

Nouha Homad

Giraffe

Mina waited restlessly outside the UN Building for her sister Bana. She had had a long day. The conference she was attending had proved more challenging than she had expected and the people she was working with more disagreeable. There certainly was no doubt about the quality of her interpretation: she was good at what she did and she knew it. But working with people who were both offensive and perpetually dissatisfied always left her drained. Now she was tired and slightly nostalgic. Suddenly, a Damascene smell seemed to assail her nose and bring back unbidden recollections of a carefree past, of love and betrayal, sweetness and pain. It was past five o'clock. She looked forward to the ordinariness of the evening: her sister -- who like most Syrians loved to cook --, at work in the kitchen; her nephews boisterous and full of fun; her brother-in-law sitting back with a drink, sleepily puffing on his pipe, roaring at the boys every now and then to be quiet. She missed Damascus with its lingering fragrance of jasmine and honeysuckle, and of bitter orange blossoms and citronella, which filled the night air. How she longed to be back despite the raging civil war and the things that were gone.

Then Bana was floating towards her. Tall and willowy, her dark hair cut fashionably and expertly just clearing her shoulders, she walked with long strides, her feet barely touching the ground. She was lovely, kind, charming. Mina felt a surge of love for this older sister who had been there for her, always.

Thus in another life: her mother bending over her, embracing her, a face vaguely remembered: Bana older, caring, protective, gently taking her hand. 'I'll take care of her, mama. Come with me, Munmun. Let mama rest.'

The meeting would probably drag on for another couple of hours. Could Mina keep herself busy until then? Bana was already going back through the glass doors, to be swallowed into the building, leaving Mina standing alone outside the tall building with unshed tears, the same old anguish gnawing her insides, feeling the pain of separation.

'Mama, don't go. Take me with you.' 'I love you, Mina. I love you, my little one.' Even after all this time, she still felt the betrayal of her mother's abandonment.

She turned away despondently, another two hours before she could go home and collapse onto her favourite sofa. Today had been a relatively easy day for her. Tomorrow she would have to lock horns with the interpretation unit, but today was hers to do with as she pleased. She had spent the morning at the Cloisters, had had a late lunch in a pizzeria in the Village. And now... She felt rather than saw the eyes boring into her. An attractive young man was coming confidently towards her. Young women of good Syrian families did not speak to strangers they did not know, especially if those strangers happened to be of the awkward sex.

‘Hello. You’re a foreigner, aren’t you?’ His voice was quiet, gentle. ‘And, like a good girl, you’re probably telling yourself that you shouldn’t talk to strangers.’ Laughter bubbled to the surface and his face broke into a mischievous smile, his eyes disappearing into delightful crinkles. His mirth was infectious and Mina found herself smiling back. ‘You’re absolutely right,’ he went on. You have to be careful these days. I’m of Italian stock myself and we always tell our women not to be reckless.’ There was a slight pause and then, ‘I’m Luigi.’ He put out his hand and took hers warmly into his. ‘I work here.’ He motioned vaguely towards the UN building.

‘Mina, habibti,’ her father had told her, ‘You’re the best judge of what you may do, and what you should not. We’re an old Damascene family, we need to keep our ways; but not if they interfere with common sense.’

She stole a fleeting look at him; he had such charisma. She judged he would be in his thirties most probably. Perhaps older. It was impossible to be sure these days, she thought. People looked like they could be any age. Only last week her doctor had told her that one of his patients he had taken to be in his early sixties had turned out to be ninety-three. Imagine that. It sounded almost impossible. ‘I know a really good place near Central Park for hot dogs,’ he was saying, ‘Very American. Not too far.’ They were already on Madison Avenue, chatting effortlessly.

‘So I visit my brother in Texas and my sister here,’ she found herself saying. ‘I usually come here for medical check-ups.’ She had never shared so much information with a perfect stranger before. The bus was not overly crowded and they were soon seated side by side. ‘I love my nieces and nephews.’

Her little arms around her mother’s neck. ‘Mama, why won’t you carry me? Carry me, carry me.’ ‘Come, my soul. Sit here by mama. Let me read you a story.’ ‘No, mama, carry me, carry me...’

‘And what do you do?’ he was asking. ‘Besides loving your nephews and nieces, that is.’ His voice was warm, interested. He bit into his hot dog. Yellow mustard oozed out.

‘I’m an interpreter. English-Arabic. Languages are so very interesting, don’t you think?’

‘Yes. Very. But you must have a thankless job. How on earth do you manage to convey the shades of meaning, the implications, the inflection of voice?’ His own voice was full of admiration.

‘With difficulty!’ she said with a little laugh, almost apologetically. Her hot dog tasted like sawdust, sour and unappetising. ‘So, what do you do at the UN?’

