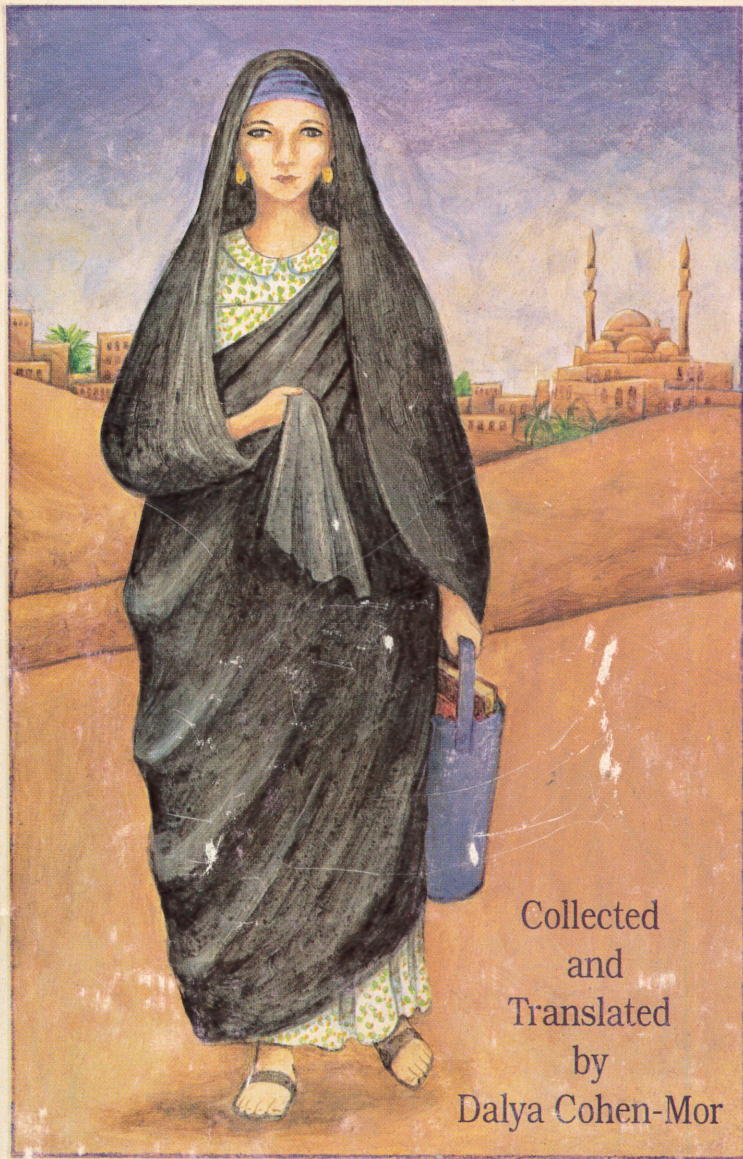


AN ARABIAN MOSAIC

Short Stories by Arab Women Writers



Collected
and
Translated
by
Dalya Cohen-Mor

know what made her stand motionless there, instead of rushing inside with the others.

She touched the dress and felt reassured. And yet, who could explain to her at that moment why she had bought the new autumn dress? And if anyone there saw it, how could she explain to them that she felt reassured holding her new spring dress?

Another bomb fell, followed by rockets. The screaming and crying intensified. She held the bag with the dress in it tightly. The fighters came through the door of the building. They were wearing combat clothes. They had long beards, and on their shoulders they carried a variety of weapons. One of them rushed toward her and shouted: "Get inside the shelter! Can't you hear? Can't you see? Why are you standing here like a statue? The shelter's the only place that can protect you!" He raised his Kalashnikov and shot into the air. The panic increased, and the sound of the screaming rose up to her, but she remained motionless. The fighter became angrier. He approached her, yelling: "I told you to come down! Into the shelter! What are you doing here? Move! What's that you're clutching so nervously? Give it to me and come down!" She held the bag with her autumn-spring dress more tightly and didn't answer. The screaming rose up again, and again he yelled and shot into the air. He looked at her furiously and advanced toward her. But then she shouted: "This is my future, my autumn, my spring. I'm hanging on to it, and what I'm most afraid of is that you'll take it away from me!"

