

The Lost Flour Mill

Emily Nasrallah

I recall the road well. Its paths and lanes, fenced by pomegranate and quince trees and bushes of wild berries, are etched in my memory. It swerves towards the mountain slope, slanting downward into the valley, where the waters from the river gush, fast and high.

The river runs between the forests of cane and reed, bypassing the proud polars, the haughty sycamores and the reticent willows, until it reaches a tree unique among those of the valley. This tree sprawls, spreading its shade like a mother eager to embrace the universe. It spreads its fragrance over the area and from its bosom hang the fruits of its bounty - green in the early summer, ripening in September, tempting the children to pick them and pelt each other with them. The walnut tree! It shaded the old flour mill as though protecting a timid virgin from curious eyes.

As time went by, the old mill became more retiring and the walnut tree more protective; its roots digging tenaciously into the earth, its tops waving resolutely at the open spaces.

It was at a young age, now deeply rooted in the past, when my father decided to lease the flour mill and manage it himself, providing a service to the farmers and producing unadulterated flour and seed and grain whose very names stirred the appetite.

I still do not know why my father gave up tilling his land for that year, why he no longer planted and tended his crop of olive and grape and took on the flour mill instead. But I do know the seeds planted in my memory that year will last me a lifetime.

I moved from village life, sharply defined by the changing of the seasons and propelled by the pace of the farmers; footfalls, to a land of wonderment and revelation.

Each person coming to the mill carried a story. No sooner would they begin the first words than we, the children, would sit obediently on the narrow threshold, forgetting our mischief and playfulness to listen.

We were told long stories, in time to the strains of the millstone and the gurgle of the water as it rushed out through the opening in the mill, announcing unequivocally that it had finished its work and was returning to the river.

The good farmers' stories were flavoured with their lives and that of their villages - stories that started out true but strayed, in the telling, into the world of fantasy.

What more of life could a child of seven ask for, than to grow up with nature as her school? Once the pouch full of stories was depleted, we moved

on, my siblings and I, riding the saddle of adventure. We climbed the trees at the edge of the precipice, where the slightest wrong move would have thrown us into the valley. We chased insects and reptiles, not differentiating between friend and foe. And once we were through exploring the outer layers of the soil, we dug deep into the belly of mother earth to discover what seeds and roots lay within its folds.

That was the world of my daytime. A world of continuous movement and surprise. As night fell, spreading darkness over the river banks and blanketing the trees, as the leaves whispered gently to the night and closed their sleepy lids, I moved into the exalted world of imagination. Every echo became the door to an unknown world I was eager to open. Each ray of light sparkling into the darkness, carried with it the promise of a distant planet. Every flutter of a night bird's wings opened a vein of ecstasy to my heart.

How I loved the night! I waited for it, preparing myself for its arrival in the hut my father had built for me on the roof of the flour mill. It was made of wooden planks and tree boughs, with straw mats for a floor, and peepholes in the corners for eyes that cannot wait to watch the dawn break. Huddled in my hut, I felt as though I were sitting on a top of a throne prepared for me by

angels that sat around me, protecting me, providing for my happiness and comfort.

The year passed, the days falling off like pages from a calendar. One year followed another and the child became a woman, her land of dreams no more than a distant memory.

On an autumn day held captive by a bored sun, she would accompany her daughter to that distant valley. She had promised her daughter she would leave the city. They would leave behind the strangled, broken communication lines, the roads that were no longer roads, the homes haunted by echoes of days gone by, their small alcoves left standing to register their censure.

She had promised to take a day away from the life that had her turning in place like a beast of burden tied to a water wheel. Except that she wasn't really turning. It was her world that turned while she submitted to the will of others.

Those others who had imposed war on her country, who had levelled her home and displaced her children, who had stolen the sleep from her eyes and stripped her of dreams and worldly pleasures.

She also submitted to the will of every workman and labourer, who carried his tools and trampled through her house, (after it had lost the protective-ness of windows and doors), to bang a nail into a wall and promise the house would look like new.

