

Divorce by LELLA ABOUZEID

Translated from the Arabic
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The emaciated young man was suffering long moments of uneasy anticipation; he did not join his colleagues in their usual chat about the issues of the hour. He tapped his pen against his desk, looked at his watch, threw the pen down, crossed his arms and laid his head on them. Finally he rose angrily and left the office. "He's supposed to receive word about his application for promotion," explained one of the men.

A moment later, the emaciated young man returned with a dejected look in his eyes. He sat down and remained at his desk until it was time for him to go home. He walked down the halls, the rhythm of his steps in time with his breathing.

Outside in the street he got on his motorcycle and drove off recklessly, disregarding all traffic signs. He overtook a car from the right and swerved across the road. Moving like an expert roller skater, he attempted to pass a bus from the left, but as the bus came to a turn it blocked his way. He applied his brakes forcefully and was immediately thrown off the motorcycle into the middle of the road. The oncoming car that he had passed a moment earlier came to a sharp stop, its tires shrieking. The young man was bruised and scratched. A hole was torn in the right knee of his trousers as though that spot in his trousers had melted in the air. A small crowd of pedestrians collected around him and the driver of the car scolded him. Someone in the crowd helped him to stand up and handed him his motorcycle. At that moment he was overwhelmed with distress. He walked along, pushing his motorcycle on the sidewalk, and broke into sobs.

At home, his wife brought him some cotton and an iodine solution. She went back to the next room to tend to the children. They clung together, motionless, as they did every time their father came home in a bad mood. He, however, went on rubbing the palm of his hand and his knee with the iodine-soaked cotton. The sting of the solution hurt and he clenched his lips and shut his eyes tightly. He did not utter a sound. He lay on a mattress on the bare floor and silence fell on what seemed to be an empty house.

He lay on his back like a corpse for some time. The evening darkness became more and more overwhelming until his brother walked in and turned on the light. He

looked at the injured man's leg and heaved a sigh of relief.

"So what was rumored to be a broken leg is no more than a few scratches on your knee!" he exclaimed. "People exaggerate so much they distort the truth. Why don't you sell that motorcycle?"

There was no reply. Staring into his brother's face, he was able to see how very depressed he was. He remained silent for a while, until his injured brother finally spoke out.

"Life is depressing," he said. "I'm at a loss."

"Why? Are you going to let a small traffic accident destroy you?"

"It has nothing to do with the accident."

"Then what is it?"

"Just life in general."

"And only now you discover that things are bad?"

This question angered the emaciated young man. The veins on his forehead swelled and he shouted, "Of course not! I learned that when Father abandoned us."

"There you go again, back to the same old story! We're brothers, after all, let's be reasonable. You grew up a long time ago and Father was done with his responsibilities for you then."

"Then why did I leave school? Why did I marry a woman whom I found abandoned in the street? I am a failure on every score."

"Did anyone force you?"

"Poverty forced me! You know that well but you pretend you don't."

Silence fell back onto the house until it was interrupted by the call for the evening prayer. The emaciated young man listened attentively, and his anger dissipated. As soon as the prayer call was over, he spoke more calmly and even affectionately to his brother.

"I remember," he said, "when it used to get so cold in our room at home that I would be unable to fall asleep. But at school in the classroom I would feel the warmth spread all over my body and I would be overcome by sleep. School," he went on as a sad smile appeared on his brother's lips, "what good is school when you're hungry? Do you realize how many times Father was married? Perhaps we'll never know the exact number. Men like him, who produce delinquents, are a curse on our society. They should be banned."

"Your bitterness is too intense," put in the brother.

