

Ghada Al-ABSY

Extract from the novel [The Green Shoemaker: Fantasy of Whisper and Scorpions]

## Chapter 1

*A good mold is the mold in which the creator removes himself from the power of the circle, and aims to draw it imperfectly, just like Allah painted the orbits of the universe in the shape of an oval, so there would always be a gap to escape, either by birth or by death.*

### Eclipse

Nothing makes the sun come out quicker than a night full of tales, and I know you are waiting for it--just like we are. Perhaps it is now time to finally tell our story as we want, and as we lived together before, not as they tell it. Now, after everyone is gone, leaving us here with you, we can tell it.

I wish I had saved my sad stories for future days of prosperity, when every woman on the hill has her own window guarded by wind and mint, dismissing the boredom and depression of quiet women, carrying off the smell of frying in large kitchens. Or maybe for when handsome men smoke cigarettes and not hashish, pleasure rather than death. I tried to keep my painful stories for those that never suffered and never experienced the taste of loss. I wanted to be a colorful balloon, released to float leisurely. An oyster shell that breathes through its little scalloped ears, a big soap bubble that lasts for only a minute, not more, catching the surprise it causes in their eyes!

I found myself a maker of shoes and of tales alike, praying every night to bear the making of new soles for children to wear during the holidays. And to be spoken about by ancestors in other times!

My story did not begin when I was born. To be born is a common and a recurring event, one that brings no wonder. However, what happened a few weeks later was not only unique, but perhaps one of a kind. I do not know.

My mother kept telling me how serene and quiet I was. I was "a breath," she said. I think that's how children of the poor are. Their needs are trained very early, and daily. Or maybe on the contrary it is a training for doing without.

Since that incident, I did not stop crying and crying, I complained without words, though no one understood my complaint: my mother kept desperately looking all over my body, tried repeatedly to figure out the reason of her baby's continuous screams, but with no success. The holy month of Ramadan began, and I did not stop crying.

Sleeplessness mapped my little face, my eyelids grew bloated from so much crying, my voice became like duck quacks, and anxious thoughts were playing in my mother's head--perhaps he had been bitten by a scorpion? she thought. No surprise to have been bitten by one if you live on Scorpion Hill! But how do you survive a scorpion bite? No one does. Snakes too live on the hill and have almost become members of its big family. Our boys enjoy hunting, cutting and often skinning them, then eating them fried. The boys tried

the taste of many of the creatures here, dogs, cats--those were presented to them as delicious lamb meat. A mother here in the hill once decided to pick the leaves of a *best* tree: she spread them, then stuffed them as a substitute for tasty grape leave rolls, and it worked! Insects are probably the only things not eaten in the Hill.

My mother took me and walked down the staircase that connects us the city, hoping to find a cure in the courtyard of Sayeda Zeinab, who had visited her in a dream yesterday, shaggy hair held in her hands, wanting to enter our house but unable to.

She met Mabrouka, an old woman who sits in Sayeda Zeinab's courtyard: her tears flowed and she sat me in the woman's lap. In broken language the woman said: He's had a spell cast on him; faith will heal your boy.

But the advice did not work, and my condition did not improve. Feeling completely helpless about what was happening to me, she told my father.

It was the night before the holy day. My father liked working in his workshop that particular evening, making many new shoes. His fingers were pretty fat, long, and dirty with dark varnish. His nails were cracked; the shoes he made were pounded against his chest a thousand times, cracking his breastbone.

My father was not a storyteller, he was a cobbler, yes, the only cobbler on Scorpion Hill. The shoes he made were very ugly, with wide tips that looked like his flattened nose, yet they were solid, like his own huge structure, suited to bear the rigors, stones and dirt of the hill. The heels of the shoes he made were wide and large, just like his lower jaw, and creaked loudly, just like his voice when he speaks.

