



Ibrahim Nasrallah

Inside the Night

A MODERN ARABIC NOVEL

Translated by Bakr R. Abbas

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Our names—
What pains our parents took
To find them!
How much they thought of us!
Names are only words
And what do words mean?
Our eyes are our names.

—Fairouz

There was nobody there when we arrived, the other one and I. Nobody was waiting for us. When the rest arrived, nobody was waiting for anybody. We wanted to celebrate, the rest did not. For them, the party was behind them, and they were fleeing from certain death. We had heard about it, we had seen it, now we did not recognize it. We had always known it, yet now they knew it better: many of them had died. None of us had died this time. There were only women and children—no men.

They held their passports in their hands, dusty from the desert trail and black from the oil fires. The children had been looking back in fright with wide, staring eyes. Now they were joyfully busy with the baggage on the conveyor belt at the airport. I could not believe that human beings could forget so easily. “A miracle!” I said. None of them was innocent enough to say, “I want my daddy!”

Sand and dust filled the pores of their skin, and the nights they had passed under the open sky had distorted their features and obscured their real ages. Yet they were busy pulling the suitcases by the handles.

*

The teacher used to put a small pebble under our ear lobes and press, or put a pencil between our fingers and press, or hold us by the temples and press.

I said to the other one, “How did we grow up in spite of that pressure? How did I become so tall?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “You’re the tall one. You should have the answer.”

I did not.

The suitcases fell off in heaps on both sides of the conveyor belt, which continued moving around. Nobody complained, not even the other one and I. Women looked at their children, at other people’s children, perhaps at the other one and me. They didn’t have the strength to ask:

“Where did those two come from, whose faces are not covered with sand?” The women were all in black.

I asked the other one, “Where does black come from?”

He answered, “Mix all the colors in one container and you will get black.”

A column of smoke rose high, and when it cleared, there was no house—only charred rubble. The bomb had risen early and came whistling in the arc of its path under the neck of the gloom-strewn dawn as it struggled to pluck the color from the blackness of the last hour of the night to illuminate day.

My father said, “It was a phosphorus bomb!” I didn’t ask him how he knew.

The house next door was a heap of charred rubble, and it

was no time for questions. He pulled the young ones and my mother from under the covers, and all of us gathered in the next room, which was protected by the kitchen.

The second bomb fell. We were in the line of fire. We held each other's hands and pushed toward the door.

There was no one in the small lounge, which was only a room leading to other rooms of a dirty, glossy desert color and ceilings with huge fans churning the little air that there was.

Nobody was waiting for us.

We had been told that we were guests. The invitation had come late, but it came, and yet no one was there to meet us.

The line was growing. A line of women, with dozens of children moving between their feet, all of the same age as if they had all been conceived on the same night—and why not?

I said to the other one, "Don't they usually die on the same night?"

There were men: some standing up straight, some bent over, but all with grisly stubble on their faces. We stared at their faces. Others came and stared at our faces. We didn't know any of them, and they didn't know us. They were employees, mere ordinary employees.

The line got longer. I extended my hand through the opening in the glass divider to the airport official in military uniform. I addressed the man in charge, who was stamping the passports. "Brother," I started. He was a young man who did not seem the impatient type. "Brother we are guests."

I thought I would awe him with my multicolored letter of invitation.

“I’m afraid there’s been a mix-up!” I said to the other one.

“What is it you’re afraid has been mixed up?” he asked.

“The colors of the invitation letter.”

The official was reading with an expressionless face. He raised his head and asked, “Are you invited?”

“Yes!” I said. “He and I,” pointing to the other one.

“Who invited you?”

“The Festival Committee. It’s quite clear.”

“I’ve never heard of the Committee, or of the Festival.”

He held the letter out to me, and went on looking for an empty page in the passport to place the stamp. He handed me my passport without looking at me. The other one pushed his passport through the opening.

The official didn’t bother to ascertain the identity of the passport owner. He was only looking for an empty page to stamp. At last he found one. “Ask the others,” he said behind our backs. No answer.

The SOS calls, though delivered in sound classical Arabic, went unheeded. The bombs were increasing in velocity and density. Colors intermingled.

My mother said, “We should bring the washing down from the roof.”

My father replied, “Is this the time to think of laundry?”

“The clothes will make them shell the house,” she insisted.

“They will shell it with or without the clothes. It’s war!”

“It isn’t a war. In a war they kill only people. After a while they get bored. Even soldiers get bored—then they shell the clotheslines.”

The announcer barked on the radio, “Calling on the multitudes of our Arab nation. The carnage perpetrated today”

The refugee camp, its roofs, its yards, its lanes—all were the targets of shelling. Gunpowder smoke blew from all directions.

