

Because I had to sing*

By Ghada Samman
Translated and abridged by Leila Fawaz

Ghada Samman is a prolific Lebanese writer who has published short stories and novels. Her realism is permeated with a romantic, extravagant tone. The articles she has published in papers and magazines contain a sharp satire of certain social evils. The following story reveals an emotional style in which the author's imagination wanders freely, unrestrained.



* *Alnaka Kadari*. Samman Ghada, Beirut: Dar El-Adab, 1962.

I could hear the strains of a haunting melody floating faintly from the Hotel Lounge. I imagined the strings mysteriously weeping.. wailing in tune with the waves beating desperately against the rock outside my window. The sea is wailing tonight, as if carrying the voices of the island people who had suddenly woken to find the stars leaving the skies, forming a wake behind a lost sailor wandering round and round, trying to find a harbour...

I wish I could sacrifice.. but tonight is the night for which I have waited and striven all my life, with all the talent I possess..

The stage calls me where I stood for the first time a year ago, an unknown singer, her only hope the warmth in the night black eyes of a lover, her beloved.

I look down at the bed. My eyes fall on the open newspaper with the picture of a beautiful smiling woman.. I raise my eyes abruptly and see the same face reflected in the mirror, only the smile is missing..

Could not the waves be still for this one night and take pity on my torment by being silent?

I turn from the mirror to close the window, my eyes glide towards the rock.. the waves are still creeping on the shore, searching with longing for our happy footsteps, where a year ago we sat celebrating my success, my first appearance on the stage. I had been anxious and frightened that night.. when I stood on the stage, it seemed the walls were filled with eyes ready to condemn me. I wanted to flee.. I almost broke up in tears.. but, he was there, sitting in the first row, and in his deep dark eyes the warmth of the black night.. my glances fled from all others and fastened on the beautiful dark pools. They were whispering a cautious message, like a lovely breeze in the summer night.. the words flowed across.. "Your voice is beautiful.. you will triumph.. everybody will love you"..

I sang to him only.. I sang to his black eyes.. the audience vanished.. the walls receded.. the sky was brilliant.. there were only the two of us in the rosy dawn of the sky..

I woke to a storm of applause.. and soon discovered that the sound was delightful.. wonderful.. and that I was thirsty and greedy.. and I wanted more..

We went back to the Hotel with the words of praise ringing in my ears turning my triumph into arrogance.. before going to our separate rooms, we went down to the shore and sat on the rock by the sea.. my senses drunk with my success..

His tender voice mingled in the heart of the sound of the waves as he asked me: "Did you hear their praise?.. They said your voice is exquisite.. you only need some expression of emotion.. but, lets forget them.. release me. Set me at peace.. tell me. When will you marry me?"..

— "Do you always have to spoil our happiness with this talk? You know I love you, and you are not ignorant of my desire"..

— "Enough, no need to discuss the same subject over again.. I apologize for my weakness which is driven by my love.. it was my passion for you that prevented me from going away"..

The stars in his eyes looked torn with hurt as he said: "I will not return until I become the man you desire"..

The shadow of sadness mingled with my arrogance turning my face ashen as he quietly said: "Tomorrow we return to Damascus, we will decide what to do" ..

My hands burried themselves in his hair as I caressed his locks while he took me in his arms in a wild embrace..

When I woke the next day they told me he had gone.. when I followed him to Damascus they told me he had gone far away.. alone.. to bring to my nude neck, that loves pearls, a necklace of pearls..

Why can't the waves be silenced for one night only?.. Why is it repeating the same refrain, the same story, since I arrived alone to the city, without him.. since I stood before the mirror adorning myself, preparing tonight for the final decision? Has not the story ended Oh savage waves"??..

The stage awaits me with its hundreds of eyes.. tonight the critics will know the truth of my fame.. and he has not yet returned to sit in the front row.. so that my frightened eyes can find refuge in the warmth of the black eyes.. he is not returning Oh sea.. will you not be silent?..

There is a knock on the door. Who is calling?.. "Yes.. I will hurry.." I return to the mirror. I put the final mechanical touches to my make-up My face is carefully painted like a white velvet portrait, what people call my bewitching eyes, I outline with a black pencil and reinforce with false lashes.. my lips.. I design with the experience of a spider weaving his web.. I needed no adornment that first time.. I arrange my hair and as I spray it I feel I bear on my head the hair of a dead woman..