The mothers of Scorpion Hill used to hold their children's feet by force to try on my father's new shoes. The children cry and scream when they see him, then calm down when their mothers take them home, carrying the shiny new shoes. He watched them then. He used to watch their steps, reassuring himself that the good product of his hands covered well their small bare feet, then opened his big mouth to laugh, a foolish laugh of an idiot, unfitting a man of his shape.

My father used to come home late, his pace heavy and slow, a rude smell of sweat. This was usually when my mother asked about money. He would put all he had in her lap, then go wash his face and hands, not trying to wipe off the varnish stains. He only sat on the stool, surrendering, never complaining, no matter how bad the food looked, no matter how my mother tried to provoke him with her many demands.

When she told him, he picked me up and kept staring at my face, my tears running down my raw-red cheeks. Thinking I was crying because he was holding me and I was scared of him like everyone else, he put me quickly back in her arms. It was difficult for a man like him to understand what is being said to him. He looked at her with puzzled eyes, not knowing what to say. He took all the money he had out of his pocket and gave it to her, as usual. She cried, and cursed him.

I cannot describe my mother. I don't know how to. Only a few days before, she left me at our neighbor's house and took my siblings to buy some clothes for the holiday. She took them down the many stairs to reach the heart of Sayeda Zeinab's neighborhood, then put everybody on the bus headed to Wekalet El-Balah, then stopped at the shop of a salesman in the Canto secondhand market. The salesman called out in an annoying voice: "Anything for two pounds fifty! Come on Ma'am! C'mon Miss!" After dozens of warnings to stick together, mother left the boys by themselves, then kept checking the

goods inside the large cardboard boxes, trying to find something that would fit their size. Her black hair veil kept sliding down her back, leaving her head bare under the glare of the sun.

Buyers' hands were grabbing everywhere, fights constantly breaking out around the two-fifty box. After a long while my mother finally managed to come out of this hell, carrying several black bags of clothes; she then repeated the same procedure with another seller, completing the holiday packages for all of us.

At her last stop in the Canto market, a sock shop, she ordered each of my siblings to hold out their hands to see if the stockings would fit their feet. Mona, my older sister, was about to ask for some with giraffes and pink flowers embroidered around the edges, then remembered my mother's warnings and remained silent. Meanwhile my brother Hussein said that word, unconsciously and without thinking ahead to the consequences: "I'm hungry!" She slapped him angrily, cursing: "Aren't you fasting you little bastard?!" He cried, maybe because he was truly hungry, or maybe because an eight year old still has the right to cry when he is slapped and cursed.

After they finished at the Canto market, she took them back up the hill. From time to time the breeze carried the sweaty smell of my mother's coat; she marched quickly, with no concern for the children's tired feet. At home she took out the garments from the bags she was carrying, giving each one what she thought was suitable. My younger sister Madiha mumbled as usual, accusing my mother of bringing Mona better clothes than hers; as soon as she did, my mother started hitting and cursing her, but Madiha didn't give up until she got the dress she wanted. Madiha is very much like my mother: she has a wide mouth with spaced teeth, and never stops rubbing her scalp. It's true that all of us had suffered from lice and that my mother had dealt with this using alcohol and petrol till we all were rid of them except Madiha, who never did.

This is simply how my mother was ... but only until my secret was revealed.

I was allowed to sleep between my parents while the rest of my siblings slept in a narrow space separated off by a short curtain. My mother did not sleep this day despite the drowsiness that overcame me and put me out in a way I had not slept for weeks. She was determined to take me to the general hospital early next morning. This was actually a defeat for her, but just when the first ray of the sun slipped through our little room's window, my secret was out.

She noticed a green mass coming out of my ears. She sobbed and hit my father to look at it as well. And as soon as he saw it, the same confused look she had popped on his face. He tried to insert his fat fingers into my ears to grab this green blob, but couldn't. My mother tried as well, but drew back in fear of causing me harm.

