

Originally appeared in Under the Naked Sky: Short Stories from the Arab World. Denys Johnson-Davies, trans. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004

It Happened Secretly

Amina Zaydan

Everything was gleaming in a rich redness that issued from the flame of the solitary, enormous candle. The half-empty bottle of vodka that looked, with its streamlined shape after the long pillar of its neck, like a compressed globe, with the translucent, blazing liquor, like a live ember exposed to the air that causes it to burn more fiercely, dancing inside it. The same was true of the half-filled glass, which was closer to the candle, on whose sides jutted drops of wax that had no sooner solidified than they began to glow again, following a fresh drop, inflated like a liquid bubble. How beautifully frightening it was alongside the joyous, mature face. He has drawn near to the candle, the bottle, and the glass, on the outer surface of which are nacreous drops of water, their sparkle reflected in his cheerful, blazing eyes as though they had been hewn from some volcanic mountain. Thus the whole face was shown: the baldness that reached back to above the ears, the matted white hair covering his ears and the sides of his neck, his beard and the prominent cheekbones. It was a happy, childlike face on which contradictions

found visible expression, revealing their eternal presence, as though he were reverting back with his soul from the end of his eighty years to the beginning of his years of opening up, this face that has protruded from the darkness and swam and bathed itself so as to be cleansed by the incandescence of the candle and sensuously take into its embrace the half-empty bottle of vodka and the half-filled glass. Behind him stand two men holding billiard cues; they look at him as though they were going to take him off to his final place of rest—but how could such a man cease to exist!

"It's enough for me to see this picture and to touch its colors with the tips of my fingers, to smell it, for a sensation of warmth to flow through me," she said, moving her senses across the oil painting in its white, glassless frame. Small lamps filled the corners with light. Directly behind her, he pressed the light switch and turned it off until she reached the corridor leading to two closed rooms. She pressed the final light switch. She looked at him, meeting head-on his face and thick mustache that covered and hid his upper lip. While avoiding touching him, she said laughing, "It seems that all roads lead to the bedrooms."

From the moment they passed through the front door to the flat it was as though they were crossing into another world, a world able to contain her fear. Recovering her breath, she cast aside the feelings of choking and suffocation she had experienced going up the stairs. She had tried to count them in order to disperse her fear and apprehension, which accompanied the tread of her high heels. She braced herself against the pain in her feet so as not to make a sound as they touched the marble stairs. Even her mind, during the time she was climbing the five flights, could not bear to think beyond standing in front of the wooden door and passing through it. However, all these sensations collapsed and fell stricken to the ground when her hand closed the door and she was enclosed in the flat with its warmth

and its colors, so homogenous to her eyes: the rain-white, the blue, and the sandy yellow. Resting her shoulders against the door, she had turned her head like someone waking up from the unconsciousness of cholera. She was met by the African features of her face reflected in the mirror, flushed from the effect of holding her breath as she went up the five flights; also, behind her face, were reflected a number of wooden shelves, on which were ranged collections of poetry. "Nizar . . . Nizar . . . Nizar . . . al-Shinnawi . . . Dante . . .," she read as she looked them over, moving the books with the tip of her index finger.

He motioned her to enter the living room. She had, however, moved aside the curtaining made of metal strips of colored circles and squares to find herself in the kitchen. She went through another door, where she faced the two closed bedrooms. Putting his arms around her shoulders, he said, "Rania's room—and this is my bedroom."

She went up two steps covered in blue carpeting and crossed through a low, narrow archway that opened onto the living room, which contained two couches and three large armchairs with bulky cushions. She came to a stop in the middle of the room and looked around at the paintings.

"Do you feel safe living among them?" she said. "Aren't you frightened they'll come out of their frames one day? They almost speak out and confirm that they'll come alive."

He was standing by her, contemplating them as though in the company of a child at a display of toys. It pleased him when she seated herself on the sofa facing the dining room, placing the soft blue cushion on her rounded knees, then resting her elbows on the cushion. He was excited by the sight of her clasping her fingers under her chin, and he let his gaze fall on her body, observing its curves and contours as he searched for a way to come to terms with her.

"It's the first time I've been in a house that doesn't have a woman in it," she said.

"That's the best thing about it," he said, turning his head as though following the flight of a fly, for he did not miss the presence of a woman, other than that of his daughter, who was being brought up by her grandmother.

"How do you live," she said, "without a woman chattering away and filling the rooms with her bustle?"

"I can fill the house with them in minutes."

"The smell of a house is different when there's a woman about."

