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DAYS ROTATE

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I SAID, 'Carry me'. He said, 'No'.

I said, 'Carry me'. He said, 'No'.

So I bit his hand that gripped mine, was leading me. I bit hard until I cried. His eyes changed from hazel to blue but he didn't let go. We kept on climbing.

I said, 'Carry me'. He said, 'No'.

I stopped climbing, I stopped moving. Our arms stretched and the distance lengthened between our eyes. I said, 'This level is fine for me. I can't go further.'

He said, 'Empty yourself', and looked away.

I gave up jewelry, a pretty bauble. It smashed on the rocks below. We kept on climbing.

Cars once drove up this steep mountain path. It is said they had tires that gripped the road. Before the Great War there were lights at night that were neither fire nor the moon. There were escalators in shopping malls. Astronauts were sent to space. The earth was a tight, frustrated place. Some died of hunger, some paid money to lose weight. People were locked up.... He remembered the old days, passports and insurance companies, but I was born in 2115.

He started to sing. I held his voice.

*The blows of love play tricks on men  
And destroy them stage by stage.*

*I asked: am I acceptable?*

*The elders said, Make yourself empty.*

We kept on climbing.

Planes once whizzed over this steep mountain path. They sprayed chemicals on the plants. The Great War defeated technology, materialism, the nation state. Now all power was spiritual power, all struggles spiritual struggles. My mother told me about the day in 2114 when the war was won. The babble stopped, no newspapers, radios, TV. In the peace, little voices were heard.

'What is this song?' I asked. He had stopped singing.

'It's from the *diwan* of Sheik Al'Alawi'.

'I'll tell you a riddle', I said.

'Tell me'.

'Why were Americans good?'

His wide grey eyes, a lilt in his voice, 'I don't know. Why were Americans good?'

'On their money they wrote, In God we trust'.

He smiled. 'Carry me', I said. He shook his head. We kept on climbing.

'Tell me about your life before the war', I said.

'I was covered in a thick rubbery skin, like an elephant's skin. I always wanted more and when I got what I wanted, I quickly became disillusioned with it...' His voice made it easier for me to keep on walking.

'Did you own a car?' I wanted details, I was fourteen.

'Yes. A red Porsche'.

'Porsche?'

'A fast car'.

'And what was it like, driving in your fast car?'

'Powerful, fun'. He suddenly stopped walking and I bumped into him. 'But I didn't feel the loneliness because I was coated with that rubber skin'.

I looked up at the sky. Two angels were deep in conversation. Their light made me blink. We kept on climbing.

'How many wives did you have?'

'One. Most men had one wife in the old days'.

'Is she with you now?'

'She died before the war. From cancer'.

'What is cancer?'

'One of the diseases of the past'.

It started to rain. Soft light rain, large flat drops. The rocks began to give thanks, the trees swayed. We slowed down. I stuck my tongue out and tasted rose water. He tipped his head back and tasted aniseed. He took off his turban and let the rain into his hair. His beard became wet. We laughed together.

'Am I your youngest wife?'

'Yes', his voice as if my question had been irrelevant.

'Why did you not consummate this marriage?'

'You're not ready yet'. He stopped smiling and held my hand again. We climbed. We climbed for miles. The muscles in my legs burned. My eyes were dry from the wind.

I said, 'Carry me', he said nothing. I said, 'Carry me', he said nothing. I said, 'I haven't eaten all day, I'm hungry'.

He stopped walking and I saw his eyes change from grey to brown. Heroes of the war were granted the ability to change the colour of their eyes, to cure wounds. He said, 'I'm sorry. I forgot you still needed to eat every day'.

We sat under a tree, in the shadows. He gave me four dates. He took them out of his pocket. I ate three and was too full to eat the fourth. I offered it to him. He shook his head. He only needed to eat every two or three days. It was my youth that made me hungry.

'In the old days it was illegal to marry girls as young as you'. He laughed out loud.

'I don't know what's so funny'. I dug my fingers into the damp soil. I accidentally overturned a snail and apologized. The snail said, 'You didn't break my shell. My shell is pink like your nails'.

The shadow of the tree lengthened over us. When I stood up, my shadow too was equal to my height. The call to prayer came hushed from the snail, muted from the tree, clear and familiar in his voice. Because there was no water to wash, we pressed our palms against the mountain rocks. We rubbed our faces and our

arms. He took his *miswak* from his pocket and rubbed his teeth. He said, 'In the old days there were parts of the world where only animals prayed, birds and stones, particles of water and dust. No one could hear them. We were all deaf and busy.' He looked sad when he said that, sadder than I had ever seen him before, his eyes tired, the *miswak* held still in his hand.

I said, 'The old world's passed now. It's over'.

He looked through me and said, 'But days rotate. Days rotate'. I thought of the Freedom Lovers, their slogans and edgy ways.

He put the *miswak* back in his pocket and we began to pray. The ground was cool and wet. Afterwards I wiped mud off his forehead and mine. This made us laugh and we went on climbing.

Steep steps and miles of rough ground. The wind whizzed in my ears. Fatigue. At times my blood burned, at times I was numb, his hand pulling me as if I was walking in my sleep. I said, 'Carry me', he said, 'No'. I said, 'Carry me', he said, 'No'.

So I bit his hand, scrunched hair and bone until his eyes turned from brown to blue. He said, 'Empty yourself, you will feel lighter'.

I shouted, 'There is nothing in me anymore'.

'That's not true', he said. We kept on climbing.

'Carry me'.

'No'.