I pick up a lovely necklace of pearls and imagine I will sway under its weight. I put on my skin tight dress..

My glance falls on the image of the woman reflected in the mirror.. people will say she is beautiful.. she just needs a smile.

I part my lips.. the shadow of a smile dies.. I hear the sound of the sea.. cannot you silence this eternal story for this one night only? Stop the waves from lamenting.. let them know that the bark is lost.. and that the blood of the evening glow has dyed its sails... and it has gone astray..

There is a knock on the door: "One moment my friends.. I am coming.."

Why do they stare at me with astonishment?..

Someone is saying: "Bewitching, but your beauty will not be enough tonight. I spent days composing the music for your song. You must sing it with emotions.. as if it were your song.." My tears lose their way to my eyes.. and shed inwards.. falling inside my soul where the song lives as I say "I will try.."

I feel the spot-lights of the stage on my face like the flames of hell as I step upon the marble where once his arm supported me and enfolded me with its magic.. tens of arms are extended now.. I take the one nearest to replace my lost anchor..

The heat of the Hall surrounds me with its compliments that bore me.. so many men around.. all seeking to know me.

My hands greet them mechanically. I am a stranger without him.. lost without him.. things have lost their colour and the fire of fame burns with a brand of ice.. and I am a lonely child in a city where everybody has turned into bronze legendary statues.

I walk on the stage.. a sudden fright takes possession of me. What am I doing here?

The make-up feels heavy on my face. The weight of my false lashes seem as if they are falling off, tearing my eyes with them. I need to run away.. to a field of violets, where a little warm house exists, and a bark that has never tasted the salty water, leans against its walls, and between them a child plays with the sails..

I look for help.. searching for the eyes dark as night. I find no one..

I take the first step that leads to the stage and a knife seems to twist in my heart.. I take the second step.. the third step.. it is too late.. climb up you fool.. and I love to climb..

I stand under the blazing lights.. the applause drowns the sound of the waves. Dark eyes like the night are swallowed up by a screen of smoke.. no one is left but myself.. a butterfly.. its wings flirting with the flame, swaying to the clapping as it would to the smell of fire..

A blue mist with the scent of the sea seems to surround me as the music starts.. The critical eyes seem to fill the Hall. The old familiar fear takes hold of me.. I look to where he was in the past and I find no dark eyes like the night.. he is gone.. gone..

The music stops. I must sing.. I cannot.. I am a cardboard puppet and I have lost my voice.

The music starts again. The audience is restlessly murmuring. And he suddenly dominates my being.. I have to find him.. I have to rescue him. I will call him with my grey song. I will search for him..

I will leave on the stage my body, my dress and my head.. I will slip away.. I will not let them see me go.. I will stand amongst them and look at the body on the stage and feel how farcial it is.. how did I manage to design and paint it?

I feel my face washed clean by the stars of a virgin forest, my bare toes wiggle in the mud and I smell the fragrance of grass. I feel strangely at peace.. and I feel a malicious pain at seeing her on the stage.. a paper puppet her voice imprisoned in my body..

As for me.. I will sing.. I will die if I don't sing. I will sing my agony and my pain and call him as I vanish from the stage.

I will look behind before I leave, I will see her opening and closing her lips while my song fascinates the swaying audience..

I slam the door as I leave on my way to the sea.. to the rock in front of the Hotel as I sing my wild sorrow and I find him there.. I approach him.. I lose myself in the grey sands of his magic embrace.. I sway and he catches me and holds me close saying: "I will build you a house of seashells and in each shell there will be a pearl."

I answer murmuring "I want a necklace of pearls.."

His embrace becomes stronger and stronger.. a strange premonition grips me and a painful lazy happiness.. my sense of assurance appeases my fear of the future.. peace disperses my desire, my wish for an unborn moon.. my song is dying.. I rebel at my happiness with him.. must I be tormented so I can sing.. I am a gypsy, I will die if I cannot sing..

