

nothing, I looked at Masood and saw that his eyes were darting about to left and right like two mice that have lost their way home.

'You're still fifty pounds in debt to me,' said my grandfather to Masood. 'We'll talk about it later.'

Hussein called his assistants and they brought along donkeys, the two strangers produced camels, and the sacks of dates were loaded on to them. One of the donkeys let out a braying which set the camels frothing at the mouth and complaining noisily. I felt myself drawing close to Masood, felt my hand stretch out towards him as though I wanted to touch the hem of his garment. I heard him make a noise in his throat like the rasping of a lamb being slaughtered. For some unknown reason, I experienced a sharp sensation of pain in my chest.

I ran off into the distance. Hearing my grandfather call after me, I hesitated a little, then continued on my way. I felt at that moment that I hated him. Quickening my pace, it was as though I carried within me a secret I wanted to rid myself of. I reached the river bank near the bend it made behind the wood of acacia trees. Then, without knowing why, I put my finger into my throat and spewed up the dates I'd eaten.

A Conversation from the Third Floor

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translated by Denys Johnson-Davies

She came to the place for the second time. The policeman stared down at her from his horse.

The time was afternoon. The yellow-coloured wall stretched right along the road. Inside the wall was a large rectangular three-storey building; its small identical windows looked more like dark apertures. The woman stood a few paces away from the horse. The policeman looked behind him at the windows, then at the woman. He placed both hands on the pommel of the saddle and closed his eyes. After a while the horse moved. It was standing halfway down the street. Then, a moment later, it made a half-turn and once again stood itself at the top of the street.

The woman came two steps forward. The horse bent one of its forelegs, then gently lowered it.

'Sergeant, please, just let me say two words to him.'

His eyes remained closed, his hands motionless on the pommel.

Above the wall stretched a fencing of barbed wire at the end of which was a wooden tower. Inside there stood an armed soldier.

The woman took another step forward.

'You see, he's been transferred. . .'

The sun had passed beyond the central point in the sky. Despite this the weather was still hot. A narrow patch of shade lay at the bottom of the wall.

The woman transferred the child to her shoulder.

When she again looked at the policeman's face, she noticed thin lines of sweat on his forehead.

Quietly she moved away from in front of the horse and walked beside the wall. About halfway along it she sat down on a heap of stones opposite the building.

The prisoners' washing, hung by the arms and legs, could be seen outside the bars of the windows. Mostly it was completely motionless, even with the breeze that blew from time to time.

The woman whispered to herself: 'They must be wet.'

She placed the child in her lap. For a moment her eyes fastened on a djellaba that gently swayed to the movement of the wind. She stretched out her leg and gazed at her toes and the dried mud that clung to them. She rubbed her feet together, then gazed at them once again.

Putting back her head, she looked up at the windows of the third floor with half-closed eyes.

The soldier in the tower took a step forward. He rested his head against the edge of the wooden wall.

He looked at the sky, at the roofs of the houses, at the street, then at the head of the white horse.

Suddenly a shout broke the silence. The woman quickly drew back her leg. She caught sight of a bare arm waving from behind the bars of a window on the third floor.

'Aziza! Aziza! It's Ashour.'

She moved a step nearer to the wall and stared in silence at the window.

'It's Ashour, Aziza. Ashour.'

She saw his other arm stretching out through the window. She searched with her eyes for something between the two arms and succeeded in making out a face pressed between the two bars. Other faces could be seen above and alongside him.

'Aziza, I've been transferred. Did you get my letter? In four days I'll be transferred. Did you prune the two date palms? Where are Hamid and Saniyya? Why didn't you bring them with you? I'm being transferred. Where's Hamid?'

He turned round suddenly, shouting:

'Stop it, you bastards!'

She heard him shouting and saw the faces disappear from the window. After a while his face was again looking out through the bars, then the other faces looked out above his.

'Aziza!'

She looked at the policeman on the horse, then at the soldier in the tower.

'Who are you holding? Shakir? Aziza!' She shook her head twice.

'Lift him up. Lift him up high.'

She took the child between her hands and lifted him above her head.

She noticed his arms suddenly being withdrawn inside and his hands gripping the iron bars of the window. Then his face disappeared from view. For a while she searched for him among the faces that looked down. She lowered her arms a little and heard shouts of laughter from the window. She spotted his arm once again stretching outwards, then his face appeared clearly in the middle.

'Up, Aziza. Up. Face him towards the sun so I can see him.' She lowered her arms for a moment, then raised him up again, turning his face towards the sun. The child closed his eyes and burst out crying.

