

The Aunt of Rafiq (a short story)



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Tonight was the last night she would spend in this strange country. The mineral baths and the massage had ended in the morning and the attendant had smoothed the last heavy application of black mud onto the ailing parts of her body.

The doctor said in the strange, broken language of this country that she needed physical, mental, and emotional rest.

“Physical rest! Mental rest! Emotional rest!!!” he repeated.

She told the doctor she would be unable to obtain any of these rests that he prescribed.

“Why not?” he had asked.

She could not respond. How could she make him understand who she really was? How could she explain the responsibilities that rested on her shoulders, on her head, on her arms?

She had tried to conceal her real identity in this strange country, tried to disguise herself so no one would know she was here, resting her body, her mind, and her emotions.

It was the doctor in her own country who had decided that she was near collapse and needed a retreat where there would be no work or responsibility, only relaxation, sleep, and a pleasant atmosphere. Her brother had nodded, but said after deep thought and careful consideration, “And who will help me while she is gone?”

The strange doctor had continued to question her. “What do you do that causes such total exhaustion, such great tension?”

She had been puzzled how to answer. Should she have explained the nature of her work? Should she have said that she is the sister of her brother? In the end, she had said nothing.

When she had left to go to the strange country, her brother had told her not to speak of her work to anyone. “If the Arab tourists recognize you,” her brother had said, “they will say, aha, the militants behave in a bourgeois manner even though they say they

are the militants, the leaders, and the fighters. They will say you are the sister of the militant, the sister of the leader, and the sister of the fighter. Thus you must not behave like a bourgeois.”

And he continued to tell her, “Remember, the feeling of fatigue is a bourgeois trait. The collapse of the body in the face of responsibilities is a bourgeois trait. And the frailty of nerves in the face of exhaustion and wakefulness is a bourgeois trait.”

Her brother had, after all, devoted himself totally to the cause. He had been infused with enthusiasm from the first moment he became aware of the concerns of the homeland. He was the only son in the family, she was the younger sister. She was influenced by his strong personality and began to voice his opinions and repeat what he said. Then he began explaining the cause to her. She soon found herself engaged in a major military operation. Her brother made her a comrade in the struggle. This increased her commitment to the cause and she spent all her time working.

But her brother —. Despite his enthusiasm and his struggle for the cause, her brother, managed to find another comrade, a comrade of a different kind. The new comrade entered his life through an easy door and became a pampered wife. She, his sister, remained his comrade in struggle.

Other people knew this perfectly well. They knew that she, his sister, was truly his confident, that every major secret was told to her alone. They knew that behind her brother’s unique, captivating personality stood his sister — a solemn pledge to the cause, consulted before all his speeches were made, before all his policies were announced.

But women are assumed to be more talkative than men and people tried to follow her, to ask her questions, direct and indirect. She had passed the test, however, and remained steadfast, not answering any of the tantalizing questions, until her brother’s supporters and followers called her “the sister of men”. They had honored her. They had given her a rank, the rank of those who are known through their brothers!

Soon she recognized that the cause was more important than all human desires and to give it total attention she dissociated herself from the world of women. No visits to the hairdresser or the dressmaker, no trips to the market or morning social calls. For such visits wasted time. She needed the time for the cause.

When her brothers' wife bore a son, Rafiq, her brother became known as the father of Rafiq. She found this preposterous. She also found it strange that her brother began to spend part of his time evaluating his son's toys, while her own responsibilities to the cause increased. And she came to be called the aunt of Rafiq. They had elevated her to a new rank, that of the aunt of Rafiq. She was no longer called "the sister of men". Had men suddenly become little children?

What if she had been called the mother of Rafiq? The idea had not occurred to her before. She remembered an offer of marriage, long ago. She had been engaged very young to a man whom she did not see except through the gifts that his mother and sister gave her... Then her father had decided that her fiancé was not suitable and she had returned the gifts.

She had asked, "Why wasn't he appropriate? Why had he been appropriate at one time and not now?"

Her father never answered this question, neither when she asked him herself nor when she sought an explanation from her mother. "Your father thinks this is best for you," was all her mother would say.

She wondered what had happened to those gifts and who was wearing them now.

She asked once what would happen if she stood before the mirror admiring herself as her brother's wife did.

Her grandfather said. "She is a wife, and must make herself pretty to please her husband. But as for you, are you making yourself pretty to please your brother's friends? And what would people say if one of them got interested in you?"