The Persian Rug

HANAN AL-SHAYKH

WHEN MARYAM HAD FINISHED ARRANGING MY HAIR IN two plaits, she put her finger to her mouth and licked it, then passed it over my eyebrows and sighed: "Oh, your eyebrows are so untidy!" She then turned quickly to my sister and said: "Go and see if your father has finished praying." No sooner had my sister gone than she came back and whispered: "Not yet." Imitating him, she stretched out her hands and lifted them to the sky. I didn't laugh as usual, and neither did Maryam. Instead, she took the scarf from the chair, covered her hair with it, and tied it quickly at her neck. Then she slowly opened the cabinet and took out her handbag. She put it under her arm and reached out her hands to us. I held one, and my sister held the other. We understood that we had to walk on tiptoe like her. With bated breath we went out through the open door of the house. We went down the steps, first turning our heads to the door then to the window. When we reached the last step, we started running, not stopping until the long narrow lane had disappeared from view and we had crossed the street. There Maryam stopped a cab.

We were all behaving the same way because we were afraid. Today we were going to see my mother for the first time since her divorce from my father, and he had

sworn he would never let her see us again. This was because just hours after their divorce, news had come that she was going to marry the man she had loved before her family forced her to marry my father.

My heart was pounding. I knew this was not because of the fear and the running, but because I was worried about the meeting and the confusion I expected to feel. I was reserved and conscious of my shyness. However much I tried, I couldn't show my emotion, even to my mother. I wouldn't be able to throw myself into her arms and smother her with kisses, or hold her face in my hands, as my sister would, and as it was her nature to do. I had thought a long time about this, ever since Maryam had whispered to me and my sister that my mother had come back from the south and that we were going to visit her in secret the next day. At first I thought I would force myself to behave just like my sister. I would stand behind her and imitate her mechanically. Following blindly, as they say. But I knew myself. I knew myself too well. However much I tried to force myself, and however much I thought in advance about the do's and the don'ts, when the time came I would forget what I had resolved and stand looking at the floor, my eyebrows knitted even more closely together. Caught in this situation, I wouldn't despair; I would beg my lips to open into a smile—but it would be no use.

When the cab pulled up at the entrance to a house with two columns topped by two lions of red sandstone, I felt a surge of joy and momentarily forgot my fear and shyness. It delighted me that my mother lived in a house with an entrance flanked by two lions. I heard my sister imitating a lion roaring. I turned to her enviously and

saw her stretch her hands up and try to grab one of the lions. I thought to myself: "She's always so uncomplicated, so full of joy. She stays joyful even at the most critical moments. Here she is now, with no misgivings about this meeting."

When my mother opened the door and I saw her, I found I didn't have to wait for anyone else to move. I ran and threw myself into her arms, before my sister, and closed my eyes. It was as if all the joints in my body had fallen asleep after a long period of insomnia. I smelled the same old scent of her hair, and discovered for the first time how much I missed her. I wished she would come back to live with us—in spite of the love and care my father and Maryam were giving us. My thoughts wandered, recalling her smile when my father agreed to divorce her. A religious sheikh had intervened after she had threatened to douse herself in petrol and set fire to herself if the divorce didn't take place. I felt dazed from the smell of her—a smell I remembered so well. I thought about how much I missed her, even though when she had left us, with tears and kisses, we had gone back to our game in the narrow alley by our house while she had hurried off behind my uncle and climbed into the car. And when night had come, for the first time in a long time we didn't hear her quarreling with my father; silence had reigned over the house, disturbed only by Maryam's sobbing. She was related to my father and had lived with us in the house ever since I could remember.

Smiling, my mother ushered me aside so that she could hug and kiss my sister, and hug Maryam again, who had started to cry. I heard my mother say tearfully to her: "Thank you very much!" She wiped her tears away with

her sleeve and, contemplating my sister and me again, exclaimed: "May God keep away the evil eye. How big you've grown!" Then she put her arms around me, and my sister put her arms around my mother's waist, and we all began to laugh when we discovered it was impossible for us to walk. We reached the inner room, and I felt sure her new husband was inside, because my mother said with a smile: "Mahmud loves you very much and wishes your father would let me have you, so that you could live with us and become his children too." Laughing, my sister answered: "You mean we're going to have two fathers?" Still dazed, I laid my hand on my mother's arm, proud of my behavior, proud of having escaped from myself and from my fettered hands and from the prison of my shyness—all without effort. I recalled the meeting with my mother, how I had spontaneously thrown myself into her arms—something I used to think was impossible—and how I had kissed her so hard that I had closed my eyes.

