



MONA AL-SHAMMARI

Black Kohl . . . White Heart

A SHORT STORY
TRANSLATED BY SOPHIA VASALOU

She steps out of the bathroom fully dressed, looking like the sun on a hot midday, dazzling in her radiance, and strolls to her room. Like a sunflower, I put aside my soft toy in the courtyard and follow her. Her beauty bewitches me; between my mother and her there is an abyss of difference. I sit down before her, invigorated by the smell of cleanliness mixed with white musk and the special perfume that her hair exudes. My eyes careen over the blackness of her soft hair. When she leaves it loose over her shoulders like a moonless night, the breeze gusting through to dry it faster, it is like a bounty from God; only the features of her face can rival its beauty. Her lips are always glossed with jujube lipstick. They're swollen like red cherries ripe for plucking. Her deep black eyes are like chestnuts; the black kohl makes them wider, and lends languor to her gaze. Her skin is the colour of milk mixed with honey. Enchanted, I say: "Tiba . . . you're really pretty." She laughs out loud until the rows of pearly white teeth show. She plants a kiss between my eyes: "Soon you'll grow up and you'll be even prettier." "There's no-one prettier than you in the entire universe," I retort with resolve. "You're my only solace in this place," she replies.

Things had been out of kilter between Tiba and my uncle Nasser from the very first days of their marriage. Having travelled a long way from her family home in al-Sharqiya province in Saudi Arabia, she had been shocked to discover the knight in shining armour that was lying in wait for her. Her husband was an overweight and feeble-minded simpleton who didn't talk like grown men did, who ate like a child, and slept like a brute. He was a mentally retarded man-child, ten years older than her, who would take his pocket money every day from my grandfather to buy sweets and coca cola and who loved to sit and play with us.

My grandfather, though, had warned him to keep away from me after he broke my hand, and my father had to quickly whisk me off to Mohammad Abd al-'Al al-Utaybi, the most famous bonesetter in the area, who put it in a cast for a month. After that my uncle Nasser would content himself with playing marbles with my younger brothers Saud and Dhari under the buckthorn tree in the courtyard. They would win and take all his marbles, and he would begin to shout: "You cheats, you thieves, you bastards." Fighting would break out, and gigantic as he was, he would simply stick his hand in Saud's top pocket and rip it off without a struggle, laughing as he retrieved his

marbles. Saud would burst into tears and Dhari would be shouting: “You stupid big oaf, we’ll never play with you again, I swear.” My grandfather would come out of the sitting room and tower in the doorway, obscuring the view of my father, who was standing behind him, and his trenchant look would sweep through the place in wrath. He would nod in my uncle Nasser’s direction, and without uttering a single word, my uncle would put his hand in his pocket with the utmost meekness, take out the marbles, and hand them back to Saud. He would then retreat to his room on his huge plodding feet and burst out crying just where Tiba was sitting all per-fumed and enveloped in the scent of incense, which was wafting through the entire house. “This is why,” she would tear at him with her words, “your father, that crafty old fox, struck the deal with my father’s wife when he registered some land there in her name, fetching me up here from al-Sharqiya all on my own. Because all the girls around here know you’re an imbecile. But God won’t pardon my father, with all his grey hairs, for trampling on my pride and putting me under orders, ‘You’re not to come back even if they feed you straw for dinner’.”

In the sitting-room, my father was using great caution and exercising his customary respectfulness in expressing reproach to his father, who had insisted on arranging a marriage for Nasser, with the rationale that marriage would “bring him to reason, change him for the better and make a man of him”.

“I told you, nothing will do him any good,” he said. “And the worst of it is that you went out and got him a good-looking and unimpeachable girl,” he said, casting his dice, as he waited for his father’s reaction. His father’s head remained bowed. “I think the best thing to do,” he pounced again, “is to send the girl back to al-Sharqiya and set her free.”

“Khaled, it’s your older brother you’re talking about!” my grandfather yelled in my father’s face. “Don’t you want what’s best for him?”

“It’s because I want what’s best for him that I’m asking that we send the toy we brought him back to where we got it from.”

At that, my grandfather stood up from his seat to put an end to the onward march of blame. “Let’s wait and see whether God decides to bless him with children – it might bring him to reason and change him for the better.”

