

**Hanaa HIJAZI**  
Short Stories

**Separation**

We will become friends, it's not possible to continue this way:  
I avoided asking him, I told him this as a decision, I was afraid he would begin talking about things I was done with years ago.

I hung up.

I felt as if a mountain of ice had come down: what was happening brought about a crash of noisy silence, a huge vacuum, sadness maybe, and relief-- there were no tears, no, no tears, only some sort of sorrow pushing me towards the bed. I pulled a cover over myself and surrendered to deep relief.

He had refused to send the papers from abroad, insisting he'd do it when he came back. Now he stood in the doorway, a stranger without luggage; I nodded for him to come in, and called my son. He screamed joyously-- dad!!!-- and kissed and hugged him. They spent two minutes together; then my little boy left us, and he excused himself to go to the bathroom. It seemed he was coming directly from the airport. When he came back, he said he would be leaving immediately. I stopped him, asked him to sit down and talk. We sat in the guest room. I tried to smile affectionately. "You know, Doris Lessing, the one who got the Nobel prize, says that marriage is not for her, she has been married and divorced twice, and she decided not to do it again, because marriage is not for her. I think I'm like that. He didn't comment, only smiled a tired and bitter smile. The smile made me sad; I wanted to say I'm sorry, I know how depressing and annoying this is but to me this has become a necessity and an urgency. I can't continue, I have changed, you haven't, you assume that what happened to you is the cause, but no my friend, it isn't. I have changed, my eyes are suddenly open. I know it is strange but it is also real. I know you have a lot of explanations: I too have my explanations. I'm sorry my friend, it wasn't possible for me to go on. I'm not suited for marriage, does this make you feel better, I give you this satisfaction. I'm not suited for marriage.

I told my child, dad is not going to live with us anymore.

Ha ha ha, are you joking, yes, no?

No I'm not, I'm serious

But we're a family, and families live together

Yes we are, but families get separated sometimes, your father is still your father but he won't be staying with us

But this is not possible, family members have to live together

Do you remember Zack and Cody on the Disney channel, wasn't their father living apart from them?

He remembered the series and knew I was serious. He stopped talking. In the car he asked me, what if dad came back and stayed with us? Then I will leave, I said. But who will take care of your mother's duties? Do you remember how you sometimes put the notebooks I forget in my bag while I'm asleep, who is going to do that if you leave?

Yes I remember, I said

Do I have to remind you of your duties? How can you think of leaving?

I didn't leave,

He did.

Each one of us has his own explanation.

The world as well has its.

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### **It's the War**

I wake up tense, the way I used to feel at the start of the war. I open my clenched fists, I don't say good morning to myself. I can't. Yusuf is asleep next to me, hasn't changed his habits, wakes up in the middle of the night and sneaks in to lie down beside me. School time, honey. As usual, he doesn't wake up. I remind him the psychologist yesterday said he doesn't suffer from any troubles. Mr. Saleh said you are a good boy, remember? He decides to get out of bed; for the first time I ask Norma the maid to get him ready for school. There has to be a first time for everything. And I find an excuse to myself, it's the war.

It's the war now which will bear all our faults. Thank god. I found a new hook for my exhaustion, my boredom, my sadness, my depression, my temper, my neglect. It's the war, and it's excuse enough.

I decide to not turn on the TV, at least not now. I turn on the internet in its place, and before my eyes can catch the news page I switch to email. Nothing new, so much junk mail, then a message from a friend with the header "The War," as if I were replacing heat with fire. I open it and find a lot of photos, oh god, photos, it would have been better had I watched TV instead, at least the images are moving, these photos are still, looking at you, hurting you more deeply, leaving deeper scars. No more jokes in the email these days, nothing but pictures of the war. I remembered the messages from friends trying to stop the war, some asking for signatures and replies, one of them sending a picture of her in London joining a demonstration against war.

Now, the war has begun and it appears that a feeling of impotence has hit everybody. No more messages asking for contributions to stop the war.

Even my mobile is receiving fewer jokes these days. Many have stopped sending jokes. Instead, so many text messages asking for prayers so that God may take revenge on Bush. Some sms asking one to read certain verses from Quran at a given time, or to fast for Iraq.

I still forward jokes whenever I receive them.

I wiped the sleepiness and laziness from my eyes, and I shook off the war pictures scarring my soul, I locked them in my chest, I said to myself I'll go to work today in a new spirit. During the day I spoke sharply in two different meetings. It's the war, perhaps. I asked for discipline from those who work with me, and asked for some of my rights in one of the meetings. I was curt, I know, it's the war.

I'm writing a paper about children and environment, WHO is asking for this, what a lie, there is no mention of Iraq, the Iraqi children and all those bombs, dropped to create a better environment for them.

Jihad Elkhazen avoids the topic of Arab weakness to write about other things; I sympathize with him because the subject is bigger than words.

The Guardian devotes pages to those resisting the war, and puts links to other sites which do the same.

I decide that while I'm writing this essay I'm not going to talk about war next time, but if I did, I'd say "it's the war".

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### **Did you see me? I Was Walking in the Street...**

Did you see me? Of course you didn't. I didn't see me either. I was walking in the street, my hair flying in the wind. You know my hair, it isn't thick and heavy; it's light and soft, that's why it was easy for the wind to lift my wisps up and twirl them around in the air. Everything was free and liberated, even my hair. The wind was blowing in my direction, so my hair was lifted up and away from me. I tell you... it was a marvellous sensation. I was flooded with strange emotions...  
I felt free!!

