

Taleb AIRAFI  
 From "Samar Kalimat" [ "Samar's Words" ]

### Samar's Thoughts Between Traffic Lights

*It s five past eleven in the evening, Abdul Azlz Yousif al-Mlzini Street seems pretty quiet. I assure myself that Suleiman's apartment In Bneid ALGar, right behind Safir International Hotel, is only a twenty minute drive from AL-Faiha, where I am now standing.*

The blood on my ankle must have dried by now. I feel the tremor of my fingers, the tears on my cheeks, and the ache in my heart as I drive on. There are very few cars on the road at this hour. Before my marriage to Walid, my father never allowed me to stay out beyond eight. This time he had slammed the door behind me, shouting:

"Get out. I don't want to set eyes on you in my house again."

I shouldn't have let it go so far. When I had told Suleiman about the trouble with my family, he merely said:

"All you have to do is rent an apartment of your own and take control of your life."

His reply hurt me & the idea of living alone terrified me.

"How can I leave my family?" I asked.

"Well, they've cut their ties with you!"

His frankness shocked me. What hurt me most, however, was the fact that he was right.

"But you know only too well that no Kuwaiti girl can live on her own" I hastened to answer.

"Who says, may I ask?" He looked me in the eye and added: "There are Kuwaiti women who rent a small apartment, and live alone or share it with others."

"Maybe in secret," I replied.

"Some in secret, some openly."

I mulled over his last sentence, and remained silent for a few minutes. Then he carried on in a chiding way:

"Samar! You are not a little girl. You're over thirty-five. What counts is your happiness and your own peace of mind. Let others be each to his own."

"Easier said than done," I replied.

Silence fell between us. I feared that Suleiman might construe my remarks as an invitation to resume our relationship. I took refuge in silence until after a few minutes he said:

"Very well then, bring your stuff and move in here permanently!"

"Here, of course, meant his apartment. It also meant an end to all discussion. I looked at him in amazement as if to enquire about the status he would ascribe to my presence in his place. Our eyes met in full understanding. He was elusive though, yet said:

"All right, you just do what you think is best."

*I take the roundabout and head towards the second ring road. The fence of Al-Faiha middle School for boys is to right. Ever since I opened my eyes, I have seen my father sigh time and again:"There are two boys' schools right across my gate and I only have daughters! "*

Suleiman was just opposite of my father in both beliefs and life style; maybe it was because his circumstances were very different. He was young, rich, and the son of a well known family with a father among the wealthiest in Kuwait.

"My father," he once told me "was a man who was modern in thought and deed. He insisted that all my sisters went to college, and he always took my mother along with him on his trips. They used to fly to Cairo just to go and listen to Um Kulthoum. He had a big library, he loved poetry and wrote it, and it was because of him that I took an interest in reading and music. "

I realize how much Suleiman is influenced by his father. Whenever I protest against his excessively liberal views, reminding him that "we live in Kuwait, you know" his ready reply will be: "Exactly. Because we live in Kuwait, we must realize that things have changed."

He becomes silent for a few minutes. I look at 'us': a man and a woman who have been living together for more than ten years now. I no longer feel embarrassed walking around in my night gown or moving about the house as if it were my own. Quite often, after lunch, I take a nap stretching out on the sofa right in front of the TV. He tiptoes over and covers me with a light blanket and leaves me to my deep sleep. I never thought we would become so close. I can hear him say: "It is man who makes his own life and circumstances." When he begins to philosophize like that, I feel irritated and remind him that "this is sheer rhetoric with no bearing on real life. And even if this philosophy were true, it only applies to men. "

"No." he would insist: "it applies to anyone who loves life."

More often than not, Taleb would disagree.

"Women are different. In our society, a woman is abused and oppressed for no other reason than her sex. She is abused at all stages of her life; and a long time is needed before this can be rectified."

*Ibn Rushd elementary school for boys is to the right of Abdul Aziz Al-Mizini St. The roundabout is right before me.*

The cut on my ankle hurts. It happened as I fell on the doorstep of our house after my father pushed me, yelling:

"You deserve to have your throat slit."

Yes! This is how he shrieked at me just a little while ago. He took me by surprise as he rushed wildly towards me and made to strike me with the flat of his hand. He pulled me by my hair, his head-gear falling off, his grasping fingers digging into my skull, and his voice roaring:

"You shall not spend one more night in here."

My mother pleaded: "Abdullah It's late at night."

