

Her face became more hard-set, as if some mighty devil dwelt in the depths of that young woman who always seemed so calm. She possessed great courage. Not for an instant did she experience real fear. Nor was she going to back down. A youth from one of the workshops moved to help her, but the men held him back, saying in a tone that revealed more violence than wisdom:

"Do you want to die? Leave her to it, she and no-one else is responsible for her stubbornness."

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Their peevish voices, full of fear, insinuated their way into her heart and wounded her. Again, she became aware of them hopping around her like little birds. "There's no point in resisting, the man has a deadly weapon!" said some, in their defeatism.

Their submissiveness only increased her stubbornness. A blind ferocity exploded inside her. She attempted to make her fingernails a force equal to the knife he was waving before her. She moved them deftly around, seeking an opening through which to get at his face, at the same time whispering determinedly under her breath: "Had he all the weapons of the world, I will not give up my necklace!"

In that instant he turned towards her, glaring, his lips drawn back with malice. She saw her tense face reflected in the pupils of his yellow eyes as he snarled through clenched white teeth:

"You stubborn little savage!"

He took her by surprise with a number of brutal punches aimed at her temples and face. She lost her balance and her body slid under his. The punches continued, causing her grip on his shirt to slacken and finally he managed to free himself. The pig then kicked her in full view of all who stood there, terror gnawing at their faces, paralysed in their cowardice. He kicked her once more, violently, then ran off.

Immediately she gathered herself together and got up to continue the chase, her hair dishevelled, blood running from her nose and her clothes covered in dust.

With all her strength she ran screaming "My necklace!" By then he had reached his companion who was waiting on a motorbike at the street corner. He sprang on behind his mate and the bike took off, cutting its way through the crowds. At that moment she realised that everything had been planned in advance.

She fell to her knees, her strength and resolve slipping away. She began crying hot stinging tears. A tremor of shame ran through her body, shame at being an inhabitant of that street: the submissiveness of her neighbours was a harder blow than the stranger's aggression. As her sadness reached its height she remembered the girl who had been raped by a number of youths in a Cairo street with not a single passer-by moving to help her. Their hearts were closed and they were content in following the scene as if watching some entertaining and exciting film.

Her imagination raced to times past, when an attack against a she-camel had caused two Arab tribes to fight a fierce war lasting forty years. She felt the people's shame and heaved a heavy groan as something deep inside her became cold and hard. Just then, the call to noon prayer broke out in the air, the voice of the muezzin accompanying her inner grief and the purity of his voice pouring balm onto her soul.

The people crowded around her, comforting her yet avoiding her gaze.

"We're sorry for what happened."

"You shouldn't have put yourself in danger."

"How could you seek your own destruction with such determination?"

"You warded off the danger; now live and hope for better things."

"You should keep your possessions concealed, not put them on display."

With her wounded pride she gazed at the people's faces and felt as if a wall stood silently between her and them. Then, as she raised herself up, still covered in the dust of battle, she heard a quiet, hateful voice say:

"Shame on you! You've made yourself a laughing stock. Wretched!"

She swung round, looking for the owner of the voice. She stared fixedly at their faces then shouted:

"Gutless, spineless cowards! Since when has standing up for yourself ever been something to laugh about?"

The words were spoken harshly and painfully. The violence emerging from her mouth held a ferocious sway over everyone present.

She continued alone towards her parents' house at the end of the street, feeling as if her mind had been divested of weighty illusions. She tried to walk steadily under the sun which, having banished the veil of clouds, had begun to blaze down, breathing its blind malice upon her.

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