When the shelter, crammed with bodies, shook, we said, “Howitzers!” The man who held his children to him, trying to suppress his fear, said, “Three days of this is enough to make them all arms experts.”

We were not experts in traveling. By the time they sealed the town around us we had forgotten how to travel. They sealed it suddenly and reopened it just as suddenly.

“Travel to your hearts’ content,” they said.

“Do we really have to travel?” he asked.

“We needed a miracle,” I said, “an eighth miracle. No, in fact we need a ninth miracle, because we are the eighth miracle. Only a miracle! The Great Success is a miracle. We deserve to see at least one miracle that isn’t soaked in blood. We should celebrate the occasion and win back our color from the all-encompassing blackness.”

I searched for the invitation letter. Its colors hadn’t run together.

“I’m full of apprehension,” I said.

“What apprehension?” he asked.

“Apprehension about colors.”

Black garments were all around us. We stopped by a tall man and asked him. He stared at the letter and shook his head

from side to side. Then he stared at the surrounding faces.

“He may be waiting for somebody,” I said.

“He isn’t waiting,” the other one said. “He is watching. Look at his waist. There.”

My father had bought a gun, but he did not wear it at his waist. It was a Beretta. I don’t know who inspired this fancy for the Beretta in him. When the *Beretta* series was shown on TV, I remembered the gun, but my father wasn’t there to watch the program. He took out his gun when the howitzer hurricane struck and houses mysteriously vanished so that ditches the size of those houses were all that remained.

My mother said, “The planes were following us and dropping large barrels of oil, obliterating entire orchards. I saw olive orchards transformed—in the wink of an eye—into heaps of charcoal. I was young, but has it ever been said that young eyes aren’t as wide open as adult eyes?”

She was silent for a moment and then said to my father, “Look at your children’s eyes. They are wider than yours.”

My father didn’t say, “It’s war!”

My father was very attached to his Beretta. He liked it more than all the weapons of the Organization, and maybe more than my mother.

Mothers rushed through the gates. No one was waiting for them. They gathered their children at the hems of their long black dresses and stood on the sidewalk to make sure that all the children were there. Without looking back—for the danger was behind them—they crossed the street.

*

I tried in vain to explain the matter to the woman standing before me. I told her the policeman pushed me. "Shame on you!" she snapped. "You've disgraced us!" said the other one, and moved away lest he be included in the woman's condemnation should she notice that we were together. "It is improper for a man your age," the woman reproached.

"Sister," I started to say, but she wouldn't let me finish my sentence. "You don't do that to your sister!" she barked.

A man's voice was loud over the speakers. He was shouting some slogans, and his voice reverberated through the streets. I wasn't taking part, for the war hadn't started. I was walking when my throat surprised me, for I heard myself repeating the slogans. It amazed me to discover that I had such a strong voice. I listened to the other voices and tried to distinguish one from the other. I would stare at the face, neck, and veins of the man from whom the voice emanated. I discovered an amazing and magical power in our throats.

When I glanced at the woman, she seemed to be pleased with me and to have forgotten the misunderstanding concerning her back.

The multitudes surged as a new wave of people joined the demonstration from a side street.

"I'm not going," she said.

I tried to explain to her that it was the first time I had ever participated in a demonstration.

"Then go. It may be an unprescribed cure for your condition."

I understood and left in silence. She followed me and said, “I’m sorry.”

She tried to come near me. It seemed to me that she was taller than me. The matter fascinated me. She was indeed taller. I cried out, “What’s happened to my height?!”

“Stop dreaming!” she said.

I left in a hurry, measuring myself against anyone who came up beside me, even though he might be a stranger and there was nothing to compare. I measured myself against him without letting him know what I was doing.

The woman said, “Shame on you!” but then she forgot and seemed pleased with me. I let my voice reach a pitch it had never reached before, not even on the day I was born. I rolled on with the multitudes, and the street disappeared.

The women were crossing the street without looking back. Death was behind them. It wouldn’t come from either side. Whoever heard of a driver running down the entire number of passengers of a Boeing 727, all at the same time!

One of them uncovered part of her breast—her weary breast—her skin was lined with tiny cracks. She exposed the misery of her entire life and she thanked God. The women understood, and I understood. I said to myself that the children would understand but not yet. Today their eyes are only wide. Once more she thanked God and nobody thought anything was wrong with that. Even the only official behind the glass window at the airport understood, and so did the other one.

Another woman was upset. She was young and with six

children. She thanked God without baring her breast. She thanked God for not making the hearts of the murderers harder; otherwise they would have murdered the children too.

