

Love and Marriage

We came to her small village of square concrete buildings to treat her father. The household compound looked like any run-down ranch in the Southwest of the US and many others outside Harib city limits. The main residence was constructed of gray siding glowing gold in the sun. Topped by a plain chimney and a TV satellite it faced the aluminum-plank courtyard gate flanked by three cinderblock outbuildings and a corrugated tin shed where goats trimmed parched shrubs. I heard a generator chugging when Patrick turned off the motor of our battered compact.

The ceilings were high, the doorways low, draped with thick cotton in patterns of burgundy and green. Her father lay on a stripped mattress with a bevy of women swathed in abayas hovering around him. The women parted like a cotton sea.

The father, introduced as Mr. Nafari, had broken his leg. Sometimes people explained the occurrence behind crippling injuries or gunshot wounds when they called us. Sometimes they didn't. We're doctors, not inquisitors.

"Mr. Nafari, we are here from the clinic," Patrick always introduced us this way; him and me and our assistant Mo, a young man from San'a with more practical medical knowledge than most third-year residents in the States. He nodded at Mr. Nafari as he prepped him, "We are going to give you a shot for the pain, then we will set your leg." Of late-middling age, perhaps fifteen years my senior, Mr. Nafari sweated through a plaid shirt while he grunted quick affirmatives and ground his teeth.

Mo laid out the equipment. I gave him morphine; Mo and I held his shoulders as Patrick set the bone. Mr. Nafari cursed Patrick heartily until Mo gave him another morphine shot.

As Patrick prepared to cast his leg, one of the women pulled my sleeve, said, "Can you look at my daughter-in-law too? She is ill."

I nodded and ducked out of the room, following her across a courtyard of hard-packed dirt. Members of the household wavered in doorways like drape closures and leaned from the square casements, peering through the midday heat to watch me—the westerner in button-fly Levis and New Balance sneakers with a mere paisley scarf to cover her hair, and that in shades of blue—walk to the separate square structure where the women of the rural household lived. In the dim interior spread heavily with rugs, a baby cried from the corner, a newborn from the tenor of the wails. I could smell infection, not strongly, but a faint, underlying odor emanated from the bed.

I pushed back the scarf that covered my hair as women can do when no men are present, and knelt next to the girl stretched out on a foot-high pallet. She couldn't have been more than fourteen. My first time wasn't until I was sixteen.

I spoke quietly to the girl, "Is that your son, there?" The infant calmed, the girl managed to nod.

"Yes, that is her son Ahmad." The voice was high, but spoke clear Arabic. A girl no older than eleven spared me a glance as she peered over my shoulder. A beautiful unblemished soul with perfect skin; eyes round and green and somehow familiar. Like Natalia before the Leukemia. She smelled like cinnamon. Her shoulders were so small. I pursed a smile and covered the teenager, my exam complete. "He is a month tomorrow," the younger girl said.

"Was it a long birth?" Pain flickered across her face like a shadow cast by a flame-drawn moth. The elder girl nodded. "Do you want more children?"

The teenager cast her large eyes at the baby supported confidently in the younger girl's arms. She nodded again, but stiffly and slowly, as though a hand moved the back of her head. The mother-in-law perched in the corner.

The exam revealed a fistula, likely from prolonged pressure of the baby against the wall of the uterus. I pressed my lips together to keep from scolding the mother-in-law. It seemed she cared, at least somewhat. After all, she brought me to look at the girl. The baby resumed wailing and one of the older women swept across the room and laid the boy on a changing table too tall for the cinnamon girl, who disappeared back into the courtyard.

I turned to the mother-in-law. "She needs a small surgery." My Arabic was always a bit stilted. "Can you bring her to the clinic tomorrow?"

The mother-in-law permitted her considerable brows to stitch, though I could not be sure why or at whom she was angry. She took a step toward the bed, as if to ascertain for herself what was wrong. I stretched and leaned slightly to the side, blocking her advance.

"Can she nurse?" The mother-in-law's voice was a porous stone; hard, but I could hear wind whistling through the holes. She was not the first Yemeni matron I'd met.