She would take a vacation from work and weariness and the endless wait; from the monotony, the fear and the anxiety . . . from tomorrows and yesterdays; from the news and newspapers, the radio and the television;

from foreign correspondents and politicians and special envoys; and from all those concerned parties who had dug the graves of their people.

"Yes," she had said. "Today I'll take a day off with my daughter. One day will neither advance nor hinder the course of my life."

In the car she took her place in the passenger seat next to her daughter. She surrendered to her musings, lost in thoughts that confused past, present and future in her mind.

She knew that this day would create changes. It would awaken memories covered by the ashes of years, distorted by the fires of war.

"If it weren't for you, no one would have been able to forcibly remove me from my home and take me there again," she said to her daughter.

"Why are you so apprehensive about this trip?" the young woman asked. "The roads leading there are safe."

"I am afraid, child, of the sharp daggers of my memory." But she knew she would not be able to explain to her daughter what her words meant. It was a "business" trip, besides. Her daughter was preparing a study on ancient mills and factories (the old flour mill was one of them) and had decided to take advantage of her mother's association with the old world.

"Yes, dear," she had told her daughter, "the old mill is still there, standing at the neck of the river, the water gurgling past it to rapidly reach the end of its journey."

Now she said, "Stop the car here, where the paved road surrenders to the country lane. Let us continue on foot."

She did not wait for an answer. The minute her feet touched the red earth of the valley of bounty, she did not look back. She nearly forgot her daughter and the purpose of the trip.

She was a child of six or seven once more. The orchards stretched out in front of her, the trees tempted her with their honeyed fruit. Bunches of gold and ruby grapes dangled from the vines like healthy pink cheeks and open smiling faces. The leaves on the trees flapped like birds' wings, inviting her, whispering words of welcome to her. She heard voices rising from the depth of the valley - the voices of happy children with no restrictions and no curfews. She could almost see them, running barefoot, their tiny feet blistered and red droplets of blood. Ah, but what mattered was the rosininess of their cheeks.

Those were her childhood friends. With them she ran those orchards tens of times. She knew every corner and every pathway. She knew where the branches were thickest, where they intermingled and huddled as though in secret conference, where they bent towards the river, imparting their secret to the waters.

She knew the forests and the streams, the bird nests and the havens where the cattle lay to rest. Today her daughter had given her the opportunity to recall all that.

She ran as though a thousand hands were pushing her, carrying her, oblivious of the thorns and the pebbles in her path. She ran, never once looking back. She could see the past in front of her, opening a path to the future.

The road guided and she did not slow down. She knew it would lead her to the old mill, and the walnut tree

where she would finally come to rest.

"I think we're lost."

It was her daughter's voice that brought her back to the present. It was discordant somehow, unrelated to what she saw around her and what she felt. Instinctively she needed to defend herself, defend her place and her past, "I am sure the old mill is over there, behind that orchard."

"You mean it used to be there."

The young woman laughed.

"An what used to be still is."

"This will always be a point of contention between us, dear Mother. You will not admit that a place may change. Sometimes even cease to exist totally."

"But the mill . . . the river . . ."

"Only in memory, Mother, within the depths of your roots that hold tenaciously to this land."

"let me just walk a few more steps."

She pleaded with her daughter, but she had lost all confidence and her words lacked certainty.

Suddenly she realized that the road she had chosen was no longer a road. It had become part of the orchard trees, which hugged and huddled like the members of a close family.

She turned around, looking for the walnut tree, to use it as a landmark, a sign. And she was shocked to find dozens of trees strewn all around the field. Not one of them bent lovingly over an old flour mill.

She walked away with her daughter, her head bent, dragging her feet, tripping over her desolation. She only saw the jagged-edged stone as she stumbled on it. A strangled cry escaped her and she would have fallen had her daughter not supported her.

It was the millstone.

She was standing atop the ruins of her cherished flour mill - and here it was buried, under the layers of earth and years.

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