It was a Friday. She hurried to the hospital carrying me among crowds of worshipers, while tremors of prayer shook the whole place. In preparation for the feast tables laden with *konafa* were followed by colorful hammocks on both sides of the street. Fireworks sellers were everywhere, children were playing, putting up their cute wooden carts. Among all the joy, her tears flowed.

After the doctor examined me, he took a small device and tried to insert it in my left ear; the closer he came towards me the more I screamed. When he finished the examination he said: this is the stem of a plant. A seed is growing inside his ear, a condition that I have not seen before.

- Oh my god! What can we do then!?
- I can only think of a surgery to remove it, but for that his father has to sign a consent to accept the risk to its hearing. The child will most likely lose the use of that ear.
- Good God! For ever!?!
- He'll still be able to hear with the other ear, Ma'am.
- Alright sir, I have to talk to his father about this.
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On our way back, my mother struggled up the hillside in a pitiful condition. She had always played strong but now felt a fracture inside that did not match her facade. Eventually it took a green stem coming out of the ear of her youngest to blow it up in our faces, bringing an end to the state of denial she'd lived in for ages, to admit that she was helpless towards me, my father, my siblings, towards the biting scorpions of Scorpion Hill. Returning home all she wanted to know was who did this, the only thing that defeated her.

She marched through the door of our dilapidated house to find my siblings happily dressing up in their holiday clothes. Mona wore Madiha's dress, which looked tight but beautiful on her thin body. She had two long pigtails braided like a French bread loaf, wide hazel eyes, and a loving heart. Madiha looked very funny, yet pretty in the loose dress of her older sister. My brother Hussein was just about flying with happiness in his jeans and striped shirt. I can guess what he was thinking about next -- how to find some real-looking plastic shades to look good in front of the girls on the Hill.

By then, my father was still deep asleep. My mother took the opportunity to whack each of my siblings to get them to confess; she heated a spoon over the stove and swore that she would burn the skin of all of them if they did not say who was responsible. Crying, Hussein shouted: "It was me, Mom. I put the wheat seed in his ear!"

I know it was strange that our small room had been empty that night. We were alone together, for the first time ever, Hussein and I. I know too that this wouldn't have ever happened again, to be alone. He was playing with the water-soaked wheat grains my mother was preparing for the weekly Friday dinner; I was just a baby lying down after a full meal, thinking of nothing at all. Suddenly Hussein picked one of the wheat grains out of the dish and jammed it violently into my left ear. Surely I screamed, surely asked for help, but nothing could change my fate, written that night.

It didn't matter to me how much my mother punished Hussein, nor how she forced him to spend the whole holiday grounded at home, nor how she ripped up his new clothes in front of his eyes: what really mattered to me was that the wheat seed grew, climbing the shell of my ear, and I was finally able to sleep. The truth is that, unknowingly, my mother watered the seed by the sliding trickle of milk dribbling from my mouth to my ears, through the thin stream of shower water seeping into my ear. But how did this wheat seed grow in a barren patch like my little ear? Inside a soul like mine? And among the scorpions, the snakes, the garbage, the defeated humans? ... Why me?

*-You kept on asking this question. But you never managed to find an answer. After all these years do you still think that your brother chose me? No, my dear I was the one to do the choosing, I chose the soil where I will live and die, I was, and still am, a virgin. Do you know why? Because in a world like mine, virginity is never lost. To be a virgin is to be a see embraced in loving soil. I'm still a virgin because I was never harmed in your company, my dear. I was always safe inside you.*

*You are saying that you were not born the moment your mother gave birth of you. Well, that is true. I will tell you the truth, my dears: God chose an oval, egg-shaped wheat seed to*

*be his private sphere, and together we created our single, unique, space. The boy was a male and I was a seed cracked down the middle, just like a woman's vulva..*

*Well, I inhabited the best of him!*

*Translated from the Arabic by Mohamed Mahmoud Embaby,  
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