"Yes. But she cannot bring the baby tomorrow, and she cannot eat after midnight tonight."

The matron nodded but her attention, like mine, was drawn to a growing commotion outside. High pitched voices, and the scratchy splatter of thrown dirt. They screamed in Arabic, a jumble I barely made out:

"Shut your mouth!"

"Kasi, Kasi," --in singsong-- "Soon to be wife, a fat man's wife!"

"Shut your mouth or I'll fill it with dirt."

On the ground the young girl Kasi, forced dirt into the mouth of a boy a little older than she, her skirt a net pinning his legs and giving him little leverage.

"Kasi, the fat man's wife, the old man's wife. How long before she is old and fat, like Ndarjan her husband?"

"You little turd!"

I knew Ndarjan, and my stomach revolted; I swallowed, forcing bile back to my gut. He lived two villages south--at least, an overweight man five years my senior with the surname Ndarjan lived two villages south. We treated him for secondary syphilis. I swallowed again. There must be more than one man named Ndarjan.

"Count down the months! Fat old Kasi, married away!"

Finally the matron reached the pair, grabbed Kasi by the arm and hoisted her off of the boy. He spit out dirt and small pebbles around laughter.

"Quiet!" The matron's voice was a thunderclap, the gathered family members backed under awnings in front of the compound buildings, afraid of the storm. With her free hand she yanked up the laughing, dirty boy and gave him a sound slap on the butt.

"Your sister needs no teasing! And Leneah needs to rest, the doctor says."

Here the matron's eyes darted at me and the boy's followed, then flinched from the threat implied by the matron's tightening grip. Kasi paid no attention to any clandestine glances or significant looks and said loudly,

"I will not marry fat old Ndarjan! Not in August, not in May, not ever." She spoke with a finality that belied her age.

"His fat belly will crush you."

Kasi picked up a rock with her free hand and threw it at her brother. The matron gave Kasi's arm a good yank and spanked the boy again twice.

I'd heard rumors of child marriages. I'd heard sometimes the girl-bride cries--screams in protest--and needs to be carried to meet her groom. Non-relatives are not invited. Patrick and I had no wish to know about such weddings; we can't judge custom too harshly, even outlawed

custom. If we knew, we might be honor bound to report it, and if we did, they might not trust us enough to come to us for help.

My eyes rested on the beautiful girl, but I did not see her. I saw Natalia then, and Robert bending over my maternity bed; Robert bouncing Natalia on his knee. I thought of Robert and our daughter who would never marry the man or woman of her choosing, or live alone in a house full of cats.

Then Kasi noticed me. Her eyes searched mine; mine hers. I had never met a child bride in the last months of her engagement, only later, for difficult childbirths and the aftereffects.

The matron gave Kasi's arm another firm shake and began to haul them to the doorway behind me, saying, "Children; always playing too rough and too loud."

Robert once told me my eyes hide little. I met this woman's glance as she passed me and she looked away quickly. I knelt, stopping Kasi by putting my hands on her shoulders, arresting the matron's progress if she wished to hold onto her. The child's hands were scraped; she'd likely fallen on them. I fished antiseptic spray out of my bag; squirted each palm and wiped away the grit.

"Try to keep the scrapes clean until they heal."

Then I stood, keeping my back turned as the matron hustled her away.

I stumbled back to the room where Patrick was just finishing with the cast. He noticed my face and flashed an expression of concern, but wrapped things up with his usual smoothness. Soon back in the car, we glided down the paved road to Harib.

"What happened back there?"

"Another obstetric fistula. I didn't ask how old she was this time." I paused, glanced in the rearview at Mo, short for Mohammed. This was his culture too, and I usually saved my gripes for when Patrick I were alone. Patrick, this once, ignored the hint. He had a fondness for Mo that sometimes made me inexplicably jealous.

"Is Ndarjan a common name?" I asked Mo, continuing in English, a note of hope in my voice.

Mo snorted and replied in Arabic, "No. Why?"

"Well," I continued, "There was another girl, maybe ten or eleven. She was fighting her brother for teasing her about getting married. But it's *who* she's getting married to."

