

A Mistake in the Knitting

IHSAN KAMAL

I HAD TOLD HER REPEATEDLY THAT I DIDN'T LIKE knitting. It required a lot of patience, which I didn't have, to make a complete garment stitch by stitch. Then she would philosophize and say, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." I also reminded her that since childhood I had been terrible at knitting and excellent at sewing. How nice sewing was! The material was there from the start, and all I had to do to turn it into a complete dress was to sew up the sides and shoulders. But my sister insisted, saying it was now almost a tradition one had to follow: every girl must give her fiancé a sweater she had knitted herself.

"What about a ready-made one?" I asked. "What's wrong with that?"

"He'll feel your affection for him more if you knit it yourself. Also, a ready-made one won't fit him," she answered.

"Then do me a good turn and make it for him yourself. Knitting's easy for you. Think how often you've presented us with your masterpieces!"

"Suzanne, my darling," she said. "Are you really stupid or do you just pretend to be? The woman who first thought of this didn't do it for nothing. When you decide to knit a sweater for your fiancé, making a front

An Arabian Mosaic

and back and two sleeves out of nothing, you'll naturally think of him while you're working, stitch by stitch, and with every stitch he'll get closer to your soul, and his love will steal into your heart."

She was right. As I knitted, I thought of him. But with every stitch, I cursed the day I had met him. When some friends and I heard about the way my mother had got married—which, I discovered, was the same way all their mothers had got married—I felt sorry for her and them. It was not a marriage but a gamble, even though my mother tried to play it down by calling it "an unopened watermelon." Why shouldn't it be "an opened watermelon"?¹ But even we—the few girls who are university educated and claim to be liberated and sophisticated—cut with a knife that reveals only a little bit. We may discover the color, for example, whereas taste, smell, and hardness will remain a secret in the heart of the watermelon. After all, what person reveals all his character to his friends? Even after our engagement, I went out with him for a whole month before I discovered how despicable he was. Yes, he was despicable; I could not describe it otherwise. He said he wanted details of my salary from now on, and when I expressed astonishment, he tried to appear tolerant.

"You can enjoy the months left till our wedding."

"And after that?" I pressed him further. His attitude astounded me.

"The wife's time belongs to her husband and her

¹ This refers to the way in which a watermelon can be bought in the Middle East: either unopened, in which case the buyer does not know if it is ripe, or cut open on the spot, in which case the buyer can refuse it if it is not ripe.

A Mistake in the Knitting

home. If she uses it to do work, the pay goes back to the original owner of the time. The owner of a car, for example, is entitled to the revenue if it's used as a taxi."

I almost felt sick. He tried to be charming, but was it really charm? I may allow a person to rob me, if he steals in soft words. "Entitled," "revenue," "owner," "time," "car," "use"—he wasn't talking, he was throwing bricks, and it wasn't the first time either. On every visit, he had brought a brick to throw at me. Perhaps I hadn't noticed them because they were small, but that day I piled them one on top of the other, and suddenly they turned into a big barrier between us.

I thought seriously about breaking the engagement, although I knew this wouldn't be a simple matter for my father and family. Their roots lay in Upper Egypt, and they clung to certain beliefs. In fact, it wasn't simple for me either. There was my reputation to consider, and the gossip. I knew that kind of gossip very well. I had heard it on previous occasions. I had even taken part in it once—among us, the educated girls. The girl in question had hardly left the room when a female colleague winked.

"She's going to meet *him*, the man who broke the engagement."

"It's unlikely. But then she has to say that."

"I wonder why he left her."

But families and neighbors aren't satisfied with assumptions, they look for certainties; they don't inquire about reasons, they're ready with speculations. Why? Is it because in the marriage game men are the strongest and society is always in the grip of the strongest? Or do they consider man to be a treasure and find it inconceivable

able that a girl who's stumbled on a man would give him up? For some men this is true, but others are worth no more than a straw. Perhaps our society regards a girl as a drowning person who has to hang on even to a piece of straw. And we may indeed be drowning girls: we've left our old traditions and plunged into the sea of life, striking out for the opposite bank—liberation. But it seems we haven't reached it yet. Perhaps our daughters will manage to get there. Our generation is the generation of sacrifice. If only we hadn't left the first bank, despite its emptiness!

