

An Arabian Mosaic

was strange, abnormal. And you always said I was stubborn, crazy. I knew you were saying that because I loved you and wanted you. But I hadn't yet understood who I was. All I knew was that I was a failed woman, a desperate woman, *a woman worth less than nothing*. A woman who was looking for herself but hadn't yet found herself.

Perhaps I *would* find myself—if I could forget you someday. Perhaps?

Half a Woman

SUFI ABDALLAH

HER HEART BEAT FURIOUSLY AND SHE FELT A SURGE of joy that set her body quivering. Her eyes roamed over the scene around her. Could she notice anything? Could she sense the droves of people and the crush around her? No, not at all. As the car made its way through the streets, her longing was almost leaping out from her heart, pushing her forward, as if she felt the car was moving too slowly and she was struggling against a desire to jump out and run off . . . to where she would meet him!

She paid the driver and rushed to the elevator. She ran into the apartment—the door was ajar, as it always was when she came, because he knew her appointed time—and looked around for him. In an instant she was in his arms, and he was holding her tightly, and whispering ecstatically in her ear:

“My darling . . . My darling . . .”

Rubbing her cheeks against his chest, she began to whisper with the same yearning:

“Rushdi . . . Rushdi . . .”

They fell into the trance of the meeting. Each was totally absorbed in the other, and everything became still around them, except for the passionate sighs, like steam rising from a fire ablaze inside her. When they had

calmed down a little, he pulled her by the hand to the sofa and put his arms tenderly around her, touching her, as though afraid that she would dissolve from between his arms, or that, after all the time he had missed her, and whispered secrets to her, and put his arms around her, he would discover she was a mirage. He stretched out his fingers gently and lifted her chin. Their eyes met. It was a passionate, love-crazed look. He cried out:

“What are we to do?”

Yes, what were they to do? How could they possibly go on living like this? How long could she hold out against the burning flame of this love? She wondered if she would manage to lead a double life. She wondered if she had the strength to carry on with this comedy her whole life. Today she would make the break between her past and her future! Today she would say her last word to him! Today she would bring down a thick curtain on ten years of her life, ten years in which she had been the model of a faithful wife and devoted mother . . . until she had seen *him*.

How did he manage to deprive her of her mind, her heart, and her being, and turn all the values that formed the fabric of her life into nothing? How did he manage to stifle all her motherly feeling, making love of life and the self and the desire for freedom and pleasure sweep away everything else? Was this what people called the irresistible power of love? Then there was no hope for her, no hope for life. She wondered what fate was lurking in wait for her, and what had come over her that she could change into the opposite of what she was.

Had she had an unhappy life?

She didn't know. They had married her off at eighteen

to a successful businessman of thirty-five, handsome, daunting, self-possessed. He respected her and treated her kindly. She hadn't felt any change in her life, except for the physical engagements that she experienced with her husband at appointed times, without finding a response or a meaning to them. She had grown up in a small house as a member of a large family; now she was the mistress of a great villa. Her husband's behavior was steady; the times at which he slept, woke, sat, stood, and ate never varied. She never heard an improper word from him; his actions were marked by kindness, gentleness, companionship, and calmness. She had lived with him for ten years, and in that time had borne him Samih and Najwa, a boy and a girl, the delight of her eye and the focal point of her life. She was the exemplary wife of the successful businessman, slim, calmly beautiful, and self-assured. Her movements, her gestures were well considered. She lent grace and beauty to the parties given by her husband; she was an excellent housekeeper, a model mother, and an obedient wife, devoted to her good husband.

Her life flowed along in a single, unchanging mode, although in recent years the volume of her husband's work had grown, and the number of business trips he undertook at home and abroad had increased. His business had grown to such an extent that she rarely saw him. The children grew bigger and went to school. She had less say in their supervision, because care of them was entrusted to a German nanny born in Cairo. The nanny consistently refused to let anyone come between her and her children—as she called them—even if that person were their own mother, and even if seeing them

gave their mother more joy and happiness than anything else on earth.

And suddenly Rushdi had burst into her life! She had seen him at a party where her husband was the center of attention. It wasn't the first time she had seen him. In fact, she had often seen him; he was a well-known personality in the world of literature and music. But she couldn't remember his ever having attracted her attention, or her ever having thought about him separately from the other people she had met. Even when she had greeted him, she had merely nodded from a distance. She couldn't remember ever having shaken his hand. So what on earth made it impossible, on that particular day, for her to take her eyes off him? What new feature in him had attracted her? And why had his eyes constantly searched her out, not letting her escape, as if he were trying to hypnotize her, plunging with her into the abyss, making her realize how heavy her body felt, how worn her nerves were, and how much she wanted to relax!

Things moved quickly after that day. They moved in a way that made her forget herself and her life and her husband and her children, until she no longer saw anyone but him. He had opened her eyes to the secret of life—a secret closed to every woman, so that she should discover it with her husband, the man who held sway over her life.

Rushdi was the man who had made her aware of her femininity, and then she had lost her balance and reason; she had surrendered control of her life to him.