A moment of silence then Mo gasped, "The one we treated for syphilis a month ago? Disgusting."

Relieved, I admitted, "I'm not sure it's the same man. I don't want to jump to conclusions, but I thought I would be sick."

"A child to a child; that is one thing, but this is another entirely. What are we going to do?" Mo sounded sincerely distressed.

"Do about what?" Patrick raised an eyebrow.

"If you are certain they are marrying the girl off underage, should we not report them?" Mo sounded angry, reproachful. My heart swelled. I wanted to cheer for Mo: for being stronger than I was and so much more than I judged him. How had I thought so poorly of him after eight long months?

"Why don't we talk about this tomorrow, after we've all gotten some sleep?" I could tell Patrick did not want to talk about it at all.

Mo said, "You are supposed to dine with me tonight, remember? Ruth has already begun cooking."

"We wouldn't want to disappoint Ruth." I smiled a little as I said it, to put them at ease, to make them feel I'd relaxed.

Ruth did actually relax me with her excellent cooking and company. She spoke English well and helped me with my Arabic. When we found ourselves together we behaved like sisters. She was a bit older than Mo--she counted him as her second husband--closer to my age. I slurped up her lamb ogdat, wiping the bowl clean with her fresh-baked flat bread.

"So what's this Mo tells me about a syphilis patient?" We sat in the kitchen drinking black tea with cloves while Patrick and Mo lay around smoking pipes in the living room. He must have mentioned it in the moments they were alone. I relished my forgetfulness; the taste of lamb.

"This young girl has to marry him. And he's got to be older than we are."

"You mean older than the mountains?" Ruth chuckled.

"Yes, old as the ground, and just as broad."

She laughed outright. "Why don't you report them? Country people, they're slow to change."

"You know if we do they'll never call us again. They won't trust us."

"You think they trust you now?"

My mouth hung open but I didn't sip my tea.

"Probably not. I want to help her, but it wouldn't be real help to report her family."

"You want to tell the mother about his syphilis?"

"Illegal. Besides, I'm not even certain it's the same man."

"And if it is?"

"I think her family might thank me, but his wouldn't." We both sought solace and answers in the tea. "She still has a few months. Maybe he'll get run over by a camel."

She laughed heartily again, slammed the table with her hand. "You Americans and your racist jokes. I hope he gets run over by a tank."

"Quiet wife and woman! We are supposed to be the loud ones!" Mo called from the other room.

We smothered our giggles like schoolgirls. Then I sobered, seizing the opportunity to ask a question I'd always held back before. "How did you manage to get out of your first marriage?"

"He died." She shrugged when I asked how and answered, "Something he ate."

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Robert still pressed the argument for me to come home; denied that something was broken if I preferred shared-living in a Yemeni suburb to nuptial cohabitation in New York. We each had our secrets; I doubted I discovered all of his.

'We should try again,' was his favorite refrain, 'while there's still time.' Like I was already menopausal. I was still in my early thirties. Well, 34.

I didn't tell him I'd read the emails from Eva, didn't remind him not to use the same passwords for everything.

The night after I met Kasi I called Robert. Twice. Even with the difference in time, he should have been home. I left a message on the second call, and tried not to sound passive-aggressive when I said, 'Hope everything is okay.'

The computer beckoned. I opened his email again and there, in the archive, an exchange between him and Eva:

Eva_Mitchum71@hotmail.com to RobertTTanner@att.net
Subject: Italian

Meet you tonight at 9? Fresco by Scotto?

RobertTTanner@att.net to: Eva_Mitchum71@hotmail.com
Subject: RE: Italian

Mmmm lobster risotto. Can't wait.

He couldn't wait.

He'd painted over the pale yellow of Natalia's room right after I left. Behr's Pastel Sunflower. He ripped the decorative child's prints from the moldings, stripped the wood. He turned our daughter's room, so carefully planned, into a den. Said the living room felt too large in the empty apartment. I had never seen his new den. I would need to face the den and wonder if Eva had ever drawn him out of it; sleep in the bed and wonder if Eva ever slept there. If even that sanctity had been broken.

In the morning I called again.