Well, when I insisted on not having family supervision and raised objections on the basis of my age and sophistication, I got what I wanted. We began to go out alone, without a chaperon. There was only the promise of marriage, confirmed by two rings. So that gave us quite a lot of scope. Nothing much happened, but who can prove that to people? My mother told me: "From now on every young man will hesitate a hundred times before asking for your hand."

I knew all the difficulties I would have to face even before my mother listed them for me. She looked at things through a magnifying glass. Could it be that she had convinced me? Of course not. It was inconceivable. But when he came to see me the next day, I didn't say anything. I didn't even tell him how angry his views had made me. I pretended I was sad because a movie star I adored had died. Perhaps I was afraid *he* would be the one to break the engagement. It would be a disaster. It seemed my mother had given me her magnifying glass along with her love and jewelry.

I thought I'd knitted enough: my sister had told me the

border had to be ten centimeters deep and assured me the border was the only difficult part; the rest was very easy. But what did I see? A mistake in the middle of the border! The right stitch was where the left stitch should be, and the left where the right should be. How ugly it looked, like a chessboard! But to fix it I had to undo everything above it, about six rows, every one containing more than two hundred stitches that I had strained my eyes to produce. Every time I had completed a row, I had looked at it, reassuring myself that the sweater had grown. Must I now go back and undo everything? And what would happen if his excellency wore a sweater with one mistake in it? It was inconceivable for me to start all over again: I hated knitting, just as I had started hating the sweater's intended owner. But why should I tell him that? Perhaps he had changed his character. Yes, why should I be so negative that I had to withdraw at the first setback?

The next day I went out with him, and when he headed toward the pastry shop, I firmly made him understand that I would never allow myself to be ridiculed in front of the staff there, from the manager down to the waiters, as had happened on previous occasions. He didn't buy a cake, but it was a hollow victory. All the time we sat on the terrace talking, it was clear his views remained as strange as ever.

"They're thieves! Selling a piece of cake for five piasters, when outside it costs half that amount! We'll order tea in exchange for sitting here, and that'll be enough. I'm not bothered if the waiters look at us disapprovingly or the manager objects. Let them go to hell.

Those who buy people's respect by forking out more money are stupid and hypocritical."

I'd tried every argument, but I couldn't convince him. On the other hand, I became convinced—convinced that this was not a positive outlook at all.

Being positive means overcoming obstacles with a view to improving the future. The positive approach encourages one to crush any mountains that stand in the way of the future—as is happening now in Aswan, for example.² But changing a character is an impossible task. Our ancestors rightly said that character leaves the body only after the soul. How on earth did I think I could change him? Take me, for example. Although I was younger and belonged to the so-called weaker sex, could anyone change my values and turn me into a slave of materialism? Impossible! Being positive, in my personal situation, meant courageously and decisively severing the ties that bound our two lives, refusing a marriage that from the outset clearly seemed sure to fail, and choosing a route to happiness that differed totally from his way of life.

"Valentine leaves the earth's orbit and circles in space." I pushed the newspaper aside. I thought it would distract me, but it only increased my anger. I was unable to break through stupid convictions that people had acquired. People *here*, only here. Everywhere else in the world people regard an engagement as a trial period for the two partners and assume that if they break up, it means they lacked mutual understanding. But in our country—or in our conservative circle, to be precise—

² The reference is to the construction of the Aswan Dam.

my mother, for example, said the trial should *precede* the engagement. My God, Mother, how did you arrive at that?! Suppose he were my classmate, even then much of his personality—the very part that concerns the future sharer of his life—would remain hidden from me. How much more so, then, when he was not my classmate! How could he be? He had graduated from the university a year before I joined it. He was a classmate of Afaf's, my spoiled friend who had a relaxed attitude to studying, took two years to complete one year's program, and graduated with me. A few months before her graduation, she introduced me to Shukri Abd al-Aziz. He had used the opportunity provided by his transfer to Cairo to come to the department to register his master's thesis as the first step toward a doctorate. The faculty regulations allowed only those who had obtained at least a grade of "good" to register for postgraduate work, and he tried to overcome this obstacle by making frequent visits to the department.