"In every corner of the house I breathe in the smell of them. I made love to a woman against the door of the flat and to another beside the stove so that boiling drops of tea were falling on us. The world is never short of them." Then he added, "And another one insisted on lying on the dining room table. Only a few were patient enough to wait before going into the bedroom—although all roads lead to it. . . . I have known around three hundred women, and they were all virtuous wives and society ladies."

"I am with the two of you, listening and seeing." She laughed a lot as she repeated this phrase written on a marble slab placed above a piece of furniture in the shape of a black hut with several openings for video equipment, television, and a turntable. She got to her feet and rummaged through the records. She took one out of its sleeve.

"Do you mind?" she asked as she put it on.

"Not at all, just as you like. I haven't listened to a single record since I brought them from Russia in the seventies."

She stamped her foot on the floor covered in blue carpeting before the record moved under the needle. She went on looking at the Russian paintings until she stopped at the picture of the old man and the vodka—as she had named it.

"Why did you travel to Russia?"

"I was on a training course for a year."

"Training for what?"

"For war."

She looked at him. "Then you fought in '73?"

"And in Yemen and in '67."

"In what branch?"

"Infantry—I was a sniper."

"Then you're a retired sniper—you live with the eye and heart of a sniper."

"Yes, I had thought that I would wake up in the middle of the day and be freed of this mold in which the military had cast me, but I found myself clinging to the mold and burying myself further still in its shell."

"Did you kill anyone?"

"Yes, many are the heads I've cropped."

"Do you remember the first one?"

"Are we going to spend the time talking?" he said, coming up to her and trying to embrace her from behind after she had put on the light in front of the last picture in the corridor leading to the bedroom.

Like some mythical creature, he gathered himself together and gazed at a world lit up by light switches. The darkness retreated, defining the universe. Pelted onto its surface were dots of colored lights from the ships lying in the Canal. She stared at them until the lights danced before her eyes. She breathed in deeply the odor of washed buildings and of the earth moist with drops of rain and that of waves crashing against the walls of the Canal.

The air was saturated with these smells and her senses gulped down this strong mixture, breath by breath.

"From here you can see the spit of the Canal, the gulf, and

the eastern shore, and from the kitchen window the whole of the Ataqa mountain. When the sun first falls on it, it appears golden, later silver, and finally it tucks itself up for the night. You live wholly in the heart of things," she said, elated, as her words danced in the empty space before her. She would have liked to cast aside the abstinence of her thirty-nine years alongside her shoes, and set off at a run to catch up with what remained to her of her life as a woman.

A gust of cold air struck against her and she closed the glass window. Gazing out, it was as if the light of a candle were dancing on the darkness of the glass surface. She let down the blind of metal-blue matting.

The smoke curled up in endless, eddying circles from the earthenware mugs of tea. He placed the tin tray on the rectangular table, whose glass surface was buried under a motley collection of crystal ashtrays, china vases, and albums of color photographs. Flipping through the pictures, which were all of his daughter in bathing costume, in school uniform, in a speckled, sand-colored uniform like that worn by commando shock troops, or of her dancing and holding a baton, she said, "It seems you're enthralled by your daughter."

"She's all that is left of me."

"In addition to the medals and the records and the oil paintings—and the smell of women."

He turned away his head as though he were avoiding a strong smell when his eye alighted on a picture in which a blonde woman was standing beside his daughter, a woman of a strong, unquenchable beauty.

"This is your wife—she's beautiful. So why did you divorce her?"

"I'll never go into that," he said, gathering up the albums from her lap and closing them.

"But she doesn't look like her daughter," she said, casting a look at the final picture.

He had gone back to regarding the picture in silence, searching for lost aspects of similarity between the girl and her mother. Then he brought the two covers of the album together with a resounding bang.

"Where is she now?"

"She lives with her mother's mother."

"I mean your wife—the one you divorced."

"In Abu Dhabi."

"And what does she do in Abu Dhabi?"

"She works."

"As a teacher?"

"No."

"What does she do, then?"

"I don't know and I'm not interested to know."

"Why are you upset?"

"I don't want to talk about her."

"Does she frighten you so much?"

He looked at her with alert, reddened eyes. He closed them and rubbed his eyelids with his fingertips.

Through her cold nostrils a warmth permeated to her limbs. Her feeling of excitement calmed down. Smoke rose up gently and was dispersed in the empty space. He held out his lighted cigarette to her. The white smoke left her mouth in a thick cloud. There clung to her throat a feeling of bitterness she had first tasted with Sumayya, her cousin, in the laundry room on the rooftop when she had sneaked a cigarette and had believed that the bitterness was a punishment for her; thus this bitterness was forever mixed up with feelings of guilt.