A crab with red lights in its eyes approaches and drops a golden dagger, its grip is like the steps of the stage.. I take the dagger and plunge it in my lover's breast in innocent simplicity. His arms tighten and press me closer and I sing with ardour the anguish of love. My voice is almost lost by the sound of mysterious applause. I search for a bark so I can save him until I can redeem myself. I do not find the sea!.. I cry my pain. I suddenly weep with mute agony.. I carry my love in my arms.. I lift him high and wander around aimlessly on the shore.. until my tired feet dig a hole in the sand where the malicious frogs are croacking scornfully "The waves have committed suicide and the sea has dried up.."

I won't lose hope..

I keep on holding him as I weep and sing as I walk the shores.. climbing rocky mountains.. descending into green valleys.. losing myself in the branches of a vicious jungle.. and I am a repentant harbour wishing to redeem myself.. I find the sand and the shore but not the sea.. I hear the wailing of the sea rebuking me and I smell the salt of the water but I don't find the sea.

I search for the sun where it bathes every evening.. but I don't find the sea!

The shells weep in the sand as I recklessly tread on their pearls.. children cry as they stone me accusing me of killing the sea where they build castles in the sand..

I run in fear.. bewildered I try to hide my face in my lover's breast.. only to discover he has vanished.. drops of water burst from the sky screaming "You have lost him.. he has gone.."

I turn around the muddy grass, I beat, I sway, I crawl, I ache and sink in a pool of mud.. and I don't find him!

I meet a man who asks me: "Why are you singing?"

— "All I know is how to sing!"

— "Whom are you calling?"

— "I am calling my love who has become a water-lily in an eternally dark brook or a transparent bird with strange colors sailing in an unknown sky.."

The man moks me saying: "Go to the people of the city of wax, they are waiting for you.."

At the entrance of the city I find a cave and run to one of its corners to crucify myself like a bride of cardboard.. The King of the city comes surrounded by women and I ask him: "Do you know where the sea has gone?.."

"It has departed with your lover and left you all the world's pearls.. your voice is beautiful Oh weeping woman.."

He points his finger at me and the beautiful mute women approach me and adorn me where I have crucified myself in the cave like a bride of cardboard, while the people of the city of wax applaud.. applaud.. applaud.. and as my song fades away everybody applaudes!

I wake from my trance.. and find myself on the stage under the burning lights with the sound of clamouring coming from all sides.. "Magnificent.. the song of Pandora* is exquisite.. it expresses so well the feeling of despair." I lose myself in the sound of applause.. I almost fall off the stage.. a hand supports me as I leave.. "smile"..

I smile.. and bow my thanks.. and leave with my friends. The clamouring follows me.

There is a party in my honour. A party to celebrate my triumph! But my smiles are over tonight.. in a little while he is arriving to Damascus.. I cannot stand it.. I have to run away.. run..

I reach my Hotel room breathless.. I enter and lock the door. I want to be alone away from the world. From applause. From everything..

The crashing of the waves are like the storm raging within me. Moonlight filters through the window. The window seems to shrink.. there has never been such a small window nor so slim and cold a moon.

* A woman given a box by Zeus from which all human ills emerge when she opens it.

From a distance I hear the iron clock toll twelve times. I feel their sound piercing my flesh. I approach the window to close it.. I see him on the rock where we sat a year ago.. tremulous under the light of the moon!

I slam the window and fall weeping on my bed. I had been aware that at this precise hour a plane coming from a far off place would land in Damascus. Two sad men, their breath smelling of stale cigarette smoke descend from the plane carrying a wooden coffin.. a coffin containing the eyes of a poet who had roamed the earth

in search of a pearl necklace for his ambitious lover. They have returned, but those eyes dark as the night have grown cold..

I have not lost him.. It is too late the sea has dried up before I could redeem myself. I could not even meet his body since he came.. tonight.. the most important night of my life. I grit my teeth on the pillow, the strange silent tears wash away the layers of paint on my face.. my false lashes fall on the pillow and I feel them tremble under my cheek like a destructive spider with sticky legs.

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Apology

Due to the severe electricity cuts during the past month, we have grouped the last 2 issues of Al-Raida together. We apologize to our readers for the inconvenience it may have caused them.

AL-RAIDA, IWSAW QUARTERLY

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