He pushed her aside.

"Stay out of this! She has to leave right away or else I'll kill her."

He dragged me behind him. I tried to force my body to keep up with him. I was shaking.

In his mad striding, he tripped over his 'dishdasha':

"You're behind all the troubles we've had" he growled angrily his grip on my hair growing tighter. I knew he meant my marriage to Walid and the divorce that had followed; and also the death of my grandmother.

"From now on, you are no longer my daughter. I disown you!"

I gritted my teeth, my head still in his grip. I could detect a hint of glee in the eyes of Abeer, my sister. My mother scurried behind us:

"Abdullah! Stop, before the girl's neck is broken!"

"Hope it does. Good riddance." I felt my scalp burn. I staggered.

"Out!"

He pushed me out. I fell over the doorstep. His voice followed me, his shaking finger pointed to the sky, and warning:

"By almighty God I'll kill you if I see you here again!"

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<sup>1</sup> Dishdasha: traditional men's outfit in Kuwait.

"I'll never come back to you!" I replied bitterly. He spat at me and called me:  
"Spawn of the devil".

With all his might, he slammed shut the door.

*Abdul Aziz Al-Mizini Street Is empty. I can hardly make out what happened to me. A cacophony of sounds was clamoring inside my head.*

Only the yellow entrance light seemed to be still there. I do not know how much time passed since I fell. Maybe because it was night no one would notice me. With trembling fingers I reached to touch the sticky liquid that began to trickle down my ankle. I tried to stand up but my legs gave way, failing to hold my shivering body. I had only one shoe on; maybe the other was still inside, or some place here or there. A lump rose in my throat and I was in a flood of tears.

I leaned on the fence for support, trying to get to my car.

This bloody shiver still seizes me. My head is swarming with all kinds of noises.

*Its seven minutes past eleven.*

I take all the blame. Yet with Suleiman rejecting all talk of marriage, what choice did I have? I had either to accept my new life with Jassim, or be the eternal divorcee guarded by the ridiculous complacency of a grumbling family who would constantly breathe down my neck. True, the path I have chosen is rough; but isn't fifteen years too long for anyone to bear? Walid divorced me three months before the Iraqi invasion. I was only twenty-two when I joined this hellish club of divorcees. Soon, I'll turn thirty-seven.

Tomorrow I'll be the gossip of the town, everyone will be speaking of the woman who "snatched her sister's husband".

Does it matter anymore after all that's happened tonight?

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*I read the blue road sign: Bneid il Ghar straight ahead, Abdallah Al-Salem to the left, and Al-faiha to the right.*

Today at dawn, nightmares woke me: It was just before five. I lifted a head heavy with sorrow and immediately a thought occurred to me. I have to take a decision: I shall settle the matter today once and for all. I picked up the phone and called Jassim. His voice, laden with sleep, reached me:

"Hello!"

"I've made up my mind," I said. "This evening I will tell my folks we want to get married."

He did not seem to understand what I said. I told him:

"It's me, Samar."

"Good morning to you,"

He replied and his smoker's voice asked:

"What time is it, anyway?"

I did not tell him it was five in the morning. I skipped over the question and repeated:

"I am going to speak to my father this very day."

I waited for him to say something but he didn't.

"Thanks,"

I said, putting the receiver down and let him go back to sleep.

I thought of calling Suleiman but soon decided to dismiss the idea. Something filled me with awe. Around 10.30, I called Taleb to seek his advice. He saluted me in his typical manner which made me speechless and all I could say was:

"Suleiman is wondering why we have not seen you in a while."

Taleb said he was busy writing a new novel and promised to drop by at his earliest... I ended the conversation as hurriedly as I had started it.

Tomorrow my one-month leave from my job at the bank begins. By the end of this vacation, I will go back to my office a married woman. Jassim and I have decided to go through the religious ceremony tomorrow morning.

My day was busy, with not a single minute of rest, as if the bank's clients had all decided to come at once. Jassim called three to four times but I could not talk to him and briefly told him how busy I was. I went back to my father's house at half past four. My head was spinning with my decision and I was mentally rehearsing what I intended to say. No one was there. I went straight to my room, closed the door and began to get my suitcase ready. I was almost certain my father would throw me out of the house so I made sure to pack all of my important papers: my Passport, jewelery, a few photographs as well as some clothes and shoes.

