

SHORT STORY

How we were



Emily Nasrallah, Lebanese Novelist

I held onto your hand and your soft, delicate fingers intertwined with my big, coarse ones that were offspring of the oak and the sumac trees. And through the pores invisible sap communicated to your warmth. Happiness blossomed in your innocent eyes as you skipped along the sidewalk near the blue sea. Your free hand gestured toward the horizon and your stammering lips said, "Sea gull ..."

As though the gull heard the echo of your words and thought them a summons, it approached the shore where we stood. Your eyes were fixed upon the path it traced in the sky. When it was only meters from us, it dove into the water and retrieved a small fish. Dumb and cocky, the fish had been attracted to the surface of the water by the dancing lights. After regaining its balance, the gull flapped its wings and flew away. We continued on our way, on our slow, peaceful walk.

On one tranquil morning we saw a number of other people ambling along, too. Young and old, mothers and children. They were strolling down the sidewalk which opened like a lover's arms, welcoming their happy faces, carrying them atop its solid, cobbled surface, that they might enjoy the mixed blueness of the sea and sky.

On those mornings, and on morning following them, and the ones after those, we went out to walk by the sea, and were met by faces that grew familiar. We exchanged greetings without words. We shared the silent

understanding of our common goal.

You began to grow. Your soft, delicate fingers separated from my big, coarse ones. I stood aside and observed you as you skipped sometimes like a bird, or hopped like a rabbit in the stillness of the wild. The threads of time stretched out, carrying with them the multicolored bubbles of our happy times together.

Sometimes, when you met children of your own age, you slowed down. You watched them, smiled at them and spoke to them. And soon enough it happened - you entered their world and forgot me, some distance behind you, just a person who watched out for you. And when you remembered me again and came back, you found my arms trembling with yearning to hold you.

Sometimes we were content to sit on one of the stone benches; your legs swinging in a failed attempt to reach the ground.

We passed the time tattling - questions from you and answers from me. At times we reversed roles: I asked and you answered. Your words transported me into the wondrous, marvel-filled world where children reside on crystal islands populated with vast forests of imagination.

Many a time I attempted to penetrate that world but was unable to even cross the threshold, let alone enter it. Adults were barred from the magical world that opened only to the flutter of young wings.

I remember during one of our talks asking you, "If I became a child again, would you allow me into your world?"

You looked up at me, your eyes filled with wonder and confusion and a great deal of misgiving. "If ..." you said. Then, as though saving yourself from falling into error, continued, "But grown ups cannot become children."

"If children can grow into adults, why can't adults return to their original state ... they used to be children before?"

Without missing a beat, you answered, "Because they are out of the game."

At times the sun deserted the beach, leaving a gray cloud cover that stretched out of the blueness of the sea and upwards as fast as the eye can see. We walked through the fog and eaves dropped on the waves as they whispered to those who caressed their cheeks and kissed their mouths in play. And when the whispers turned to howls and roars we ran and hid behind the glass windows and watched how the threats and warnings were to be executed.

In that long time, you were my little girl, and I was your mother. Then your little footsteps bolted away from the runway within my heart, and you soared.

I had no idea that between the flutter of an eyelid

and the ticking of seconds you were learning how the seagulls soar. I did not know that you were filching the secret of mastery over me, while I watched your shadow jumping, from between my eyelids, surrendering stupidly to my ecstasy.

And during one of those moments of surrender and deceptive peacefulness, you withdrew, your little footfalls becoming giant footsteps.

The little fingers, that had received the sap of my love and the warmth of my being, expanded ... Expanded and extricated themselves from mine. They were transformed into the strong wings of a seagull, and you soared into space ... into the limitless universe.

I returned from my wearisome voyage to rest on the old stone bench, on the sidewalk by the sea, after exhaustion of attempting to catch up with you. I looked for the seagulls in vain, I searched for the light in vain.

Gray clouds enveloped the buildings and descended to wrap the blueness of the sea, and silence the chuckle of waves.

I said to myself, "It is autumn. Why am I trying to penetrate this clear, calm surface? This natural autumn scene? It is an autumn cloud caressing the surface of the water, and it will soon clear. And the water will be blue and clear, and will tremble with the stroking of the breeze."

And I said, "This is but a temporary state and it will soon dissipate and happiness will once more return to dance within my heart and my eyes, as I watch over you running and skipping ... as I run after you with all the strength and energy I can muster, my voice reaching you ahead of me, to support you should you fall."

I told my soul, comforting it, lifting it out of its wearying anxiety, "We will be back. We will return to how we were in the past. And you will be my little one again. Your velvety fingers will hold on to my thick rural ones. We will run together by the sea, facing the mountain, over the cobbled sidewalk."

But the doubts that rise from that truth are like a dagger in my throat. Soon they become a scream that demolishes the dream and shakes the foundations of illusion.

I see you suddenly as you truly are. A young woman, pure as the light of day. you are not a seagull, you are no longer a child who skips along as I chase after her.

Our childhood talks hung still on the invisible threads of time. I saw them sometimes moving, shivering like the autumn leaves.

I tried to grasp at some of them with my hands, those childhood conversations, to put them in an envelop and send them to you.

I told myself, "Tread softly on the sidewalk by the sea and listen carefully, for the waves may have retained some of what has slipped through the cracks of memory. You may find a picture stolen by the seagulls and hidden in their secret caves among the rocks." I said all that to myself to silence the anxiety storming through me, quak-

ing within me, and to fill the bottomless void inside me.

My grown little one, you continued your journey, you have not stopped. You skipped over the sidewalk by the sea, and rode on the wing of a seagull (or and airplane, to me they are no different ... they have taken you away from me, snatched you away when your down was not yet sturdy enough).

You did not choose your distance, nor did I. It was imposed upon us by another, stronger will.

And when I saw you ambling among the fields of that faraway continent, replacing the sidewalk by our warm sea with that distant shore so close to the North pole, I wept.

I have wept a great deal since we were separated. Not for myself ... but because the separation was the one event that I had not been expecting, that I had not prepared for ... and because the mother bird does not push its chicks off the bough, out of the nest's warmth, to learn how to fly, until she is certain that their down is complete and their wings fully mature, able to carry them away safely to their destinies.

That was not what happened with us. That is why I came back, to walk over the sidewalk of our past, thinking have you again some day. "When the simmering fates let up, and volcanoes calm down. I will get you back again with blooming flowers and baskets-full of the fruit you picked along your journey into different worlds that have opened up to you, welcomed you, invited you within to explore their essence and their meaning. But what I do not know is how you will return.

When ... ? When will it come about?

As I await the answer, my little one who has so suddenly grown, I continue to walk along the sidewalk by the sea during the light of day and the dark of night. I am here on the sidewalk you have known, now that night's mysterious armies have landed. The amblers have deserted their shore, the sun forsaken the horizon, and with it the bevy of gulls. Nothing moves save the slight trembling of the tree tops, and the soft twitching of the water, like the sound of one who is enjoying the rehashing of memories.

As I make ready to leave with those who are leaving, I see you coming towards me. Suddenly you are here, the way you were with me during our past walks. I stretch my arm out to hold your hand and your soft fingers intertwine with the coarseness of mine. You spring along with happy steps, chasing a bird that tries to rejoin the flock, After being caught unawares by the night.

We discover together that the night will not hinder its attempt to join its friends. And with the sound of its flapping wings, I hear the echo of a phrase that has become my mantra, the prayer I offer to the world: How we were in the past ... when you were my little girl.

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