'He's crying.'

He turned round, laughing.

'The boy's crying! The little so-and-so! Aziza, woman, keep him crying!'

He cupped his hand round his mouth and shouted: 'Let him cry!'

Again he laughed. A few shouts went up around him. She heard their words and shoutings. Then she saw his large nose poking out through the bars.

'Woman! Don't be silly, that's enough! Cover the boy—he'll get sunstroke!'

She hugged the child to her chest and saw the soldier withdrawing inside the tower.

'Did you prune the two date palms?'

She shook her head.

'Why not? Why don't you talk? I'm being transferred. Pass by Abu Ismail and tell him I send him my best wishes—he'll do it as a favour and prune the trees, then you can bring along a few dates. Did you bring the cigarettes?'

She made a sign with her hand.

'Talk. What are you saying?'

'You've got 'em.'

'Louder, woman.'

'You've got 'em, I sent them to you.'

'When?'

'Just now.'

'Just now? Here, hang on—don't move.'

He disappeared suddenly. Two faces remained at the window. One of them stretched out his arm; he made an obscene movement in the air with his hand. She lowered her eyes, then went back to the pile of stones.

'Aziza!'

Though she did not recognise the voice, she looked up at the window. She saw the man was smiling, his arm still moving about. The second man was kneeling, having raised his djellaba above his thighs. She heard him call out:

'Aziza, look!'

She smiled. The policeman was still sitting on his horse as though asleep. From the side window of the tower she had a partial view of the soldier's head. He had taken off his helmet.

She heard several voices calling her. She listened attentively, concentrating her gaze on the soldier's head as he moved within the opening of the window. The calls were repeated, interspersed with abuse. The soldier put on his helmet, but remained inside the tower.

Suddenly the voices were silent and some moments later there came to her the breathless voice of her husband:

'Aziza? I said five—didn't I tell you five packets?' She stared up towards him in silence.

'Woman, what's the use of three packets?' She gestured to him with her hand.

'What are you saying?'

'Five—I sent five.'

'Five?' he shouted fiercely. 'The bastards!'

He disappeared suddenly, then leant out again shouting:

'Wait! Don't go!'

She turned her face towards the window of the tower. He was away for a while, then he returned.

'It's all right, Aziza. Never mind. Five—yes, there were five. Never mind, a couple got taken, it doesn't matter. Listen—what was I going to say?' Silence. She saw him staring out in

silence from the window. She shook out her black djellaba and walked forward towards the wall. He smiled.

'Aziza, I was thinking of saying something to you.'

Again there was silence. She turned away her head so that part of her face was against the sun. She shifted her head-veil slightly from her head.

'They took a couple of packets. Never mind, Aziza. Never mind.'

He laughed. His voice had become calm. The other faces disappeared from above him, only a single face remaining alongside his.

'Did you build the wall?'

'Not yet.'

'Why not?'

'When Uncle Ahmed lights the furnace, I'll get some bricks from him.'

'All right. Be careful on the tram. Look after the boy.'

She remained standing.

'Anything you want?'

'No.'

She gazed at his face, his large nose, his bare arms. She smiled. The face next to his smiled back.

Suddenly he shouted. 'Did you get the letter? I'm being transferred.'

'Where to?'

'I don't know.'

'When?'

'You see, they're pulling down the prison.'

'Where will you go?'

'God knows—anywhere. No one knows.'

'When?'

'In two or three days. Don't come here again. I'll let you know when I'm transferred. Has the boy gone to sleep?'

'No, he's awake.'

He stared back for a while in silence.

'Aziza!'

Again there was silence. The face alongside his smiled, then slowly slid back inside and disappeared. Her husband remained silent, his arms around the bars.

Suddenly he glanced behind him and quickly drew in his

arms. He signalled to her to move away, then disappeared from the window.

She stepped back, though she remained standing looking up at the window.

After a while she seated herself on the stones and stretched out her leg. Taking out her breasts, she suckled her child.

The shadow advanced halfway across the street. She saw that its fringe was touching her foot. She drew her foot back a little. The place was quiet and the washing that had been hung out gently swayed in the breeze.

When she looked at her foot again, she saw that the shadow clothed the tips of her toes. She stood up.

The soldier was still inside the tower; the toe of his boot could be seen at the edge of the wooden platform. Before reaching where the horse stood she glanced behind her, but the window was empty.

She looked quietly at the policeman: his eyes were closed, his hands on the pommel of the saddle. The horse stood motionless.

She walked down the narrow passageway towards the main street.

SOUTHERN AFRICA