What would happen to her husband if he lost her? He would be sad for a little while, then he would be whipped up into the whirlwind of work and forget her, like a

phantom that had passed through his life and vanished. He wasn't even aware of her existence; she was like a piece of furniture that he was used to seeing in its usual place. If he found the place empty, he would feel a lump in his throat, but it wouldn't be long before he consigned her to oblivion . . . And what about her children? How could her heart ever agree to leave them? With whom would she leave them? In fact, they had grown up and didn't need her anymore, and there was someone there to look after them and to provide them with the necessities of life.

She wondered if she was deceiving herself. Was it possible for her children to replace her with that nanny? Had her affection so dried up that she thought the necessities of life were all that those two little darlings wanted in the way of care?

Maybe they would be sad when she left, but they would surely forget her: the hearts of children are easily impressed and quick to forget. It was better for her to leave a good memory of their life together in her children's hearts, before deprivation made her lose her equanimity and pour her hatred out over them—if she let Rushdi slip away from her.

In any event, she wouldn't be able to continue to live like this now that she had tasted the sweetness of love. And even if she wanted to, Rushdi wouldn't agree to it. He was mad about her. He presented her with a choice: either they ran away together and got married, once she had demanded a divorce from her husband, or else he would leave the country and wander about, because jealousy gnawed at his heart and tortured his soul when

he pictured her with someone else. He wouldn't be happy until she had become his, heart and soul.

What should she do? She was caught between two fires—her children and her love! But would she be able to face life after him, if she let him go?

No, no, she couldn't face it. Nor could she lead a double life any longer. And if she didn't enjoy her life now, how miserable it would be then! She would be no more than the remains of a woman; every mouthful she ate, every garment she wore would be pathetic!

Yes, she would become the remains of a woman. Any woman who lost her heart and her nerves and her emotions was nothing but remains! A body without a soul, a corpse crawling but lifeless! That frightened her. The years she had already lost were enough for her to want to start all over, before she wasted the blossom of her youth and the fragrance of her life.

The children were asleep, and her husband was away on one of his trips. She told the nanny she would be away for three days at her aunt's in Tanta, and then she left, carrying a suitcase with some of her clothes in it. She urged the nanny to take good care of the two children until she came back.

She left in a hurry, as if someone were chasing her. She threw herself into the first cab she found and told the driver to hurry to the station in time for the eight o'clock evening train.

He had gone to Alexandria two days earlier to make preparations for a long stay. Although the hard thinking of those two days had exhausted her, she had become all the more convinced that she had no life without him and that it was futile to think of turning back. That time had

confirmed to her beyond doubt that it was impossible to break the relationship—so let whatever was coming come!

The short hours of the journey seemed like an age. Her thoughts focused on a single unchanging point: the moment of meeting—although she couldn't prevent painful pricks of conscience from piercing her now and again, as she imagined the state of her children when they faced the new day without jumping onto her bed and delighting her with kisses and hugs and laughter.

Would they be sad? Would they suffer? How long would it be before they stopped missing her and forgot her?

The train stopped. The "yearning one" was waiting for her as usual, burning with longing and agony and passion. As soon as they were ensconced in his car and she was wrapped in his arms, she forgot the children, and the house, and the whole world.

They spent the night locked in each other's arms, as if time had stopped, as if the world would end within the hour.

As she dozed off, she was startled by a picture flashing across her mind. It was her daughter, Najwa, jumping onto her bed to give her the morning hug. But she couldn't respond, she was as stiff as death. She could see her and hear her, but she couldn't speak to her. The girl let out a resounding scream:

"Mama! Mama!"

Then she broke into a painful cry.

She opened her eyes, alarmed. She sat up in the bed and looked around, baffled. Where was she? Where did she belong?

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A thin thread of morning light penetrated the wooden shutter and slid into the middle of the room, which was drowned in darkness. She turned round, and there he was, snoring happily and contentedly, his lips parted in a soft smile.

The events of the previous day crowded into her mind. Without thinking about it, she got out of the bed, hurriedly took off her nightgown and put on her clothes. Then she gathered up her things at random, put them in the suitcase, and wrote a hurried note on a scrap of paper:

“Happiness was not made for people like me . . . Forgive me . . . My children are calling me . . . You wouldn’t be happy living with half a woman . . . I know you . . .”

She looked at him one last time, with an expression that was both sad and determined. Then she went out and closed the door slowly, leaving behind dreams that were unattainable in the face of the reality that called her.

A Man and a Woman

RAFIQAT AL-TABIA

THE TWO OF THEM HAD BEEN STRETCHED OUT TOGETHER since the early hours of the evening. As the night wore on, the light of the bedside lamp grew bright around them. She was contrasting her dream with the miserable reality of the world:

“We are, then, *a man and a woman*, weaving love from old times. But neither your smiles, which I cherish, nor my whispers, which you desire, nor my kisses, nor your arms, nor our dreams together, can equal a single tear plucked by pain out of the round eyes set in this sad face, a face drained of all excitement.

“My eyes loved to embrace your picture every day, and memorize your features bit by bit. But one picture which I cut out recently, and the message written under it, have made me forget my joy with you. It was as if I had been brought back to the misery in which every human being is born, to the spontaneous cry that was in my mouth at birth, on the day when my only hope in life was the touch of the hands of the gentle midwife!

“Who are you from now on? Who am I? In my handbag I carry your personal papers—which contain love as *you* know it—and your picture. In your wonderful smile, which I adore, lies the image of the child with the round eyes. The child we used to dream of equally. *This*