He saw us every time he came to the department. Afaf seemed to be expecting him to ask her to marry him, but he approached me instead. Our superficial acquaintance meant I knew very little about him, and this little appealed to me—until I discovered that I had misunderstood his behavior and that the truth was quite the opposite of what I assumed. I admired his scholarly ambition in trying desperately to overcome the faculty's regulations—until he told me sarcastically that he hadn't given a thought to ambition or intellectual status, and that his only motive was the high salary the degree would bring. I also liked his unselfishness and his lack of that trait, latent in most Middle Eastern men, which pushes

An Arabian Mosaic

them to try to appear superior to their wives. That was when he started introducing me to all his friends as a doctoral candidate. I realized finally that he was motivated by vanity. I was even wrong about the way I thought he viewed me, the woman who would share his life. I believed he preferred intelligence and character to beauty, for there was no denying that Afaf was much prettier than I. In fact, I was merely a more lucrative deal, because of my expected degree. So I started to hate the degree, having originally felt so enthusiastic about it. His calculating attitude was not something I figured out after getting to know his personality: he revealed it to me by a few slips of the tongue.

How could I marry a person I didn't respect? How could I live with him day after day, year after year, when our views clashed every time we met? Married life does not consist only of the meeting of two bodies, or else we would be just like animals: it would be enough for a male, any male, to meet a female, any female. Married life is first and foremost a rapprochement of the character and mind of a man and a woman as they set out together on the long journey of life.

What about the other option? Gossip, rumors, and the conjectures of envious people. As long as I was successful in my study and work, there would be no escape from them. I had female neighbors and relatives whose scholastic scores were not high enough to get them to university, or who went there and then dropped out—to the relief of their mothers, who said: "Our daughters won't be working alongside male colleagues!" And my cheerful, outgoing companions, from whom I would maintain a reserved and dignified distance, would all talk about

A Mistake in the Knitting

"his deception," even those who didn't dislike me. Everywhere I would encounter burning question marks in the eyes of my male colleagues and scorn in the eyes of my female colleagues. No sooner would I turn my back than pairs of heads would draw together and the chitchat would begin. Our liberation has only been external. Our thoughts still wear the veil.

What would be my own position on all this? Should I rise above all the gossip and toss it aside with indifference, or should I try to clarify things to everybody?

Why does the human soul have a predilection for mocking other people's misfortune? Why did fate yesterday cause that white-suited old man with the elegant fly-whisk to fall down in front of our balcony? When he got up from the muddy ground, his suit was spotted like a leopard's skin. Everybody on the street and on our balcony burst out laughing. Wouldn't it have been more appropriate for them to show sorrow? And when a wedding engagement is broken, either by the woman or the man, doesn't it imply the failure of a plan that the woman dreamed would bring her happiness? One would think, then, that she would receive commiseration, sympathy, and cooperation from those around her. But I too had an excuse for attaching importance to gossip. Regardless of how developed and civilized we have become, we are unable to ignore people's views or what they say about us, as long as we live among them. I had even read in foreign novels about people who were stricken by despair or ridden with complexes because of unfair rumors.

After that little incident at the pastry shop, the scales were balanced, although the scale for breaking the engagement was beginning to tilt downwards. So I was still

hesitating when he left after visiting me yesterday evening. I didn't quite end our relationship, but I didn't go out with him either. I was like someone who has encountered some danger on the road in front of him, but who knows the road behind him is not clear either, and who chooses to stand still, in the middle of the road. Yet nothing in the world can stand still like that. Even the knitting in my hands was growing.