My mother told me later that she had had to harden her heart. She was trying to remember the largest, most solid rock she had seen in her life. She chose a piece of flint and told her heart to mimic it as she passed by the dead and the faces deformed by the phosphorus bombs.

“I want you to hold fast,” she said, “for me and for you. If one of you bursts into tears, I’ll kill you myself.” She fell silent. What woman can kill her own son? “I wouldn’t kill you, but I couldn’t bear the tears.”

There were no other men, only the other one and me.

I said to him, “I’ve never flown with so many children. You see this many children in a school but not on a plane.” I didn’t know that the plane, which was late, was a Boeing 727. Otherwise I would have said, “I’ve never flown with so many children. You see this many children in a school but not on a Boeing 727.”

I said to him, “If they cry in unison, they’ll create a sonic boom.”

“I won’t smile,” he said, but he did smile.

In the end I realized that they were ideal children. One of the mothers said, “Two nights at the airport with all these children. Had we been Americans they would not have done this to us!”

The children didn’t turn to her but their eyes were wide

open. The horror was behind them—the horror that had taken their fathers for execution.

“They are,” I said, “relatively calm children, despite having been detained in the transit lounge for two days.”

I went on, “They might have been happy with the green airplane seats that look over the world at takeoff and landing.”

My uncle held me by the hand and took me to the movies. My father was angry because he believed the movies were indecent. We went, and when we left, my uncle asked, “Did you like the film?”

“I liked the seats,” I answered. “There were so many of them.” When I asked my mother why my father didn’t buy seats for us, she passed the question on to my father, and he retorted, “Am I to sell myself to buy him chairs?”

My uncle said daringly, “I’m taking him to the movies.” And my father replied, “Take him.”

I was jumping all over the seats, trying to sit on each one before the audience came in. I asked my uncle, “Why doesn’t my father buy us seats from the cinema? There are so many seats but only a few people.”

“The cinema seats aren’t for sale,” he said.

Then I asked, “Why is the man blowing into the girl’s mouth?”

“Because he loves her,” answered my uncle.

He was silent for a little while, and then said, “Forget the blowing, forget it completely. This is to remain between you and me. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” I said.

*

I didn't tell the other one where the mirror-glossy marble came from. I didn't know if any of the children had asked their mothers for a marble to use as a mirror.

The children were silent as they climbed the stairs. "They probably don't feel safe yet," I thought.

The flight attendant said, "This is forbidden."

He was speaking to the other one, and I was behind him. I said to myself, If somebody pushes me and I touch him, he won't say, "Shame on you!"

There was a jam behind me. The steward reiterated, "It is forbidden! That's it!" Unlike the other one, I handed him my two bottles without argument.

The other one said, "We are guests here and this is from the Duty Free shop."

"But you aren't free to bring it in," the steward answered. He was muttering, "Oh God! Oh God!" as a sign to the other one that he was about to lose his patience. A second flight attendant was smiling sardonically.

The steward warned, "If they find it on you, they will send you back or even put you in jail."

"I don't want to be put in jail," said the other one.

"Neither do I," I declared. So we were in agreement.

"Make way for the passengers!" the steward ordered.

The children wanted to know what was going on. They strained their heads any way they could to see what the fuss was about.

"Now take your seats," said the steward. "At the end of the trip, maybe things will turn out for the better"

We arrived and nothing was better.

“He’s hit the mark!” I whispered to the other one.

“Who dares to utter one word about such matters?”

“Not even one syllable!”

He tried to smile, but it was a faint smile. I tried too, but couldn’t find my lips.

She was busy snapping at my lips.

“Do I have to cut myself up to feed you?” I shouted.

They didn’t lose any time. They rushed at me with their teeth: white teeth, yellow teeth, strong teeth, shaky teeth, sound teeth, decayed teeth, and the teeth that had not yet sprouted. They were amazed by the taste of my flesh.

One of them said, “We should have eaten him a long time ago.”

The other replied, “No. We would have died of hunger.”

I thought, Maybe they waited for me to get fatter. When they despaired of waiting, they devoured me. I was watching my limbs disappear into their mouths.

Nu‘man alone didn’t eat. “A father isn’t for eating,” he said.

There’s still some good in the world! I thought.

“You will die of hunger,” she said to him. She withdrew the hand that she had held out to him holding a piece of my flesh and shouted, “You’ll remain like him.” He didn’t protest.

At the end of the night, his head loomed out in my dream and said, “I agreed to be like you because you are better than them, but I won’t be like you forever. Understood?”

“Understood!” I said.