With a dejected, angry look on his face, the emaciated young man went on recalling. "If it had not been for holidays, we would never have seen the man at all. Remember when he insisted I go and show him who my father was? It was just before the Eid-al-Adha and

Source: *Women and the Family in the Middle East*, edited by Elizabeth Warnock Fernca, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985, pp. 84 - 87.

we were playing ball as he was bringing home the sacrificial sheep.” I kicked the ball hard and it struck him right in the nose. It couldn’t have been a better kick if I had tried to aim it at his face. He grabbed my shirt collar,” he went on with a nervous laugh, his voice shaking, “he squeezed my neck so tightly that I thought he was going to strangle me. I vividly remember him looking me in the eye and saying, ‘Take me to see your father, you evil omen. I am not letting go of him until I see the filthy dog who fathered him!’ he yelled to the men who rushed to my rescue. ‘They are doing such a fine job, littering this country’s streets with outlaws.’ He was humiliated, however, when he heard one of the men shout: ‘He’s your own son! Let go of him! You are going to kill him’”.

“You always go back to the past, every time we meet, don’t you?” commented his brother. “I think your mind is deteriorating.”

“The world is what’s deteriorating. What on earth is happening to it?”

The two brothers remained silent for a while and only the regular rhythm of their breathing could be heard.

Then the emaciated young man further recalled, with a smile on his face, “Do you remember the story of the bicycle? I had become so obsessed by the desire to own a bike that my mother, bless her soul, was worried about me. She sold everything that was worth anything to buy me that bicycle. I was ready to die of grief if she hadn’t bought it for me. Children’s happiness is so essential, isn’t it? And it can be destroyed by a number of things, one of which is divorce. I know that. It marks children with psychological scars that never fade.”

“Well, I can’t stay much longer. I have to be at work at six in the morning, as you know,” said the visiting brother, looking at his watch and becoming somewhat restless. He slammed the door as he left. Silence returned to the house, which once again seemed deserted.

The next morning, the emaciated young man woke up and began to shout.

“What a mess this shirt collar is!” he cried. “Is this the shirt that I am supposed to wear to the office? I suppose I should hire someone to press it! Or should I simply go and drown in the ocean?”

His wife stood as motionless as a suspect indicted for a crime. Her children came to her for protection, and right before their eyes their father rolled the shirt in his hand and threw it in her face. Her voice climbed over his, and she shouted back.

“Don’t you dare assault us anymore with your

frustrations over your own failure! Don’t make things any worse than they are! Don’t add your behavior to everything else — depriving us of food and clothing!... Do you suppose I’ve not spoken up for so long because I worry about your own well-being? Of course not! My forbearance has been strictly for the children’s sake. Otherwise, I’d be happier being somebody’s maid!”

“Ah, the children!” he said. “Don’t think they are going to save you.”

He was flabbergasted by her boldness and taken by surprise that she was as discontented as he was. He was indignant that she was insulting his life-style and the way he treated his family. And because he was humiliated he resolved to discipline her.

But, encouraged by her own rebelliousness, she responded to his threats with another curse that made matters worse.

“You’d rather throw these children into the street, wouldn’t you?” she yelled. “Exactly like your father did to you. A family tradition you want to keep, huh?”

“Go on, go on turning them against me,” he said. “I know your ways.”

He started toward the door in disarray, putting on his djellaba.

“You’ll hear from me!” he shouted as he reached the door.

He walked away and she followed, still shouting back, “Okay. Okay. Be sure you do your very best and go through with all your plans!” she cried after him.

He rushed out and went straight to the *‘adil’s* office where he found them just opening the office for business. One of the officials ushered him in and insisted that he take a seat, as though he suspected the emaciated young man might change his mind and walk out. The two *‘adils* sat down at their desks.

“You are here to request a divorce, my son?” one of them inquired.

The emaciated young man nodded. The *‘adils* prepared to write. “I need names, and the date and place of marriage,” he said, and added, “I suppose you know our fees are set.”

The emaciated young man sat there reflecting upon these words when the image of a gravedigger flashed through his mind. He was suddenly amazed by the fact that some people live on the calamities of others.

“Names, please, young man. Date and place,” the *‘adil* repeated. He wrote them down as they were given to him and read aloud what he was writing, as if he were dictating it all to himself.

When he finished the emaciated young man handed him a fifty-dirham note and departed.