*The traffic light is red. The Abdullah AlSalem residential area is to my left and I am passing along Jamaluddin Al-Afghani Street. How often I passed along that street when I was*

*Walid's wife!*

I called Suleiman a little while ago but he did not answer. Maybe he is still at his mother's bedside, as he often wished, all alone. Many a time I would call him and ask him to come to the apartment but he keeps insisting that leaving her on her own is the last thing he would ever do.

I wish he'd pass the time watching a movie or something.

He once told me: "I like watching foreign films."

But Jassim doesn't like watching movies. Yesterday he told me:

"We will get married, blessed by God and His Prophet... We are not the first man and woman in Kuwait to do so."

He also told me he loved me and did not care what people might say.

I insisted with him that I would not get married in secret. I do not know why I insisted on telling my family.

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*The traffic lights is green. To my right is the turn-off to Damascus Street.*

The toughest part of the matter was breaking the news. The four of us, my mother, Abeer, her daughter Dalal, and me, were sitting watching television. It was a few minutes past nine, when I, terrified, surprised them with my explosive statement:

"There is a man who wishes to propose to me."

My mother was startled and shifted in her chair, her face covered with that look of foreboding I knew only too well. She said apprehensively:

"May it be with God's blessing."

She turned to Dalal and ordered her to leave the room, which Dalal did quite reluctantly.

My mother watched her go out before asking:

"Who's the man?"

It was difficult for me to pronounce the name. Abeer noticed this, and the two of them kept staring at me as if they were going to devour me.

"Jassim," I said at last.

There was a twitch in Abeer's face, a quiver in her eyes. The nerve in the middle of her forehead throbbed. Uncertain of what she had beard, my mother asked:

"Jassim who?"

How could I answer? For months I had rehearsed this scene only to find I was now tongue-tied. My hands felt damp and cold; cold sweat trickled down my back. Abeer regained her stern look while I shot out my answer:

"Abeer's ex-husband."

My mother gasped and slapped her head with both hands:

"Please God, it can't be true."

Her eyes were transfixed on my face, her face dark with anger:

"You must be totally mad."

I did not have the courage to look in Abeer's direction.

"No," I hastened to answer, hoping that this would cut the matter short.

"Gracious God, this cannot be true." My mother started slapping her head again.

"I beg yon not to hurt yourself, Mother," Abeer interfered to stop the ordeal, the vein in her forehead bulging. Adding:

"What do you expect from such a bitch?"

My mother glanced at her angrily, while I strained not to respond to her curses. I feigned calm.

I will try and call Suleiman one more time. I wonder why he does not, answer. I haven't seen him for the past three days. He must be busy with his sick mother. I have no wish to speak to or see anyone - Jassim in particular.

I wish I could just drop on my bed in Suleiman's apartment and sleep. I feel secure there. Throughout the past years, Suleiman has been my closest friend. His apartment became my home, my whole life. I often recall a phrase he repeated time and again:

"The dilemma of life is that life is lived but once."

The time I have spent with Suleiman feels like a lifetime. I cannot ever imagine living without him. I never dared to tell him about my relationship with Jassim. Was I mistaken? How could I justify what's happened tonight? I am to marry Jassim tomorrow, yet something tells me that I'd better put it off now, after I have raised the subject with my family.

*Al-Nuzha district is to the right and Al-Dahiya to the left.*

It was a gamble, my insisting on marrying Walid, and I lost. I went back to my parents' home crushed and humiliated.

Tonight I am gambling again, but with a difference. This time it is gambling without a chance of returning home. Should I fall out with Jassim, I'll have to spend the rest of my life away from my parents. Even Suleiman might not receive me in his home.

I recall the comment is made when we were watching "Pretty Woman", starring his favorite actress Julia Roberts:

"Love is a game you can win or lose and deserves the risk no matter what."

How many games or battles can you really risk in a lifetime? I paid dearly for my first marriage, which left me a divorcee for fifteen years. Tomorrow, I start a new adventure with another man. But I feel I do not love Jassim. For the past few days, a hidden voice has kept whispering inside me: "Don't do it!"

Jassim and I have gone a long way together and agreed at last on marriage. Tomorrow morning, we will go to the Palace of Justice to get married. How many years will I be married to him?

My marriage to Walid lasted less than two years. I got divorced before my twenty-second birthday. I needed time to fully comprehend the blow I was dealt. More often than not, I have admitted to myself that my marriage was a reckless adventure by all standards.