Her brother added "What if, God forbid, one of them loves you? People would say that I allowed you to participate in a national cause in order to find you a

husband. Your proper behavior makes you immune to criticism and your pride in being 'the sister of men' is enough for you." Her brother had laughed merrily. "Isn't that so, aunt of Rafiq?"

This was her last night in this strange country, and she had never explored the night life here. She had gotten to know the streets leading to the sanatorium, the massage room, and the room for mud applications. What had she seen in this strange country other than the mineral baths?

Night was another world, a new world with which she had not been familiar during the three weeks of her exile. Had the long quiet nights studying political books in her room rested her and made her happy? Was the restaurant forbidden, so she had dinner in her room? Why had the world of the night frightened her? Wasn't she the fighter, sister of men, aunt of Rafiq? Was she more courageous during the day? Why had she eaten her lunch every day in the infirmary restaurant, which was filled with the old, disabled, and sick? And why had she limited her breakfast to the mineral water from the drinking fountain in her room?

She knew why she had kept to herself. But she could not believe that she actually had passed long weeks in a medical program that claimed to have given her rest physically, mentally, and emotionally! It was time to return home. To the cause. To the work. In her country, night would connect with day once more and women and men would be considered equal.

Men and women, men and women. She seemed to hear her brother say, "Have you forgotten that you are the sister of men, the aunt of Rafiq?"

After all this struggle and self-denial and sacrifice, why had she still not reached the point of being called by her name?

Was it not an honor to be a woman? A woman **only**? Why is a woman always the sister of men, the aunt of a child.... Why was she not at least the **wife** of a man?

She had finished eating her dinner and had not noticed that the sweet had been placed on a plate in front of her.

She looked about the restaurant... At some table sat men, at others women, and at a third both sexes sat together. And she... she alone of all the people in this room could not say, if asked, to which table she belonged.

A voice rang out. She realized after a moment that it was her voice calling. The waiter came to her. She asked him for a glass of wine. He stared at her in astonishment and disapproval. She repeated her request.

He said, "You want wine now, when dinner is over? We are in a restaurant attached to a hospital, the time has passed for ordering wine with dinner."

He paused and pointed outside. "The bar is on your right as you exit from the main door. They can serve you wine until the sun rises tomorrow."

He left before hearing her reply. Had the waiter provoked her deliberately? Did he know who she was? Even though she had disguised herself these weeks, that did not mean that she was nobody. There, in her own country, a thousand and one individuals desired to talk to her, "the sister of men" to learn something about her or her affairs or the affair of... of... of her brother.

For the first time she asked herself to what had she dedicated her life? To the cause, or to her brother?

The waiter presented her with a bill. She signed it and stood up proudly, confident of her reputation in her own country. Tomorrow she would be at home, where people honored her and expected her to speak eloquently.

Music drifted out of the bar. She entered. The room was crowded and filled to the ceiling with smoke. She walked among the occupied tables to a small table in the farthest corner. She sat down. The table remained empty, and she was pleased that no one had recognized her.

She wondered if she should ask for a glass of wine? Did she want red or white? Which was known to give a person more courage?

She looked around but no one was watching her. She could ask for whatever she wanted and nobody would even give her a glance. Was that a comfort?

The light in the bar was faint and the clouds of smoke surrounded her. No one could see her in the semi-dark. Was that what she wanted? That no one would see her?

Someone stopped by her table. He gestured toward the empty chair. She motioned with her head that he could help himself to the chair and he did. His features resembled those of the natives of her country and so she turned her face away from him.

Your fingers are lean like the fingers of a man, her brother had said. She withdrew her hands and put them in her lap. The man sitting at her table was not looking at her, but turning his head this way and that. She followed his eyes to a statuesque blond girl with a beautiful face. The blond girl was carrying a tray with glasses and bottles on it.

The "sister of men" looked attentively at the face of her table companion. In it was grief and longing. The waitress was near the neighbouring table but she turned and smiled at them. The waitress came over and whispered to her table companion. "The sister of men," the aunt of Rafiq, did not understand a word in the language of the people in this strange country. But the table companion was a stranger too; that was better. But.. why was that better?

On the next round, the waitress stopped for some moments and again on another round. Some minutes passed.

Her table companion turned and looked at her... She told herself he could not have recognized her. He was a stranger, and he did not know that she was "the sister of men," the aunt of Rafiq. He was looking at her directly, at her, herself. Then he looked down at the empty table before her, and then up at her again.

His eyes asked, "Have you finished?"

And she nodded, "Yes".