Her husband wasn't there. I opened my eyes, stared at the floor, then froze. Confused, I looked at the Persian rug that lay on the floor, then I looked long and hard at my mother. She didn't understand my look. She went to a cabinet, opened it, and threw me an embroidered blouse. Then she went to a decorated dressing table, took out an ivory comb painted with red hearts, and gave it to my sister. I stared at the Persian rug and trembled with resentment and anger. Again I looked at my mother. She interpreted my look as longing and affection, because she put her arms around me and said: "You must come every other day, and you must spend Fridays with me."

I remained frozen. I wanted to push her arm away. I wanted to sink my teeth into her white forearm. I wanted to go through the moment of meeting all over again: she would open the door, and I would stand as I should, looking at the floor, my eyebrows knitted together. My gaze was now resting on the Persian rug; its lines and colors were imprinted on my memory. I used to stretch out on it while studying, and find myself so close to it that I would examine its pattern. This looked like slices of red watermelon, one next to the other. When I sat on the sofa, the slices changed into combs with fine teeth. The bouquets of flowers around the four sides were purple, the color of the cockscomb. At the beginning of every summer my mother used to put mothballs on the rug—as on the rest of the rugs—then roll it up and put it on top of the cabinet. The room would look dull and sad without the rug, until autumn approached. Then my mother would climb to the roof of the house with the rug, spread it out, pick up the mothballs—most of which had dissolved from the heat and humidity of the summer—sweep the rug with a small broom, and leave it on the roof. In the evening she would fetch it down and spread it out on the floor, and I would feel overjoyed. With the rug's brighter colors, life would return to the room. But a few months before my mother's divorce, the rug had disappeared after being spread out on the roof in the sun. When my mother climbed up in the afternoon to bring it down and didn't find it, she called my father. It was the first time I saw him turn red in the face. When they came down from the roof, my mother flew into a rage. She questioned the neighbors, who swore, one after the other, that they hadn't seen the rug. Suddenly my

mother cried, "Ilya!" We were all speechless—my father, myself, my sister, and our men and women neighbors. I found myself shouting: "How can you say that? It can't be true!"

Ilya was a half-blind man who frequented all the houses of the neighborhood to repair cane chairs. When our turn came, I would come home from school and find him sitting on the stone bench, his red hair shining in the sun and a pile of reeds in front of him. He would stretch out his hand and work the rush with an ease that made weaving seem like the motion of a fish slipping unharmed through the meshes of a net. I would watch him insert the rush in a hole deftly and skillfully, twist it around, and take it out again, until he had formed a circle on the seat of the chair, just like the circles before and after it. The circles were all even and alike, as if his hands were a machine. I was amazed at his speed and dexterity, and at his posture: he sat with his head inclined as if his eyes could see. Once I doubted that he could see nothing but darkness, and I found myself squatting on the ground looking up at his rosy-red face. I saw blurry eyes under his spectacles, and the white line that went through them pierced my heart. I hurried off to the kitchen, where I found a bag of dates lying on the table. I put a heap of them on a plate and gave them to Ilya.

I was still looking at the rug. The picture of Ilya, with his red hair and red face, appeared before my eyes. I saw his hand as he climbed up the steps by himself, as he sat on his chair, as he haggled, as he ate and knew he had finished everything on the plate, as he drank from the jar and the water slipped down into his throat with ease. When he came one noon, calling out "Allah!"

before knocking and entering—just as my father had taught him, in case my mother didn't have her veil on—my mother jumped at him and asked about the rug. He didn't say anything, but made a sound like crying. As he walked away, I saw him stumble for the first time, almost banging against the table. I went up to him and held his hand. He clasped it, and he recognized me by the grip of my hand, because in a voice like a whisper he said to me: "Never mind, girl." Then he turned to leave. When he leaned down to put his shoes on, I thought I saw little tears on his cheeks. My father said: "God will forgive you, Ilya, if you tell the truth." But Ilya walked away, supporting himself on the rails of the stairway. He went down the steps, taking time—unusually—to feel his way along. Finally he disappeared, and we never saw him again.