*It is Al-Nuzha district; the entrance to Quraish Street is to the right.*

The minute I got into my car and pulled away from my father's house, I called Jassim and told him, crying:

"It's over! I told my father and he refused."

"Just refused?"

"He refused, disowned me, hit me, and kicked me out of his house."

My frankness seemed to shock him. I continued, sobbing:

"I took my suitcase and left the house:"

"Where are you now?"

"On my way to a girlfriend's. I'll spend the night at her place."

Lost for words, he did not dare ask me who she was, nor did he invite me to his house.

He just said: "I am ready to do anything for you."

"Thanks."

"Do you want me to come over now?"

"No, I'll call you in the morning."

He reminded me that all arrangements for the next day were taken care of: "Two of my friends," he said, "will be there as witnesses. I'll wait for your call. "

I hung up, but he called again asking: "Are you sure you're OK?"

His question surprised me. My throat rattled with sobs which I tried to subdue: "Thanks."

He wanted to say something, but I preferred to end the conversation and simply wished him good night.

I need Suleiman. He is my only true friend. How can I leave him tomorrow? I do not think I can ever do that.

*The traffic light over the bridge is green.*

I wish I could marry Suleiman. He has become more distant over the past months, with his mother's illness. It's been years since we started living together in his apartment. I had my own quarters, my bedroom and bathroom, my large wardrobe, my computer, my women's things – a whole life with him. I never envisaged I could have such a relationship with any man. It's been thirteen years with us barely ever apart. The apartment was a safe refuge for our intimacies and secrets. He did not mind receiving his friends with me around. We had our little parties, our little rows, and shared details of our daily secrets and worries. Quite often, Taleb came to spend Wednesday evenings with us. He told Suleiman that one day he would write our story.

"I have no objection," Suleiman said without giving the matter much thought, "Provided you tell the truth, the whole truth."

"Art has its own truth," Taleb commented.

I remained silent listening to their conversation. He turned to me:

"What about the heroine of the story?"

"Am I the heroine?" I asked, laughing.

"Yes, indeed! And I will devote three whole chapters to you alone; your name will be Samar. "

"That's fine with me."

What was there for Taleb to write about? A widower and a divorcee who spent years of companionship together - two grains of sand side by side in this infinite cosmos. How many love stories in this world are like ours? What is love if not companionship? Only the marriage certificate seemed to hover far away in the distance. I had stopped talking about marriage to Suleiman in case I annoyed him. More than a year ago, after I had my first meeting with Jassim in the park; we were watching a foreign movie when Suleiman, as if reading my mind, said bluntly:

"I have no intention of getting married again." He lifted a face whose features I know by heart: "The suicide of my wife, Dana, was so traumatic for me."

He looked deeply into my eyes and said sadly: "She committed suicide to ruin my life."

The tone of his voice changed. He asked, as if coming to some sudden realization: "Does our relationship, such as it is, bother you!"

I swallowed the ache in my throat, and answered him in a matter-of-fact way: "No!"

*The road sign said to Bneid AQ. straight ahead, Kuwait City to the left, Al-Ahmadi to the right.*

The key to Suleiman's apartment is in my pocket. After we'd been friends for a year, I began to go to the apartment whenever the opportunity arose. I would find him alone, the serenity of the apartment enfolding him, reading a book, watching a film, or looking around for the right spot to hang a new painting he was adding to his collection. He once told me:

"My father was a friend of authors, writers and educated people, and they often met in his house. Any artist or musician visiting Kuwait was sure to be a guest at our house with a private exhibition or performance. "

I think my parents would give their blessing to a marriage with Suleiman if it were ever to happen. It was my marriage to Walid that was at the root of all our disagreements. I come from a well-established, 'full-blooded Kuwaiti' family, while Walid was a *baisari*. Marrying a man with no heritage to his name was the sin of sins. I still remember my mother's reaction when I told her I wanted to marry Walid. It feels like only yesterday. She relayed the news to my grandmother who was beside herself with horror: "No girl of good family marries a *baisari*. This will only bring shame and disgrace. "

My father supported her completely, saying: "I will never allow a daughter of mine to marry a *baisari*."

My mother shared grandmother's opinion while my sister Altaf said, weeping: "My husband will divorce me because of you."

"But what has become of your husband's piety and his beard?" I couldn't help asking.

She did not answer my question. I kept staring at her until she muttered: "What does piety have to do with marriage?"