Coming close to her, he passed the tip of his tongue over her lips, savoring the taste of sweetened tea and the bitterness of the

cigarette. She saw the abstinence of her thirty-nine years lying beside her shoes. Without resistance or argument, she yielded without any sense of regret; she embraced his kiss as though it were the first religion vouchsafed to her.

He put back the glass of tea and the cigarette, then took up her glass and let her rise to her feet to fiddle around in the drawers of the black wooden cave: cassettes, sex films and films of private parties, obscene china and ivory figurines of naked women and black men, and miniature cedar trees and date palms.

She opened the crystal glass of the cupboard opposite the dining table. His medals and badges were scattered over the shelves under a thin layer of dust.

"Why did you fight?" she asked.

"Duty."

"Duty for the sake of duty . . ."

She took hold of a metal plaque inscribed in gold lettering.

"Major-General Mohamed Hamza . . . who's this Mohamed Hamza?"

"My brother."

"So the family's full of fighters—no scholars and no thinkers."

"In war the brain doesn't operate, in fact it is done away with when faced by duty."

"Don't say duty, rather say that war is a legacy that one inherits."

"This brother of mine is in charge of a governorate with a million people."

"And why didn't you become a governor?"

"What I did in the war was the equal of being twenty governors."

"You fight and you govern and you make love and you make sons who are copies of yourselves and dance to your history—all alike. Time retrogresses."

"You won't understand the life of a fighter unless you yourself have fought. You won't realize what it means for me to return from the front. I divest myself of my authority with my military uniform, just as I discard the role of leader alongside the bed. I leave it to my wife to lead me to it, which is when I know that there is another man who leads her there." She tried not to show sympathy for the distracted intonations of his voice.

"It seems," she said, "that the fighting man is a sadist in warfare and a masochist in bed. And in governing? How do you think he is in governing?"

"Of necessity he'll be all of that together."

From two silver swords crossed at the middle came a reflection of light that struck at her eyes. The small medal, laid out inside the box lined outside with blue velvet and inside with white satin, was shiny despite the scattered grains of dust.

The picture of her husband swung in front of her like a pendulum. She saw him half-naked, half-covered with his white shroud as though she had listened to the early morning sounds that remind her of him: the crowing of cocks, the fluttering of sparrows' wings above the bedewed eucalyptus tree. She came to, as though a long, rattling scream had burst out of her chest and throat.

She closed the glass and collapsed beside him like a dried seed of three thousand years slipping down toward a pool of water.

With her husband's death she had realized that there was no longer time for the sensation of pain. She had gathered up his framed photographs and belongings and crammed them into an old box, which she had placed at the bottom of a chest that would be forever closed. She had not spoken about him to her two daughters. She had buried his memory in the same way he himself had been buried, just as the fence with which he had

encircled her had become tattered and torn. He no longer came to the house with folded newspaper and empty mind, searching around in the boxes of condiments, counting the bags of meat and chicken, handling the childhood of his daughters with such severity, and examining her clothes before she went out to make sure no hair had slipped from her headcloth and that her dress was long enough. She had been freed from all that, though her awareness of this freedom had become narrowly circumscribed during the ten years since his death, for she had not known the ways in which her freedom could be utilized.

"Am I now exercising my freedom?" she inquired of herself in astonishment.

"This is your natural right in life—to live in the manner that pleases you."

He imagined that it was the years of being a widow that had thrown her at him. He was not aware that her sense of time, which appeared on the whole faster than his own, broken up as it was into moments and days, was what had made her cling to him. She had been doubtful whether he was the sort that would truly please her. Always she yearned for a real shaking-up when, waking as usual, she would find the boundaries of her city had become too restricted for her and that she was no longer in harmony with her two daughters, her surroundings, and her family. So she stands outside her house as she sells it and receives the money after loading her necessities into a large, antiquated car, when everything around her appears chaotic, even her way of dressing, her hair, and her things piled up behind the car, with her two daughters leaping about around her. Then the moment swallowed up this picture she was describing to him as though she were recounting to him some crucial dream, as one of his hands undid the large buttons on her dress and the other passed over her face and lips.

They were like two hedgehogs clutching each other, and they remained like that, so that each could not but harm the other. He was harmed by the essence of his own weakness, while she was harmed by her feeling that she had brought him to this weakness. She turned to him as she was opening the door of his flat, at the moment when he raised his face to her so that they might say together, "What has happened today must remain a secret."