If that piece of wool had become so dear to me, then it's no wonder psychologists ascribe a mother's love for her children to her efforts in carrying and bearing them, and then in serving and caring for them. I looked at the knitting fondly. It had come into existence through a lot of effort involving the collaboration of my hands and eyes. It was also a big secret. He hadn't seen the sweater in my hands until yesterday. Before that I had attempted to hide it, wanting it to be a surprise. I no longer cared. Of course he had to express his joy.

"You're making it yourself? That's wonderful! You can't imagine how much cheaper it is than the ready-made ones!"

In spite of his "encouragement," I was still working on the sweater this morning. Alone. I no longer felt bored, sitting by myself. I worked in complete silence and a deep serenity that were hardly disturbed by the friction of the needles or the movement of the ball of wool. When I pulled the thread, the ball jumped around, like a happy, lively bird. The needles worked by themselves, or so it sometimes seemed to me. Like two magician's batons, their touch changed the loose thread into a solid weave. In my mind they resembled a writer's pen, creating a story from separate words, or a compos-

er's quill, combining scattered tunes into a symphony. The needles embraced each other, then disengaged, only to embrace again. They could not be separated. The woollen weave united them like an inescapable destiny. And they were content with their interconnected destiny. I heard no violent clash when they met, only a soft rustling, like a light kiss. The bird on the thread continued to dance in spite of the approaching end. It was as if it were happy to give its blood, drop by drop, so that a love story or symphony could be written. How far I still was from all that—at the other end of the world! He was delighted about the sweater and showed a lot of appreciation for my having made it, just as you predicted, sister. But you meant one thing, and he meant another . . . I wished my sister would come to see us, so that I could argue it out with her in front of the Lord in heaven. She had made me struggle for nothing . . . Talk of the devil!

She came along, cheerful and carefree. "Amazing!" she exclaimed. "You've almost finished the front."

"Yes. Yesterday I decreased the stitches for the arms, and now I'm starting to decrease for the collar."

I laid it down in front of her, and she looked at it closely, delighted. Suddenly she let out a great groan of dismay.

"There's a mistake in the middle of the border," she said mournfully.

"Yes," I answered with indifference. "I only noticed it after several rows."

"You have to undo everything until you get there," she said, and acted on her words. She drew out the needles, then pulled the thread. Her action so startled me that for a while I just looked at her, taken aback,

An Arabian Mosaic

unable to speak or move. Finally I awoke from my amazement, rushed at the sweater, and tried to snatch it from her.

“No, no,” I screamed. “You can’t do that! I worked so hard on it and put so much effort into it. I slaved day after day, night after night. You can’t destroy all that in one second.”

“It’s your fault!! You should have gone back to the row with the mistake in it as soon as you discovered it—while you were still at the beginning—so you could do it again correctly. How can you build anything on faulty foundations? Once you discovered the serious flaw, you should never have gone on. Never!”

My Wedding Night

ALIFA RIFAAT

THE DREAM OF MY YOUTH WAS THE DREAM OF EVERY virgin whose body youth had touched with magic and exhilarated, turning it into a luscious figure intoxicated with desire . . . and whose songs revolved around the moment when she would give herself and all her delights to her chosen man on her wedding night.

And here was my wedding night. It arrived to find me sad, my spirit broken, my wings cut off, my heart moaning in fear and beating in confusion. In front of me a dancer was swaying, moving slowly on the floor to the rhythm of the loud music and the beating of the reverberating drums. She clashed her cymbals, and all the guests became enraptured and swayed with her, happy. I was the only one annoyed by her shameless nakedness and the dissolute story she was telling, her belly trembling till the tremor of ecstasy seized those surrounding her, and they began to clap their hands in excitement. I was the only one who was feeling upset, so upset that I was twisted in pain and had difficulty breathing. Perhaps the fear that gripped me had sparked my imagination.

Roses surrounded me, forming a large bouquet around my seat and the seat of the man to whom I was being given. But this throne over which I presided seemed to me nothing but a bier packed with frozen roses. Sud-