

Haifa ABUALNADI**Propositions****Coffee**

His coffee lasts. It's what he starts his mornings with, early, and then he drinks half a cup in the mid-afternoon. It keeps him company. Maybe the smell of it fresh is the reason he keeps sipping it, even after it's gone cold. Or maybe he has other reasons. Maybe he feels a certain duty, a responsibility toward it. His coffee, poured into a paper cup, changes in color, shape, and size each day, depending on the kiosk he buys it from. They spend the whole day together, and then he leaves it on his desk or the first ledge he sees. He abandons it without a last sip, or even a word of farewell. He leaves the paper cup of coffee and returns to his world, trusting that another one will be waiting for him in another kiosk tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and the day after that.

No-show

The two of them were standing, she observing the lines at the corners of his eyes, when coffee spilled on his black coat. When he smiles, every part of him unfolds itself: the lines around his bright eyes emerge, his shoulders tremble. His features betray a nascent, tender desire to laugh. The spilled coffee formed a line of wobbly droplets that would leave a smell and dark stains if he didn't wipe them off. He looked annoyed, maybe because his coat was still new. They'd been talking about something or other; all she remembered was that it had to do with the color blue. Were they speaking about the sea, the sky, or the bed sheets she didn't dare mention?

He had shaken his arm, and the coffee flew off.

Maybe this happened after her hand brushed his, as she passed him his coffee in its paper cup. She was distracted, but he had remedied this by remarking on the way her eyes shone. Suddenly in that moment, she felt that "something is being written inside me." He confidently told her that she would write about his coffee. How did he know? She put her hand in her purse to pass him a tissue, but he turned it down. "He must keep a tissue in his pocket," she thought, making excuses for him.

This was what happened during their brief encounter by the roadside. In her heart she felt confident, although she didn't dare utter anything aloud. And right then he spoke, hastily: "See you tomorrow."

She fell silent, trying to hold on to the next tomorrow.

He was incredibly sincere,
so sincere that he never showed up.

Refresh

His email took its time to arrive. There must have been a problem with the Internet around the world, or a glitch that affected both his computer and phone, or maybe there'd been an emergency and he couldn't text. Deep down, she knew quite well that *he* was the one taking his time, and that the Internet was just fine, no problems at all. Even so, she couldn't resist the temptation of hitting

the 'Refresh' button at the top of the page. She clicked, held her breath, and waited. She clicked again, hoping for something to change. She shut her eyes tightly, counted to ten, and opened them. As usual: no new messages. She felt disappointed. Then other options at the top of the page tempted her, and she decided to select the most recent message he'd sent her, click the box next to it, and then 'Mark as Unread.' She did this fully confident that, by doing so, she could revive the way she felt before, the excitement of waiting,

the glow in her eyes,

her heart beating faster,

her cold hands: this is what happened the moment she clicked 'Refresh' one last time, wanting to believe that a new message from him had just arrived.

Brownies With a Taste of Longing

What he didn't know was that while he was far away, and she was swept up with longing and a desire for him to gather her in his angular arms, she baked desserts: her companions amidst his absence and indifference. Sifting the flour, she dreamt of him reaching for her. Her body had pores as fine as those in the sieve, which took on his scent from the first time they met. She confessed that he was white and plain like flour, in an incomprehensible way, though she felt that with this observation, she was punishing him for something over which he had no control. When they met, his body had the soft texture of almost-melted butter. His eyes were like semi-sweet chocolate chips. Why semi-sweet? Because full sweetness could only be achieved when his almond-shaped eyes received her gaze. While measuring a cup of semi-sweet chocolate chips, she envied his deadly lashes, remembered the line of his brows, and drowned in his eyes. She poured the chips into the butter that was melting over low heat, and her heart burned even brighter. She swirled the chocolate brown with the butter, and blending them together reminded her of their first kiss. She tried to distract herself from this line of thought, though, because the pounding of her heart made her stir the batter faster. She did not forget to turn off the burner.

