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His Mother



He found it on a winter's night. The third tree before the subway. One of the weeping willow trees on the bridge over the Nile at the end of Qasr al-Aini Street.

It wasn't the first time he'd run away. He'd tried old railway carriages left to rust on disused track, and had to put up with being woken by the watchmen on their rounds and given a good hiding, until he fled from the railway and tried sleeping under lorries in Darrasa, in crannies in the wall at Fumm al-Khalig, in crannies and rubbish dumps, cattle sheds at the slaughterhouse, lots of other places, but people always chased him off as if he were a dog that was rabid or mangy.

Since his mother's husband had driven him out of the house he'd been on the run. He used to love his mother and she loved him. He'd never seen his father and then one day that man came and it was as if the strength and energy left her and all at once she seemed weak. The man would come in drunk or stoned out of his head, and empty his crazed outpourings into the depths of his mother who lay there squirming about. The sound of her panting and moaning reached him and he felt different toward her. She was different, this new husband of hers had reduced her to a formless stream of dissolving female flesh, and her heart was gradually turning away from her son.

That's what he felt then and he went on feeling it, that every day his mother was growing further away from him and nearer to this man,

remolding herself or caving in like melting butter to accommodate herself to him and his violent outbursts, until one day he woke up to the fact that his mother was gone from him, taken by the man as surely as death had taken his father. When the new marriage bore fruit and his mother's stomach swelled up with a child, he realized that the final thread that had been keeping him attached to this room where they all lived had been severed, and then the man told him to leave school and get himself apprenticed to a joiner. He appealed to his mother to help him, but he wasn't surprised when she yelled at him to shut up and not wake the baby. And what's wrong with being a joiner? At least it'll teach you a trade, you little bastard. Bastard am I? So that's what she thinks of her marriage to my father now. With tears in his eyes, he gave in. But the joiner was hard, and the boy would often day-dream and let his mind stray from the job, then the joiner used to take his hammer to him, or sometimes lay into him, cursing and swearing, with one of the wooden clogs off his feet. So he ran away from there too.

He tagged along with other boys who roamed the streets begging and scavenging for scraps and cigarette ends. He worked as an errand boy and if any of the places he worked for gave him a night's lodging they made him pay for it with his flesh, and the self-respect of the child-man who'd been forced to grow up quickly. He paid with his most precious possession, and ran away again.

But then he found he had to escape from all the others who were running like him. There was the one-eyed man who tried to teach him to pick pockets, and the blind beggar who wanted to be led around and who was always nudging him from behind with his prick. Then a woman who scared him when she grabbed him one night and tried to cuddle him. Running in the daytime wasn't a problem. He could always find something edible on rubbish heaps. No, he wasn't like a stray dog or cat. He knew how to rummage around and choose the right things, and always used to come upon something fresh or at least it wasn't rotten, then he rinsed it clean in the river, even if it was just a scrap of bread, and put it in the sun to dry and get hot ready for when the other ingredients for the feast turned up. The problem was finding somewhere to go at night, and on a winter's night he found it.

A weeping willow's trunk seems to be made up of its roots and that's why they call it locally the tree of tenderness: its roots protrude above ground, twining together, and dry out intertwined and create a trunk which grows stout and huge with the passing years so that it can bear the weight of the giant tree. And because the trunk is really the roots growing up close to one another, it isn't a solid round mass. There are gaps large and small in it, either open at both ends or closed from one side, making a little shelter with a roof and a single entrance.

One night he was making his way along miserably. He didn't cry any more because when a person feels miserable nearly all the time he doesn't cry. Crying is a form of hoping for a solution, or asking for hope, or a request to the Almighty to show us a way out, grant us some respite, however brief. One result of continual suffering is that you can't even feel the pain any more.

It had begun to rain. Then with a bountiful hand the sky began to pour down water in torrents, emptying the streets, leaving them cheerless and creating in the spirit still abroad in them a strong sense of fear and desolation and a violent desire to weep.

He sheltered under the tree from the torrential downpour which had drenched him to the marrow of his bones, and in the little bit of light which got through from the brilliant glare of the street light he saw the opening and went closer. He examined it and marveled when he found that it had a depth to it like a cave. A cave with bumps and furrows on the inside of it, making it look like an old woman's mouth filled with the stumpy remains of her crooked teeth.

It was as if he'd gone into a magic place, a cave of delights, for it was happiness just to have the sensation that the stair-rods and watery bombs had stopped beating down on his head and penetrating his thin garments. A tremendous feeling of joy engulfed him; he was like a tramp who'd been presented from on high with a fairy-tale castle. This feeling persisted, effacing from his mind all the humiliations of a life spent running away, assaulted and hounded out and always on the move. He was only aroused from his reverie when it occurred to him that there might be snakes and rats and other biting, stinging things sharing his hideout with him.

To frighten him more the lightning started up. And by the light of its intermittent flashes and the unwavering glow filtering through from the street lamp, he began to inspect the floor of this vegetable cave inch by inch, then its walls, and found nothing except part of a dog's skeleton that must have been there for ages. When he'd flung it away and cleaned up the ground with an old bit of rag, and squatted down to rest at last, he felt that he was the happiest person on the face of the earth, happier than a king or a rich man or Firmawi himself who owned all the greengrocers' businesses in the area.

He was so happy he wanted to resist the drowsiness that started to creep through his body and would draw him, if he succumbed, down into a sleep unlike any other he'd ever had. Here he wasn't on anybody's property, he wasn't near a warehouse or a shop so they'd pick him up on sus. The police couldn't see him, nobody could, human or devil, and he tried to keep awake to savor something that he'd been without all the time he was homeless—a tender mother in whose embrace were warmth and security and protection from all the evils of mankind.