"Honey it's so good to hear your voice." He sounded so sincere.

"I. . ." I wanted to tell him I missed him. "I was thinking about what you said, about another child."

He waited. He still knew me, knew I needed time to make my point.

"And I wondered if you'd consider adoption."

"Katie..."

"If I come home."

Silence. Then, "I'd consider anything if you came home."

"It's just an idea. There are so many girls who need homes."

"You're sure you don't want to see what a little bit of us can make? I always wanted a baby version of myself."

He was trying to be cute while saying he wanted a boy this time. Cute fades over transcontinental phone lines, lessens exponentially every time it bounces off a satellite.

"We did see. Adopting a daughter wouldn't prevent us from having another child later."

"It's always later with you. What if, god forbid, something bad happens? What if later it's impossible?"

"God, Robert, something bad already happened! I don't know. Tomorrow isn't promised to any of us, especially here--"

"All the more reason for you to come home."

"My contract's not up for a few months."

"You shouldn't have renewed."

I didn't want to bring up Eva or my snooping--not that the latter mattered as much to me as it did to him. "Listen, Patrick's calling; I think we've got an emergency patient."

"Sorry to hear that."

That night I dreamed of cinnamon in a child's room with yellow paint.

Morning brought me to the kitchen table in a daze. Patrick already made coffee.

"Morning doll."

I grumbled an unintelligible retort.

"Sleep that well?"

"I can't stop thinking about that girl."

"Thinking what?"

"Natalia would have been about her age." Patrick didn't say 'I'm sorry.' He knew I'd hated hearing it for years. Finally I said, "I dreamed she was my daughter."

"But," Patrick said as gently as he could, "I'm sure she already has a mother."

"Well, soon she'll have a mother-in-law."

"Not for some months yet. The cast should come off around then, and we can check in on him a couple of times, monitor the healing."

"Maybe I shouldn't go with you."

"That's true."

Leneah, the young mother, arrived for her surgery, which we performed easily; it was routine to us. The mother-in-law and two aunts accompanied her. I came out to them while she recovered from the anesthesia.

"Everything went smoothly. She is still sleeping and will wake soon. But..." here I paused. To what fate would I doom this girl if I told her mother-in-law that she should bear no more children? What use would the girl be in household eyes? Her husband, wherever or whoever he was, might take pity on her. Her first was a boy, after all. Or they all might make her suffer.

Law does not always control the secrets doctors keep. Normally I would tell the parents, discuss everything with the family. Of course, if I said nothing, the girl would be expected to have more children.

"...She was too young to have this child." I couldn't resist scolding, even in my stilted Arabic. "She should not have another for at least three years; this was a serious injury." She needed time to heal, time to grow. I wanted to say ten years.

Understanding dawned on the mother-in-law's face, her eyes softened. "It's true; she was young when she came to us. I hope you will come to check on her," she said. I nodded and smiled.

We did return to the remote compound three weeks later to check on the fistula. The young mother was in bed with her baby nursing happily, five pounds heavier. Kasi, my cinnamon girl served as her nursemaid.

"She has been eating twice as much porridge in the mornings. Mother says she will get fat, and Jofe will not want her anymore. But she keeps giving her big bowls and sweet-breads in between meals." She looked up at me smiling, and I basked in it. "I think she is trying to make her fat."

I grinned at her, tore my eyes away. "Why would she do that?"

"So her son will leave Leneah alone and pay more attention to his first wife. Besides, Leneah did her duty; her first son is a boy."

I never heard a child talk that way about duty before.

"Yes, Leneah definitely served him well, gave him a lot." I could not keep the bitterness out of my tone.

Kasi nodded solemnly. "But I do not care. I will be good in other ways. They will see. Get a job, send money."

"Send?"

Her eyes darted up at me, but she did not reply to my surprise.

"What do you want to do?" I asked, meaning so many things.

"Leave here. Maybe, become a teacher."

This silenced me a moment. I imagined the steps she would have to take to achieve higher education, both literally and figuratively. Would she travel alone to the nearest grade school?

"Have you ever been to the city? To San'a?" I took my time packing up.

"Yes, my family went to a wedding, it was a great party."