I was wearing a soft cotton blouse. It wasn't black. I know you know I love black clothes, and that half my wardrobe is black. However in this case I wasn't wearing anything black. The blouse I was wearing was white. Yes, I don't know what made me wear white, I'm not going to lie to you and say that I never wear white, or that I don't have any clothes that are white, I simply have to have a specific reason to buy that color. Sometimes, I buy it because it's the only color that goes with a

particular pair of pants, or it's the only color available in a blouse that caught my eye. At times, I just buy white for the sake of change. Wait, I think I forgot, it was the pants that were white, not the blouse. I love white jeans, they look nice on me, but I don't wear them much, because when I go out wearing white, I become obsessed by worry that they might get dirty and when I do, I spend the whole time trying to hide the spots, which simply ruins the fun of going out.

Where were we?? Right, I was telling you I had white jeans on, my body, you know, helps me to do that. Honestly though, I was happy with my body that day, just walking in the street, my hair flying with the wind, wearing my white jeans. The blouse was blue, yes I remember now, it was sky blue, and it clings to me because the wind is blowing against me. Oh, everything was so free at that moment, my hair, my blouse, my legs. How can I express what my legs felt like, I was walking on the air!!

“Was the street tempting?” Are you asking me? I don't know, perhaps it was, I wasn't really aware of the street, the beauty of it all was the sense of freedom; the sensation of walking with no scarf on my head, nothing covering my hair, my hair flying in the wind, my blouse trying to get away from me, my legs transformed into wings. Do you understand that feeling? What did you say? You think what I'm saying is silly? Me too, I was thinking while I was writing that my words may seem silly, a woman walking on the street, nothing covering her hair, wearing white jeans and blue blouse, so what? But Do you know? I've never been able to achieve that dream, I mean to walk in our street, no cover on my head, wearing a blue blouse and a pair of white jeans.

I think I'll die before our street sees my light soft hair flying in the wind.

*Translated from the Arabic by Hailah Alkhalaf*

## A Morning Meeting

Hi, I'm going to Starbucks, can you meet me there?

Which one?

The one on the beach, Yusuf is invited to a party nearby and I'll kill the time at Starbucks until he is done.

Where exactly?

Where exactly, I ask the driver.

At the end of Sari street.

Near Pizza Hut, yes, I know where you mean. Ok, I can. It's nearby, the driver can drop me and then go back to pick up Omar from school.

I arrived there before she did. I watched her get out of the car and went towards the stairs before she came up. I said, you can order because I already did when I arrived.

I wish you had called earlier, she said. I already had my breakfast.

She couldn't drink her coffee. She said it was too strong. I said this is exactly what I love about this coffee.

I told her that the party to which Yusuf is invited is a pool party, where they have two young men entertaining the kids by the swimming pool. She said everyone is thinking of business nowadays, it's only us who don't do anything beside our job. She described the way chocolate usually brought to kids' parties is decorated, a simple idea but sold at high profit. I told her about my intention to work elsewhere but she warned me that this would not be easy. Do you remember our friend Najla, the poor girl, still complaining about the new job she took ?

I reminded her that Najla's salary there is twice ours, but she doesn't care the way she and I used to.

- I bought a new lotion for my acne, can you believe the one that has always been used can't be found in pharmacies at all any more.

- That's because the state drug company is the distributor of the new one.

- But the old one had to be the first step in the treatment. They do different things.

- Yes, I know, believe me. Business is all that counts.

Maybe, I said. I also said I'd never go back to the dermatology clinic I used to go to. Can you believe what they've done? They told a colleague all the details of my treatment. Where's patient confidentiality?

She asked if I did anything about it. She expected me to call them and complain. I reminded her that I have more than one front to fight on, and sometimes I ignore things just to have some peace of mind.

And do you know what happened to the English teacher at Yussuf's school? One of the mothers just told me that her husband went to the school office, there was a fight, and because of that the teacher was fired.

I mentioned that I didn't tell the mother I already knew about the school's plan to end his contract because he had not been doing his job. What I had told her was that he had been rude. That I spoke to him on the phone, and he was impolite and arrogant. We were sad that the year had been wasted for our kids. She shook her head and said, why were you so passive, you should have complained to the education director. I reminded her about the number of fronts I am fighting on. I counted them up for her: the new car, the new department I was asked to handle at work, the house issues.

She in turn told me about the case that was going to be filed by the group that had lost the election and about the well-known attorney that had been picked. I said the winners were a surprise. She nodded, yes. She said that there's a big change in Jeddah's demographics. I asked her if the case was going to be against the sheikhs' recommendation as to the winners. She said yes, and mentioned the sum of money going to the attorney.

I took out a toy keychain with a zipper and the party invitation inside. She said it was cute and said my son could hook it up on his belt loop and keep his allowance in it. I said I was thinking it's time to start teaching him about money and responsibilities.

I took her coffee, added some sugar and sipped.

She pointed at the glass window and quietly noted therehow dirty it was. Then she asked about my plans to write restaurant reviews like I had mentioned several years ago. I said I was ready but no one had commissioned anything yet. Why not for *Laha*, for instance? I said maybe I'd write up a proposal.

We began looking for the drivers. I called mine, then gave her my mobile to call hers, asking if she really was going to buy a phone from the new company, as she had said she would. She said they haven't begun operating yet. She looked for her phone book. I told her there was no need to, and offered to take her home. We found her driver standing in the far corner, which was why we hadn't been able to see him from the window upstairs. We shook hands; I remembered we didn't kiss when she arrived. She said we haven't gone out with Amal yet, I said I don't like appointments that are too planned. I like to be spontaneous, like today. She smiled.

We moved on.