He struggled to fight off sleep, aided by the severe cold, and every time he noticed the thunder and lightning and the relentless downpour outside the cave and him protected from it all by the old tree's embrace, he felt like a drowning man who'd been rescued and dragged up on the shore. In his strong fortress, surrounded by wild beasts howling and licking their lips, he could stick out his tongue at them in the sure knowledge that their claws couldn't reach him and they were roaring only in impotent rage, and where he was it was safe as houses lined with velvet, downy velvet of the tree's substance which had begun to incline toward him sending out currents of warmth from an unknown source.

He woke up and it was morning. The rain had stopped, but the noise of the street and the rattle of the trams sounded as if they'd been going for hours. For a long time he lay, staring through the opening at the passersby and the traffic. Half asleep, he ruminated on his past life, stopping when he reached the point in his thoughts where he had found this new place to live because between the night that had just passed and the whole of his previous life was a sharp and irreversible divide.

With a hand made weak by sleep on the end of a slack and indolent arm he began to feel the inside wall of the hollow as if he was turning over the contents of a treasure chest between his fingers. He realized that he was hungry with a sort of keen, pleasant hunger that he'd never felt before. But first he had to wash his face. The Nile was close at hand. What luxury, his castle even had running water laid on, and an abundance of places to piss and shit in.

It seemed that once his housing problem was solved, all sorts of means of earning his bread offered themselves to him. He'd only taken a few steps along the street when a woman who'd just got off the bus asked him to carry her suitcase. Although it was heavy it felt as light as a feather to him and she gave him twenty pence for the short distance he carried it. He breakfasted for the first time on brown beans and bean rissoles and onions, and drank tea and smoked a whole cigarette. He roamed the city streets and by the end of the day he had enough on him to buy his dinner and go to the cinema and still have ten pence over to begin the next day with.

As he went home after sitting through two films he felt that he was going back to a place already dearer to him than any other he'd lived in. Only one thing bothered him, when he thought about it, which was that he'd find that another occupant had taken up residence in his absence. But it was still standing vacant, waiting for him, and if he hadn't been scared that he might be going off his head, he would have rushed up and embraced its walls and sung Abd al-Halim's song out loud to passersby. She's my heart's joy and my desire, she's all my life to me. His greatest happiness was that he had something that belonged to him, a place of his own, and it was like coming upon a family where the father hadn't died and the mother didn't have a husband who hurt him and mangled his self-respect. The wanderer of the sea of life had found a place to rest.

But the night was cold and he lay there with his eyelids tightly shut, finding it hard to sleep. What did it matter even if he spent the whole night awake? In the morning the place would still be all his and no one would wake him if he did fall asleep. He was in his own home.

It grew so cold that he began to shiver. He would set aside some time the next day to look for a rag or an old sack to cover himself, as the cold

had become unbearable. However much he huddled up and pressed against the inside wall of the tree, so soft compared to the rough outside wall, he felt no warmth at all.

Near dawn he felt that there was some warmth beginning to surround him very gradually and he wondered if he was feverish. Maybe the cold had made him ill and he was going to start coughing and sneezing? If he caught something now it would finish him off for sure. He put a hand on his forehead and compared the heat of his hand to the heat of his body. No, no fever, but there was a palpable warmth coming from somewhere, and it was only when out of habit he stretched out to stroke the inside wall of the tree that he realized the heat was coming from there. He was scared and almost started to shake again out of fear of this strange anonymous warmth.

He must have been beginning to invent things, for a thought had flashed through his childish mind that the tree was warming him up like any mother might do when her child cuddles up to her feeling cold. Even if it was an absurd notion it pleased him and he relaxed so that his teeth stopped chattering and his limbs stopped trembling and he drew his knees up to his chin and slept.

As he depended on the tree completely, and it had become his refuge from the wicked world outside so that he even began to go back there for a siesta when spring came and brought the hot weather with it, he was surprised when he found signs that the tree too felt lost and bereft of close relations. The hollow seemed to be changing and taking on a different shape and then he saw it, a new branch thrusting its way out from the opening. He patted it and watered it assiduously until in a few weeks it grew bigger and nearly filled the entrance, making a door and almost hiding it, so that only he could tell where it was.

Without him realizing what was happening, and of course without the tree realizing, there came to be more between them that dependence, or affection, or coolness in summer and warmth in winter. He loved it more than he'd loved his mother. It was everything in the world to him, home and shelter and loving embracer.

He didn't know how much time went by, a year or ten years, because time had stopped for him the moment he discovered the weeping willow.

Life pulsed through the tree now and the sap ran in every dried up twig, and although he had managed to get a job as an errand boy in a big shop and earned a regular wage he couldn't tear himself away from the tree's embrace. But gradually he began to feel that the hollow was getting too small for him, as without noticing he'd got bigger and his arms and legs had grown longer until the day came when he could no longer squeeze himself inside.

That's the way it goes, and one day he'd had to collect together the things that he'd stowed away in the tree's nooks and crevices and say farewell to the hollow and go to share the attic room with his friend and colleague at work. He spent many long nights not knowing how to sleep on a bed, he who was accustomed to being curled up comfortably in the tree's living embrace. But time passed and he grew accustomed to sleeping in a bed. He became a man and delighted in working hard all day and sitting up with his friends late into the night, so that he forgot all about the tree and couldn't even remember the street where it had stood, because he moved away and went to live and work in Shubra.

One day his boss sent him on an errand to Fumm al-Khalig and suddenly he found himself jumping off the bus at the end of Qasr al-Aini Street and hurrying toward it. He stood horrified, looking at it. Its green leaves had withered and its branches were dry and the door covering the entrance had collapsed. It was as if it had died and he felt a lump forming in his throat and then the tears came and he wept. His mother.

Translated by Catherine Cobham

