

Yearning

by Emily Nasrallah (*)

There was a light tapping on my door. I thought I was dreaming. I was alone at home and it was after midnight, so I thought I must be dreaming. I made no effort to open my eyes or get out of bed to open the door.

But the tapping recurred, soft and rhythmic.

I jumped out of bed and stood behind my closed door whispering, "Who's there? Who is it?" But I received no answer. My heartbeat quickened: who visits at this time of the night? Who would knock on my door at this hour and fill me with dread? Who would even dare open their door on this battle-heated Beirut night?

My questions stopped when I realized that this was my bedroom door and not the main entrance to the house - the entrance that one would normally use to get indoors.

My heart went into a panic. Someone could be inside the house. Someone could already have invaded my home, using the force of weapons, as is often the case in these broken times.

But no, I must be imagining things. My imagination running wild again. Or maybe I just forgot to lock the front door.

Yes, that's probably exactly what happened. For I have begun to notice lately little holes gaping through the pages of my memory, and forgetfulness has become an inescapable reality for me. Haven't

names started slipping away whenever the faces they belong to appear?

Can I deny that one morning I even forgot my own name and spent a few seconds drowning in embarrassed silence? Is it any wonder, in the light of all that has happened and has taken place, and all that is happening and is yet expected to happen, that I would forget to close my front door?

But I thought again. And my thoughts cancelled out all doubts, assuring me that this could not have been the case. I could not have left the front door open. Locking one's doors is no longer a habitual, reflex action you perform without thought. In these days of war and destruction, locking doors has become a ritual that demands thought and time and planning. And I, like any citizen governed by the laws of the jungle, perform the locking-up operation with precision and efficiency, motivated by my survival instincts and the drive to cling to life.

To retire peacefully, I need to perform the ritual that would allow me that peace. I close the corrugated iron door, pulling at it with all my might, until it locks at the threshold, then I close the heavy wooden door. Then I pull the chain into its latch and I clamp a padlock over it. But I do not snap the lock until I have made sure the key to the main bolt has closed all the way, and I pull at it until my teeth grind together. Finally I snap on the padlock, after making certain all the little openings and joints are closed to

the outside world. Then - only then - do I move quietly to my bedroom. There I close the bedroom door - from the inside, of course, and do not feel safe until I have closed the shutters and the glass windows and drawn the thick curtains over them. But I never forget to leave the window panes slightly ajar lest they shatter with the force of the tremor reserved, usually, for volcanoes and other natural disasters. In our case, they are brought on by flying rockets and bombs that infiltrate our little alley.

Once I am sure that all security measures have been taken, I can finally relax. Only then do I allow my weary body and wilting soul to surrender to sleep.

"He surrender to a peaceful sleep," is an expression that creeps up from childhood memories and old essay books. We borrow it today to describe different situations, daily occurrences.

You can be sleeping soundly, sunk in a sea of dreams, when you are surprised by the sound of a bomb, or the explosion of a booby-trapped car beneath the window, or the ululations of a machine gun, or the screaming of anti-aircraft artillery, and rockets that explode inside your brain first and then spread to other parts of your body, until all your senses have sucked it in and it resides in the very depths of your subconscious.

Or maybe you are surrendering to the ecstasy of dreams that have

become the only escape in our times - a place to run away to form the daily images of war that stab at you like sharpened spears.

Or you can be lulled into a false security, lifting your soul above the clouds where you can float in peace, until someone knocks at your door and disturbs your peace, drives you out of the dream, out of the ecstasy you seek, out of the fake security and false warmth.

Someone comes along and robs you of the freedom you attained through your own special means, and you may never be able to repeat it. Someone kidnaps you out of the remembered past, when you lived a normal life, when freedom meant the freedom to leave your home, to walk the streets, to swim in the sea, to visit the mountains-times when it did not take courage to fulfil your child's dream of taking him out for a drive, or a walk in the woods.

How did we not know that we would arrive at times like these? How did we not foresee that we would become as cowardly as alley rats? How did we not know that the rats would discard their skins and become the rulers of the streets?

Someone was still tapping gently on my door, while I stood behind the door and asked softly, "who's there? Who knocks?"

The tapping continued and no one answered my question.

I had waited so long in vain. The tapping had not grown stronger nor had I gleaned any information from my repeated question. I was becoming more frightened and anxious. My doubts were growing. Was this reality or was it a dream?

Why couldn't it be a dream/ An illusion? Was I now rising from the depths of sleep? Our way of life has

turned our nightmares into reality. And the two states have merged together with the frequency of bomb-interrupted sleep and heavy shelling. We no longer know dreams from reality; we no longer differentiate between the circle of peaceful, restful sleep and the maze of nightmares.

At that point I realized my thoughts had come full circle and I no longer had any choice but to surrender totally.

But surrender to whom, to what? To Sleep again? Or to confrontation and wakefulness and bravery? How could I travel outside this circle that had transformed me in time and place and thrown me into a loop? How could I explain my feelings and sensations?

The gentle tapping returned. I grew silent. I tried with my silence to start a discourse with the unknown standing behind my door, maybe through telepathy.

I was not given more time for reflection, for the stranger entered my room suddenly, although my door remained firmly closed.

How could he have come in? I did not dare lift my gaze to him, and, of course, I did not have the courage to ask how he had managed to get in.

"Have you forgotten?" asked a gentle, pure voice that wakened within me dormant feelings and burst the dams that contained my tears.

"Have you forgotten?"

I knew this voice. I could feel it crawl over my skin, through my pores, through the rest of me.

"I know this voice!" I said out loud.

"Of course you know the voice," he said immediately. "Lift your eyes to me. Look at me."

"Father?" I screamed.

"Yes," he said calmly.

"But you are . . ."

"Say it . . . Don't be frightened of the word. Say it."

"But you have been gone for . . ."

"Six years. And now I feel I want

to pay you a visit. To check on you, that's all."

"But . . . How?"

"You mean how did I get in? That was easy. Do you want the details?"

"No, no . . . It is enough that you are here. The sweetness of love and warmth envelopes me. But tell me . . ."

"Why did I come alone?"

You're reading my thoughts. I never knew you could do that."

"It is a natural thing to do, in my new home. Where I have come there are no longer any barriers. People are free beings who intermingle and interlace, and then separate like atoms in the air, without effort or sadness or anger."

"And Mother? I mean, are you . . . together?"

"Yes. And we are as close as we always were. I cannot say we are husband and wife. In our new world those words have no place, no one understands them. But that does not prevent two beings from meeting and staying together for eternity, forming a union."

"Why didn't you bring her with you? My heart is breaking."

"Please, use simple words that I can understand."

"I long to see her."

"She visits you all the time."

"Yes, I know. But not the way you are visiting me now. She comes to me in dreams. You have opened a new door for communication."

"Don't talk like a fool. This door has been open since eternity, and it will be open forever."

"Now, you are using complicated language, Father."

"Tit for tat."

"You have not lost your sense of humor. I always knew you would never change."

"Oh, but I have changed a great deal. Only you are unable to see it, for the old picture still blurs your vision."

"But this is your present picture. The way I see you now."

It is a picture I borrowed from the