"I don't know."

Jassim, my brother-in-law then, did not approve the marriage. I remember him telling me: "You will embarrass everyone."

At that time I was madly in love with Walid and couldn't imagine life without him. Wanting to marry him became an obsession that took hold of my being. I was adamant in my obstinate desire: "I want Walid and I am going to marry him."

My father scorned my decision and shouted at me: "Are you defying the family?"

"Father! I am not defying anybody; I simply want to marry the man I love."

"What If we object?"

I evaded answering. Saying: "What's wrong with him, Daddy? He is young, Kuwaiti, a university graduate, rich, and he loves me."

"What is wrong is his inferior breeding. You shall not marry him."

I was tempted to scream in his face "To hell with good breeding and nobility", but chose to say: "Father, I think we are living in an age where these values do not count any more."

"It is your way of thinking that does not count any more. You shall not marry this ... " He raised his voice threateningly: "I'd rather slit your throat than see you marry a *baisari*."

I must have been only ten when I asked my grandmother the difference between an '*aseel*', a high-born, and a '*baisari*'. She took a deep breath, which made the veins in her sagging neck move, and told me: Kuwait is a small place where everyone knows everyone. The high-born speaks for himself: esteemed ancestry, class, wealth, status, and a good family tree, whose roots can be traced back to a prominent tribe."

She looked me in the eye, blinking with her *kohl*-rimmed eyelids, as she recounted her tale:

"The high-born and the low-born were two brothers. In a time of drought and famine when they were both suffering from hunger, they stood naked by the road-side. They were starving to death. Someone passed, by and gave each of them a loaf of bread. Both

pondered long as to what to do with it. The high-born decided to cover his private parts with it; the other ate it."

Because I remained silent, she went on to explain: "This is the difference between them. They were brothers, you see."

Throughout my childhood years, I heard my grandmother tell and retell the same old, boring story. I used to protest, saying: "But, Grandma, if someone is starving to death it makes more sense to eat rather than cover his private parts."

"She would slap her head and say: "O Almighty God, O Almighty God. Shame on you, girl. Hell fire is better than accepting disgrace."

I reminded her: "There is abundance in Kuwait now, there is enough for everybody."

She was irritated by my remark and insisted: "A high-born is a high-born. He as status, good lineage and wealth. A high-born would not work for anyone, not even his own family. He is the owner of his own assets, the owner of his business, and a man of dignity, unlike the lowly

baisari who is servile and has to accept any work or job. "

But, Grandma," I said, "everyone works now at the ministries and institutions of the State."

"No, No, No." Nothing would change her stubborn pinion.

My family's rejection of Walid had made me all the more attached to him. "I shall marry no one but him," I insisted.

That day my father hit me for the first time in my life. He slapped me and told me: "Death is much better for you than marrying a baisari."

I locked myself up in my room, went on strike: no food, no drink, no outings or travel, and no studying. All attempts to persuade me to change my mind failed. One afternoon, my grandmother reluctantly came to see me. She knocked on my door, and when I opened it I saw a face draped in sorrow. She came in, sat down and in a feeble voice said: "I want to have one last talk with you."

I was exhausted by hunger, fatigue and so much thinking, and could hardly hear her. She whispered: "My dear Samar, God has forbids torturing oneself."

I hastened to tell her: "He also forbids discriminating against people."

*The traffic lights over the bridge change to orange.*

"My daughter! Marriage is born of fate and destiny. God may grant you a young man far better than ..."

She stopped at Walid's name, not wanting it to pass her lips.

"I shall marry none but Walid, Grandma," I insisted.

There was some kind of anguish in her eyes.

"I'll die if you marry this man of low breeding."

"Death is in the hands of God alone, Grandma."

"May God forgive you, my daughter?"

"Amen!" I said softly.

"Is that your last word?"

"Yes, and I'll not budge one inch."

She wrapped up her despair round her and with a bent back left my room. I married Walid. Less than two months later, my grandmother died of grief.

Money alone came to my rescue. It made up for Walid's so-called sin. His father was a wealthy merchant, a millionaire in fact, and money seemed a good enough redeemer. He provided a dowry of thirty thousand dinars, a brand new Mercedes, and a diamond necklace worth no less than twenty thousand dinars.

*My head is about to explode, the cut in my ankle is burning too much. The clock in the car says ten minutes past eleven. The traffic light is changing to the red.*

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