‘Oh,’ he said, breathlessly, almost too quickly, ‘I also deal with words. I translate different sorts of documents.’ They walked in silence for a while. Then, with smugness: ‘But you see, I have the time and the leisure to think about words.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t have that kind of luxury.’

‘No,’ he interrupted with a touch of asperity. ‘Interpreters are slaves to the word.’ And then rather cruelly, ‘They have no imagination.’

‘Oh, Mina, why can’t you be more creative,’ her teacher would say. ‘Surprise me, break out of your comfort zone. You can, you know.’ And one day she had. The

astonishment in her teacher's eyes, the caressing note of approbation in her voice had made Mina glow for days.

'I really don't agree with you. Interpreters have to make immediate decisions.' She stopped, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. Why should she defend her profession? How could she explain the responsibility involved? She stole a secret sideways glance in his direction. His eyes were alight, she thought, and he was looking at her in a curious way.

'But translators have all the fun. Writing,' he said dreamily, misquoting Samuel Johnson, '“is a calm and deliberate performance, in the cool of leisure, in the stillness of solitude.” When you have all the time in the world, then language becomes your slave. You twist it, struggle with it until you subject it to your will. When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean.' He seemed to gloat, and there was a chilling edge to his rejoinder. Mina drew her cardigan closer around her. He sounded suddenly like a vain little boy.

They strolled aimlessly in the park. The weather had held. Spring was lovely, the freshness of the warm days, the pink and white blossoms. 'I had a malignant tumour some years ago,' she found herself saying, determined to change the subject, 'and, well, you know, it's important to follow up after the operation.' Was she reaching out for sympathy? 'My mother died of breast cancer.' Disgusted with herself, she blushed. Never had she revealed so much, and to a total stranger. They were approaching a denser green and a deeper quiet. She was barely conscious of voices growing fainter.

Once it was so safe in Damascus. But that seemed like eons ago. You stayed out until all hours, and could even pick up a taxi on the street if you liked. Her father had preferred for her to call for a cab, though. But these days you could be blown up, or kidnapped. And a ransom note was sent to your family. Who could pay, who had the money? And all those dead, ghosts with no private place to shelter in. And the looting of ancient treasures to raise money to fight and fight and fight. She and her friend Nawal had been warned not to visit the graves of their fathers on the first morning of the end of the last Ramadan feast. There were kidnappers lurking about everywhere. The opposition and the government each one blaming the other for the unspeakable crimes committed against the people, against children, and old people. And those with a vested interest supplying arms, and more arms and even more arms; deadly weapons, to both of the factions fighting to the death of the country, of the Syrian people, slaughtering, destroying. The civil war was like a cancer that was eating up her country, which she loved so much, its laughing people with their love of food and drink, and books, and music, their lightheartedness, their passion for life.

And now here she was in Central Park with a complete stranger. What did he know about her pain, about fear, about war? How could she explain to him her country, its culture, its heritage. Words could never be enough, she knew. How could she pack centuries of civilization into a brief outline? But she did not have to. She sensed that he had stopped listening to her. He steered her unconsciously towards a bench. The sound of silence surrounded them, isolating them in their little island of stillness.

'I'm so happy to have met you!' he said suddenly. 'This is the first time I sit with a woman without having the urge to strangle her.' He looked dreamily into the distance;

all his earlier smugness had vanished. 'And you have such a beautiful neck.' He put out his hand, barely touching the skin of her neck, making her flinch a little, despite her best efforts. 'But I don't want to strangle you. You are so pretty.' She could hear him swallow. 'You know,' he went on confidentially, 'they put me away for a long time.' He licked his lips. 'I wasn't fit to be with people. But I'm cured now. I am, you know. Really. I don't have the least desire to strangle you, I really don't.' He paused, turning to Mina earnestly. 'I don't know why I love a long neck so much. It's like a giraffe's. I want to hold and squeeze and squeeze...'

'Shall we walk back? I'm going to be late for my sister.' She got up. Her knees were so weak she could hardly stand. So this was terror.

The bus was almost deserted. As before, they sat together, side by side. She hoped that he could not hear her heart thundering uncontrollably. She sat in the aisle seat, her body exuding the pungent smell of a hunted doe, stunned and struggling for breath. And yet the bus still crawled. Then it stopped. An old woman with her bags struggled through the door onto the pavement. The door closed with a rattle and the bus moved slowly on. Streetlights flashed, a blur of yellow and white. The bus pulled to a stop again to let someone off. The door rattled and stuck as a human form crashed through it onto the sidewalk. Driven almost insane with her pent-up panic, Mina had made a dash for it. Her body sprawled onto the pavement, her knees bloody and elbows raw. In her panic at being followed, she turned her face backward to see the bus as it moved on. Flattened against the rear window, his mouth twisted into a smirk, she saw the stranger's face. She read a taut pleasure in it. The bus rolled on and disappeared into the night.