My father went out, choking back his laughter. “Is my father really day-dreaming to such a degree?” he says to my mother. She then eagerly shares a secret that would cause him to lose sleep if he knew. “Imagine if he knew she was still a virgin – he’d die of grief.” My father twirls his moustache in some giddiness: “Don’t burden your conscience by saying things that aren’t true.”

“I swear to God, Tiba is a virgin. She told me so herself.”

One of the few times my grandfather gives Tiba permission to go to the souk, he stipulates that she take me along with her. He grants us permission to leave the house after putting in her hands a small purse that is heavy with cash. At the Marzouq souk, halfway down Badawiya Street, Tiba moves about hurriedly. From the women’s stalls, she buys some material, also lipstick, incense and hair perfume, and she doesn’t forget to buy me chocolate, some henna and sour milk. We load ourselves with bags, and our footsteps throw up clouds of dust as we walk the long distance from Marzouq souk to – the fish souk by the sea. Tiba hastens her pace. A sense of astonishment grabs me. She turns aside to the stalls where young boys are hanging about touting their wares, offering chickens, pigeons, birds and cats for sale. “I got birds, I got chickens,” they tout, “Call it a dozen, call it six.” I tug at Tiba’s abaya and she looks at me through her face cover. “What are we doing here?” She walks on without replying. She comes to a halt in front of a boy selling cats. He asks her what she wants and she whispers: “A sick cat.” He gives a sly laugh as if he were standing face to face with a health inspector. “Impossible,” he replies, “all my cats are in blooming health.” “What’s your price for a healthy cat?” she asks. “A quarter dinar,” he says. “Give me a sick cat on the spot and you’ll have a dinar.” The boy realises this is not an offer to be taken lightly. He turns around to a wooden cage just behind him and draws out a gaunt and sickly-looking cat whose white fur has turned grey; it puts up no resistance. Tiba looks it over. “It doesn’t meow. It will do.”

A shudder runs through me, travelling up from my feet to the ends of my hair where it begins to scatter pinpricks all over my head. “Good God!” Again I tug at her abaya. “Why sick?” “It’s sick now because it’s hungry,” she whispers into my ear, “but when it eats the mice in my room it will get better.”

“And how will we carry it when it’s sick?” The boy steps in with authority: “Don’t you worry. Just give me a second and I’ll put it

in a sack for you.” True to his word, he throws the cat into the bottom of a sack and fastens it at the top. Tiba hands him the dinar and we hurry back home. On the way back, she urges me not to tell anyone else about the cat, and to keep it as a secret between us. When we’re nearing the house, she asks me to go in first to make sure my grandfather won’t see the sack, because he would object to having a cat in the house. I open the door wide enough to reconnoitre the scene; the courtyard is empty. I give her the “all clear” with a wink and she hastens to her room.

The mystery of the cat continued to eat away at me, but I didn’t mention it to anyone. I gave my mother the henna and the perfume Tiba had bought from the women’s stalls, but her mind was on the dinner she was busy cooking. My mother spends every minute of her day in the kitchen, and the smell she trails is the smell of garlic, onion and spices. She has never bothered about her appearance, being far more concerned with ensuring we always had the best food to eat. “Are you fattening us like cattle? You should take care of yourself instead,” I would say to her in exasperation. “You’re growing up, my darling child,” she would laugh in reply. “Do you want me to be like Tiba? She’s a fashionista, full of airs, the only thing she cares about is her body or her hair. And even though she’s got nothing to do, she takes no responsibility, and she won’t take a single step inside the kitchen.”

A few months later, my uncle Nasser’s health suddenly took a turn for the worse. A strange illness took hold of him, and he would cough and cough until it seemed his soul was about to leave his body. My grandfather called in the Indian doctor from the medical centre, and his diagnosis was “severe pulmonary infection and respiratory difficulty, bearing similarities to the symptoms of chronic feline anthrax”.

My grandfather didn’t understand the diagnosis. The doctor put my uncle on a course of treatment for two weeks, but his condition did not improve. My grandfather then summoned the local pharmacist, who wrote out a prescription for natural herbs to be taken with hot water, in addition to those to be swallowed, along with an ointment to be rubbed into his chest, but he began to cough himself blue and his body started wasting away. My father fetched the Mullah, who read him the religious incantation for exorcising evil spirits. When he was walking out of the door, he whispered to my

grandfather: “Your son is sick – this is neither the evil eye nor witchcraft.”