She beat the batter until it became thick, dense, and heavy. She felt her heart grow heavier too, the more she stirred it; the thick mixture wasn't doing her any favors. She mentally reviewed the ingredients for what she was making, and realized that the time for sugar had arrived. She added a cup of white sugar to the batter and began to stir it again, discovering that as the granules of fine sugar dissolved, the batter slowly became less thick. This was precisely when she paused to think about the kisses he showered on her, how she blushed and her eyes shone and her heart filled with the joy of a rainbow, how before she'd known it he'd buried her in his arms and whispered in her ear, "Such are kisses, darling, you catch them as they come."

Meanwhile, her subconscious summoned his scent. She hadn't known how to describe it before, but now realized it was vanilla. She opened the bottle, took a deep whiff, and poured about a teaspoon of it into the batter. The scent encircled and surprised her; she felt like a young girl delighted as her colorful dress was ruffled by the wind.

She opened pictures of him on her phone and zoomed in on one, so she could swim in his almond-shaped eyes, and then remembered that she needed to crush half a cup of unshelled almonds. She would add them and a cup of semi-sweet chocolate chips to the batter in the Pyrex dish, and mix it all together with the passion of a lover whose heart never stops racing. Only then did she realize that she didn't need the recipe to guide her. All she needed to do was look at a photo of him, and she immediately knew all the proper amounts and steps. She almost forgot to take a picture of the batter, after it was mixed but before she'd baked it. She did so with the talent of a professional photographer, and texted it to him with the word "Before." Her message arrived. He read it, but

didn't seem moved to respond. His passivity irritated her. She continued what she was doing anyway, and poured the batter into a circular baking pan. She liked circles because they reminded her of the shape of his heart, even though everything about his body was angular.

It took time for the brownies to bake. She hurried to take them out and cut them when they were done. She took another picture of the brownies, and texted it to him with the word "After." She waited for two things: for him to respond, and for the brownies to cool a bit. The brownies cooled, but he didn't respond. She moved them into a different pan, took another photo, and sent it to him. He ignored her again. She thought: he must be stuck in an endless meeting with demanding officials and pressing issues. The situation in the Ukraine was worrisome, as he'd told her the week before, and as she'd learned from all the newspapers and news channels. She invented a thousand excuses for him and dove into the desserts. Filled with longing, she fell asleep without brushing her teeth, hoping that he would visit her in a dream.

Love Allergy

Of course someone with his prominent position in politics and society wouldn't have a public Facebook account. Maybe he had an account under a pseudonym, one only certain friends and family members knew about, and naturally he didn't count her among them. That made her angry, but at the moment she couldn't do much more than read the things his sister, wife, children, and other family members wrote on their pages. Through what his large family posted, she learned when their weddings, funerals, and special occasions were held. And when he apologized for cancelling a long-awaited date the two of them had arranged, her heart was only consoled if the time he told her he was busy, in his cryptic way, corresponded with his family engagements for the day.

Time was slow. Time was bitter. She tried to dispel her memories of being with him, but they came back to her: in bed, she was with him now, gazing down at his white chest. She tried to remain there, as long as possible, but in vain. A sigh the size of his insomnia (he didn't get the sleep he needed) slipped from her lips. Just there, above his right knee, she bent her leg to feel the heat of his tender skin. She didn't doubt it for an instant: she was in heaven. What life could be greater, loftier, than a bed the size of a cloud. In his arms, she heard his heartbeats racing and pounding; she tried to keep pace with them but couldn't. He was too fast to catch, even when they shared the same bed.

She sent him a text message: "I miss the sound of your voice."

Her message arrived, but no response from him did.

She grew bored of waiting. She rallied all her courage and enthusiasm, disregarded how he would respond if angry, and called him. She let it ring and ring and ring.

She drowned in possible explanations. But because she was flush with love for him, it showed on her face and neck, in little pimples you almost couldn't see except when she was gripped by desire. Her cheeks turned five shades redder than usual. The pimples started to itch and spread in every direction, but she stayed calm when she saw the rash spread. She looked in the mirror and said: "It almost looks like makeup, but this blush is natural." Neither her dignity nor confidence diminished one bit, and she wondered, only half-blaming herself, "Is this a love allergy?"

