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Ramallah Love Story That Inspired the Poem / Issa Boulos

I used to walk to school down through the old neighborhood of Ramallah, my hometown. Overwhelmed by the familiar smell of the streets and the odors that came out of the cooking pots from within the walls; the ones that were also the outside walls of all adjacent houses that I used to pass by every morning. While treating myself with the appetites of the moment, I used to guess which house was cooking what; and which house was out food that day. This house is cooking okra, that one is cooking green beans; the one next to it is cooking eggplants. And so forth and so on until I realize that the produce man has evidently visited the neighborhood, the day before or so, without all of us kids getting a chance to chase his pickup truck or climb on it for a short ride. The driver's mood was fluctuating between letting us be, or shouting at us and demands that we stop whatever we were doing at the moment, and often threatening us with our parents that he claims he knew all. We sometimes believed his claims, and sometimes did not! Girls from the school across a street from our home were also walking down the neighborhood but from the opposite direction. For us, we used to walk in groups so our presence was often intimidating and kind of hostile towards everyone in the neighborhood, specially the girls. It felt good, it must be said, to own the streets in such manner, and it indeed led many of us to pursue some type of "control activity" later in life. Some became storeowners, officers, or even head of resistance cells. And now when I look back, I can see how those days were the ones that made all of us whom we have become! Well, going back to our original story, we knew all the girls in the school, only by face of course. As for the new girls, those were the ones that we used to pick on the most. We used to make comments on how stupid they were or funny looking, sometimes even without seeing them, or on how their stone-throwing skills weren't as good as ours. On one of those misty days of the first week of the fall of 1982, we were about to pursue one of our "activities" on our way to school when one of the new girls showed us how wrong we were with regards to our patriarchal assumptions that girls weren't as good of stone-throwers. She in fact showed us how mediocre runners we were after she chased all of us all the way to the other end of the neighborhood. Graceful she was, charming and breathtaking. She walked back to her school as if nothing happened! And since then my fascination with her grew into a dream that was destined to live a short life, and even barely made it that far. The neighborhoods elderly kept on talking of the story for many years after the fact. As she became the one who loved a Christian boy from the old city of Ramallah. Her story was told over and over again until people themselves decided to forget all about it, or rather burry it with all the pain it caused. I have become a traveler

since then, and someone with obsessions that extended themselves to the ambiguities of this world, and to the constant status of alienation and beauty.

I waited for her to appear from a distance, every morning, and relentlessly. Distinct her presence was and so her black hair and smooth olive skin, my first love at first sight she has become, and a puzzled little one I was about to be. I used to sprinkle few smiles and stories all over the dusty roads, and even threw some at the old walls and carved others on the neighborhood's old cypress trees. While I was taming myself to the idea of love, and trying hard to become someone that I was never used to be, she was ready to go, with much to give, and much to fear. I didn't care much for the conditions at that time and managed to get in touch with some of the more familiar female faces from her school hoping for them to arrange for the two of us to meet. And here it was, something that I haven't experienced before, an emerging relationship with some dangerous unique elements to it, with a Muslim girl. As we were moving along as two roses that gloomed in a rainy season, our lives were also seasonal and we were about to become just another episode of a series of folded-into-history stories about those who love, and those who cease to pursue love! Out of hand and dangerous things happened during the following year, to the extent that both our lives were in some sort of danger. She confessed nothing! Despite physical interrogations by her famous bully brother, so she ended up being forced to Jordan to marry one of her cousins.

In 1992, it was that vicious routine that was imposed on me by the Israeli authorities, which consists of renewing my legal residency in the West Bank on weekly bases. If one failed to do so for any reason, the situation usually gets much more complicated and a violation would lead to deportation and/or arrest. This whole episode started after some underground songs that evidently became known to the general Palestinian population with a tag on them that carried many names, including mine. It essentially led to arrest and imprisonment, and much further trouble with the occupying forces of the Israeli authorities. The 8 by 4 inches sheet of cheap paper looked ridiculously colorful and full of ink stamps each with an expiration date, a week later! That was the only little document that gave me the right of being a resident, in my homeland. Ironic as it sounds, on one of those hot days of July 1992, I was sitting outside the Israeli Administration building on a muddy bolder under a fig tree waiting for my turn to enter the facility and "get stamped." After looking for too long at the faces of the passers-by and thinking of ways to absorb my anger and bare the humiliation, I dumped my face into my hands and tried to create a path for a trip towards the inside. Knowledge doesn't establish comprehension; understanding doesn't accomplish creativity, I said to myself, and woke up from a distant dream and started to engage myself once more with reality, as it is! I pursued my observation of the passers-by and the street-wise children who were selling gum and daily newspapers. And in the midst of all that, I looked to the left towards the

beginning of that hilly street leading to the Administration, and there she was, right next to me, looking at me. She sat on a muddy bolder, just like mine, under the immediate adjacent tree, just six feet away. My heart bounced into itself and the intolerable heat was about to explode out of my ears, and I said nothing! Nothing. For my surprise, she turned her face to my side and said calmly while looking away, as if she talking to dream that seemed far at the moment: “Do you remember?” “Yes,” I said, with some hesitation. I got nervous and started looking around for others who may have been watching! She looked at me while tears were dripping on her cheeks, on the dry windy dust on the ground, freely, like blue birds that just encountered mystical skies and discovered that it was just an old mirror. The street all of a sudden seemed in black and white, like an old movie from the 1930s, so dry like a fresh newspaper, and so silent like a muted TV. She was the only one in color, and her versatile presence was about to go beyond the prison like doors of the facility and disappear once more. I didn’t know what was with her that day, and I never saw her again. Jihan, is her name.

The Poem: “Al-Azraq”

Blue colors are congealed by lights,
faces seemed dry like street dust,
and love pretended to be a cigarette, Alienation it is!
Beauty has become a new venue of ceremonies and life styles, visions are silence,
wonder is pain, music is an escape, and overcoming is merely a justification.

She looked at me with her illuminating eyes, years have passed,
and prophets were still singing for the same Goddess of honey eyes: “do you remember?”
She asked.

Beyond that blue portrait, the marble glow of her eyes has frozen;
she sat on the sidewalk and said: “The beginning of memory is an aroma of memory,
an old black and white photo of a God who was crucified by the beginning of knowledge
and by prophets.”

She held my hand and said: “No one has ever known me before you came along; I stole
you from your old self,
and this is your chance to take from me what will never exist in me after you depart.”

The topography of this town seemed like remains of a whole world that has committed
suicide.

He was there, in the old neighborhood, looking for himself behind his inner closed doors,
in the disappointments of his soul, in rusty oil lamps, in empty cigarette packs and in

neon lights. My ceremonies were looking for me within my alienation, in my relationship with things, which looked like as if going down the stairs to my room with its shallow curtains, and the red cardstock paper on its windows. Very much like the depth of my migration inside out, and the idea of being content. “The depth of space was to be underneath the normal not above it.” She said, while pragmatism justified alienation with ceremonies. “Did you know that the depth of place in our souls goes up, not down? The geography of ecstasy starts in our stomachs and goes up, not down. It was where you started, the problem that is. You need to feel how not to start, the East is looking for itself within you, and your path is haunted with spiritless souls.”

Issa Boulos 1996