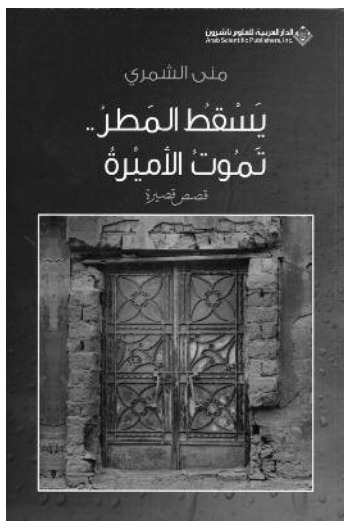
One dreary morning, the sky overcast but rainless, my mother went out with my grandfather to consult one of the religious advisers in regard to my uncle, who was slipping away from us with each passing day. Suddenly we heard Tiba screaming. I was still asleep, as was my father. The first thing we thought of was that my uncle had died. We rushed to his room. My father pushed the door open and we found Tiba with a look of terror on her face in a red see-through sleeveless dress, her black hair flowing loose over her shoulders, her gown hitched up high so that you could see her alabaster white legs. She was standing there next to the bed in her full allure, sending a radiant glow into my father’s darkness, while my uncle Nasser lay deeply asleep, oblivious to everything around him. “Is there anything wrong with Nasser?” my father cried out. “Nothing at all,” she said with a coquettish air, “he’s sleeping soundly.” “So what’s wrong then?” I shouted. “Khaled,” she purred at my father with a melt-in-your-mouth sweetness, “there’s a giant mouse in the room, and I’m dying of fear.” I was aware of my father devouring her from tip to toe with his gaze. He swallowed hard more than once in order to put out the fire that had flared within his breast. The enchantress’s kohl-drawn eyes, the scent of her incense, her perfume, her white arms, had all made him weak with desire. “Where is it?” he asked her. She sat down and pointed to the ground. “It’s here, under the bed.” I crouched down, pulling my father with me. We saw the mouse quickly scurrying out of view, and my father intercepted it with a blow, using one of my uncle Nasser’s sandals. He picked up the dead mouse by the tip of its tail and we went out. I closed the door behind me hurriedly, out of fear that my father might crawl back before her, his defences crushed.

I asked myself: where is the cat she bought so it would eat the mice in her room? I hadn’t laid eyes on the cat since the day Tiba and I had bought it – in fact I had forgotten about it altogether. “Maybe it ran away,” I speculated, as my thoughts dwelled anxiously on my uncle. Having arrived at that conclusion, my mind was put to rest. Then one day my grandfather came in carrying a deep bowl of hot fava broth, and asked Tiba to give it to Nasser to drink, because it would help with coughing and was good for the lungs. Tiba took the bowl from my grandfather’s hands, and closed the door of

her room in our faces. My grandfather withdrew, dragging the weight of an unbearable sorrow that sat heavily upon his frame. I remained standing by the door; a diabolical thought had seized me: to secretly watch Tiba at work. For, until recently, she had never once shut her door in my face.

I approached the window of her room and peered through the gaps in the lace curtain. My uncle Nasser was lying on the bed, fast asleep. The bowl of fava broth in hand, Tiba went up to her wooden trunk. "Will she pour the broth away without giving it to my uncle to drink?" I wondered to myself. She lifted the lid of the trunk with one hand, and there was the cat, looking even gaunter and sicker than it had done before. So it was still here.

Tiba placed the bowl of fava broth before the cat, and the cat licked it with an ulcerous tongue. It sneezed and coughed until its saliva dribbled into the bowl. When it refused to drink any more, she closed the lid of the trunk and went up to my uncle. Rousing him from his death-like slumber with a jab of her elbow, I could hear her snake-like hiss clearly: "Wake up, wake up. Drink this. Father brought you fava broth to help you get better." Tiba held the bowl in her hands as my uncle drank the cat's impurities. "Down to the last drop, down to the very last drop," Tiba hissed. He drank it up, and went back to sleep.



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