She grew accustomed to his always being busy and tailored her longing and desire to be alone with him accordingly. Now, she wanted just a passing encounter, an innocent hug, one that might land them—if he could be convinced—sleeping alongside each other in one bed, not even naked or embarrassed. She wanted to make his soul smolder, until she brought him to the edge of pleasure in her name, which he would repeat as they approached the bed. He'd surrender to the flame in her

eyes. And every time he'd try to flee, her desire would quickly seize him, bury itself deeply in him, until his arm cradled her neck, her hand on his chest, his shoulders. And slowly, slowly closed the gap between their lips.

"Leave him before he leaves you."

That sinking phrase rung in her ears with miserable cruelty. She pressed her hands against his, and sang him all the songs of separation. Then she bid farewell to his embrace with a tremble that would be the very last. She gathered up her things from where they'd fallen on the bed.

He Didn't Know That She Knew...

For too long she'd tried to unknit his brows, decipher them as if they were a research paper she was presenting at a conference. Every time she gazed over at his face and eyes, he insisted on maintaining this complexity in his eyebrows. She loved his face; dawn broke over those brows. He saw just her hip, which he wanted to encompass with his right side, and did.

He didn't know that she knew he had three indescribable ways of looking at her. They overwhelmed her any time she lay awake contemplating one of them. And whenever he disappeared, refusing to communicate, these expressions blazed the way to her, fantasies that shimmered and then faded, each and every one.

The First: The time he implied, with a wave of his eager hand, how crazy he was about her, without saying it outright. He opened his eyes wide and imagined her with him, fully, with all her verdant lust and luminosity.

The Second: The time they shared a bed, and he opened his arms like a gate for an embrace, stopping where she hid her surprise: her hands. He made them dance and tickled her, and awakened all her senses. He reconsidered the portals through which he gazed at her, and was ready to devour her face with his limpid eyes, precisely half-closed. Through that heavy-lidded gaze, her image reclined in his mind, and she thought she saw a tear fall from the left corner of one eye. He wasn't pretending to cry; he fiercely denied it, even though he lingered in the space of passion, more attached to these lustful moments than she was. He was intent on not ruining the moment, and urged her to taste his quiet tears. She gathered him in her arms, to distract him from a question about the likely, and unlikely, reason for his tears, especially those that fell from the left corner of his left eye, but she didn't help him find an answer.

The Third: The time he spoke to her on the phone, right after he'd woken up, and before he'd chosen the cup from which he would drink his coffee. He looked at her with an expression that differed only slightly. She saw him. Yes, she saw him. Even though they were talking on the phone. The harder he tried not to acknowledge the yearning in her voice, the more lines of happiness multiplied at the corners of his eyes. Meanwhile her eyes filled with tears every time she thought the call was nearly over; he never let their conversations go on for too long. He'd ask if there was an urgent, pressing reason for her insistent calls, and she'd reply, "Isn't it urgent and pressing that I hear your voice, sweetheart?" When he avoided her question and she heard his mood begin to sour, she'd respond with malice, confusion, and exasperation. He'd inhale three quarters of his cigarette in one remarkably rushed drag, and laugh out the smoke that filled his lungs.

He didn't know that she knew.

It's true, he didn't know. How, then, would she be able to count the number of breaths he took per minute when they talked on the phone? How could she count his heartbeats, when she shared his bed, and chest? Listening intently, fiercely wanting to linger between his racing heartbeats and taste his precious mouth with her tongue.

Well, he didn't know that she knows. That's why he might leave her for days, weeks, or months without checking in on her. Leave her drowning in a rising tide of wild questions, each beginning with the word "Why?" Leave her searching for new ways to lose herself in him. Leave her distracted with a cold paper coffee cup. She stares into it bewildered, using it to guide her to his scent which still lingers in her hands. "It looks like I'm just another paper coffee cup he got used to drinking from for a while, and then grew tired of," she says to herself. "He knows perfectly well how to close the curtains on his stories."

Translated from the Arabic by Elisabeth Jaquette