

## A Gossip of Pen and Paper!

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My aunt has warned me against writing the story of Tante Amira. She says the lady is her friend and I shouldn't start gossiping with my pen and paper. I try to convince her ... I speak to her about the history of women's oppression, the coming of the feminist movement, some human rights' achievements ... I tell her certain things would not have been possible were it not for what she calls the gossip of pen and paper ... I tell her changes would not have been conceivable had we all kept silent ...

The argument drags on and on ... When I knew that *Al-Raida* would have an issue on the theme of women and prisons, I could not leave Tante Amira's story untold ... When it comes to the gossip of pen and paper, you simply have no choice. You've got to become a participant ...

So here I am, recalling the day I met the lady ... beautiful, elegant and sophisticated ... yes, and terribly rich. She had the presence of a queen ... not that I've ever met a queen. But when you see a woman like Tante Amira, you wonder if you've actually met a queen ...

I wasn't planning on sitting with the guests ... some things seem to happen for a reason. I also wasn't eavesdropping ... the voices were simply too loud, you couldn't but hear. I tried to keep my attention on the talk show I was watching ... honestly I tried, but the talk show in the next room was more interesting.

Nothing made sense in the beginning. One woman was talking about Tante Amira being a mother of four and a grandmother of six...the fifty years she had spent with the man... the love he felt for her...the gifts, the money, the servants...couldn't understand everything...

There was also the voice of Tante Amira...aggressive and angry...so out of tune with her image. She was saying something about the huge apartment on Raouche street...the door that was locked everyday for seven years ... the days she sat on her balcony and wished she could go for a walk on the Corniche ... the brother who came to visit but couldn't come in because she didn't have the keys to the door...

She also said something about the cars she couldn't drive... the chauffeur who never took her anywhere ... the kids who came one after the other ... the schools they studied in ... the many times she felt like roaming the streets ... and the waiting ... waiting for the door to unlock... for the permission to go out ...

Soon, I found myself sitting among my aunt's friends ... I think no one noticed that there was a foreigner among them. Everyone was caught up with Tante Amira. One rebuked her for constantly fighting with her husband, for constantly speaking of a divorce. Another friend said she shouldn't be so childish ... after all, this had happened a long time ago. "Now you can go wherever you want," the woman asserted ... "Perhaps he was possessive. But you must not forget Amira, you were and still are extremely beautiful. Maybe we shouldn't blame him," another added. Tante Amira didn't answer. It was as if she couldn't see the brighter side of things ... Like her, I couldn't see that side ...

Tante Amira was still trying to explain. She said that sometimes she would wake up in the middle of the night and feel like opening all the doors and windows of the apartment. She said she never did that ... didn't like anyone seeing her do that. Sometimes she opened one or two windows ... even when it was very cold outside. She claimed the cold didn't matter...it stopped the heaviness and the suffocation ... Suddenly, I found myself telling Tante Amira that this was so because she carried a prison inside of her. All of my aunt's friends looked at me strangely. My aunt bit her lips to keep me silent...Tante Amira suddenly became relaxed. "Yes! Yes! that's definitely it... I've been trying to find the right word. I've simply been trying to explain this idea to them," I remember her saying with relief.

The conversation turned to something else. There was no talk of a divorce anymore. I was amazed at how calm Tante Amira looked. I wondered if she really wanted a divorce or just an acknowledgment that the first seven years or so of her life were spent in a prison ... a prison created by a man she had married and a prison which she was still carrying inside her.

As Tante Amira was leaving, she insisted I should come and visit her one day. I assured her I would ... In fact I have been planning on going ... Now, I wonder if I can ever dare to do that. I wonder if Tante Amira speaks English, and I wonder if she'll ever feel humiliated because I have told her story ...

At least I know one thing ... my gossip on pen and paper is my way of acknowledging that Tante Amira has once been a prisoner ... and that she still carries the effects of that inside her.