'Carry me'.

'No'.

'I thought you were my friend!' I pulled my hand away from his and plunged down. I skidded down the slope. It was so easy to go down, to let go, gravity was on my side, helping me. Pebbles rolled along me and I was free. Free of him, free of the struggle of climbing. I laughed out loud and my laugh hit the rock and the trees. A delicious sound; the pleasure of scrunching snails with my feet.

I could go faster now, blind with laughter. Green blur of trees, wind, the spot where we had prayed.... I slipped and hit my hip against a rock, grazed my face against thistle. So this was how my blood looked, sticky and red. And that buzzing sound... I was

being cursed by the grass, the thorns, the snails I hadn't killed. They knew my name and complained about me. I looked up and saw two angels move apart, take out pens and start to write. Their light hurt my eyes, I blinked and turned away. But I saw him. I saw him fly. Not like a bird, not like an eagle but as if he had stepped on an invisible escalator. His body still, only the ripple of the wind in his clothes.

'Stand up', he was now by my side. I thought he was angry but he was out of breath, exerted by the flight, by pressing his will against gravity.

'I can't stand up'.

He knelt next to me, close enough so that I could smell him, watch the colours flicker in his eyes. I had not known that he had reached the level of flight. It was something about him I hadn't known.

'Make me better', I said. The blood still oozed out from the wound in my knee.

'Cry'.

When I finished crying I stood up and dusted myself.

'Why are we climbing?' he asked, as if I had never ran away, as if I was forgiven.

'I don't know, I don't know. I just want to be with you'.

Then there was so much kindness in his eyes, in the touch of his hand. We started walking.

He sang:

*The blows of love play tricks on men  
And destroy them stage by stage.*

*I asked: am I acceptable?  
The elders said, Make yourself empty.*

*I know what you mean,  
I replied*

*But consider my state  
And show me some compassion,*

*Sadness is only the start  
Of the weight I carry.*

'Why were there so much troubles in the old world?' I asked.

'People disconnected themselves from Heaven and imagined they could get by'.

'And now?'

'Now the old ways are coming back. There are money lenders charging interest again.'

'I thought these were only market rumours'.

'No, they're true. A loaf of bread only satisfies five people now instead of eight. People are beginning to need more. In some parts of the eastern city, they've taken to locking their homes at night again'.

'My father still keeps an open house'.

'I know'.

'I miss my father', I said. An ache grew in me for the swing in our courtyard. My sisters and their games. I had twenty brothers and sisters. Some looked like me, some did not look like me at all. My feet dragged on the soil, the memories had made me heavy.

'Now', he said very gently, 'now, empty yourself'.

I gave up my homeland. It smashed on the rocks below. We kept on climbing.

'A woman once came to my father's house', I said. 'She knew my name and your name. She knew that we were going to get married. There was something different about this woman. She spoke about power and possession'.

He stopped walking. He turned and I saw green in his eyes and heard the hoofs of horses. He said, 'That woman was one of the Freedom Lovers. They want the world to go back to how it was before. I fought in the Great War so that you can look up at the sky and see angels, so that you can taste roses in the rain and never know famines. We lifted up the grid that separated countries so that people could move about and settle and there would be no border patrols, no immigration laws. But the old ways are creeping back in again. The Freedom Lovers are pushing for an-

other war and I wouldn't put it past them to break the law and use machines'.

'When will that war be?'

'I don't know.'

'In our lifetime?'

He smiled a little. 'I'll teach you how to hold a sword and fight'.

'Who will win, us or the Freedom Lovers?'

'Days rotate. Days rotate'.

'What do you mean?'

He paused and I waited. When he spoke, he spoke slowly, his eyes dark as purple. 'We were warned from the beginning. We were warned that this mystical life, this contact with Heaven won't last long'.

I wanted him to sing. We kept on climbing.

He said, 'People are needing more sleep now'.

It was true. I now slept five hours each night, last year I only needed four. I said, 'The Freedom Lovers speak about sleep'.

'It's the old ways coming back, tugging like gravity'. His hand did not grip mine as tightly as before.

I sang for him:

*The blows of love play tricks on men  
And destroy them stage by stage.*

*I asked: am I acceptable?*

*The elders said, Make yourself empty.*

*I know what you mean,  
I replied*

*But consider my state  
And show me some compassion*

*Sadness is only the start  
Of the weight I carry.*

He smiled and said that I had a good voice, a clean brain to pick up the words so quickly. He looked at me like that first day in the market. His traveling clothes and the sun on the peppers and aubergines. I knew who he was from his eyes. I went up to him and said, 'I want to offer myself in marriage to you', and he looked pleased, a little surprised, his eyes moving from hazel to brown like mine. Then I heard his voice for the first time, his accent, 'What is your name?'

We kept on climbing,

I looked up and the sky was purple and faint blue.

We kept on climbing.

I heard a sound, a singing, and it was something I had never heard before. It went inside me through my veins. 'What is this? It's so strange'.

'The clouds'.

'Are we nearly there?' The mountain was still solid above us.

He didn't reply. He quickened his step and I was lighter now. He climbed faster and I could keep up. There was no pain. I pushed the ground under my feet. I could see our destination, feel and hear it. Why did I think I could never make it, I could never reach this place? Here was what I had always wanted, every colour and every sound. More beautiful and deep than what I had given up, homeland and jewels. There were tears in his eyes. We had never been so close. I pushed the ground under my feet and it moved. It moved away from me. But that was an illusion, the ground didn't move. We were the ones who were flying.