"What did you think of it?"

"Of the wedding?"

"No, of the city."

"Oh, it was amazing! The buildings look like art."

I found it beautiful too; many of the buildings have impressively ornate façades. "It is one of the oldest cities in the world, did you know that? Will you go there?"

"If I have to. I would rather go to Britain or the U.S., where women drive."

I slipped her my card; dual-sided, one side in Arabic. I hoped that she could read. "Call me if you ever need a doctor."

She put the card in her pocket as I left some more antibiotics with Leneah and her mother-in-law.

This is a dream. I repeated the phrase in my head, each syllable carefully enunciated by my inner voice. To think of this girl's future is a dream. Wake up.

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Next night, I called Robert again. He answered one ring before the machine.

"Hi! Have you...hold on a sec."

In the background music played. It sounded like my old Peggy Lee vinyl. A female voice spoke, but it wasn't her sultry tone. Was he relaxing in the living room with *her*, playing *her* music I used to have to fight him to play?

He returned to the phone, said, "Have you thought about what you want to do?"

"Yes, but whose voice was that?"

"Oh, just a friend from work."

They did work together, unfortunately, so there were always excuses for them to run into each other. There was a time when I wouldn't have asked any further questions, but I had heard brutal, all-encompassing truth. In my mind I stooped and picked up a rock, there were so many within reach.

"Really, who? None of the guys at the office are into jazz."

"Uh, it's Eva, actually. We were just going over the quarterlies."

"You play Peggy Lee for all your finance meetings?"

He cleared his throat. "Well, the guys don't have your good taste. So what did you decide?"

"I want to come home. If Eva won't be there."

He forced a chuckle, it sounded like a cough. "Of course not, why would she be?"

Before I could insert a sarcastic comment, he finished, "I'm so glad you want to come back."

"Not immediately; as soon as Patrick can work out a replacement."

"Of course," but this response was an octave lower than the prior. In the background I could hear knocking over a muffled female tone. My knees lost their strength, suddenly I felt thirsty and tired.

"You know what; I'll let you go back to your quarterlies." I wished it was just quarterly. I hung up.

Patrick appeared in the doorway at the sound of receiver meeting cradle.

"How's Robert doing?"

"He's well taken care of."

Patrick squeezed my arm. His hands matched his six foot three frame, large and toughened. Warm.

"It's my night to make dinner."

We each played our roles. We had two glasses of wine each, a rarity for us—as foreigners, we were allowed to bring two bottles into the country.

"What are we celebrating?"

"The freedom to drink wine," I said, and tossed back the last of my glass.

When he offered me a massage as he had so many times before, this time I didn't say no.

Our first kiss felt delicate, exploratory. The later ones were passionate and strong. He carried me to the bed, pulling off my cotton layers slowly, in amazement. Our intimacy was sudden, forceful. It had been so long, for me. I did love Patrick in a way, though I could never say the words, so as I welcomed him into me I encouraged him to savor this one time, as I did.

Afterwards, we lay awake watching each other. Patrick's fresh pine eyes tilted at an anxious angle. He finally got up the courage to ask, "Why now?"

I replied, "I'm not going to renew. I need to go back to the States."

He blinked. Sadness warped the curl at the corners of his lips. "Robert is a very lucky man."

"I want to bring Kasi with me."

He laughed, and I almost snapped at him the way I would have at Robert. How quickly I fell into old habits.

"I'm serious."

His laugh turned into a cough. "Even if the idea wasn't completely crazy, how do you know she really wants to go?"

"We've spoken."

"You say it like you had some serious consultation with her. She's eleven. She can't be expected to make such a serious decision."

"Her father made one for her and expects her to abide by it soon. And besides, she may be planning to run away alone."

Patrick swallowed loudly against the crickets.

"There's got to be some aid group that can help," I continued.

"I can think of one, but I doubt they can do much without her father's permission."

"Well, we have to do something." I stared at him.

"Are you talking about kidnapping?" He sat up.

"I didn't say that. But if she really wanted to go...if I *were*?"

Patrick drew a long sigh. "You're being crazy, you know. This is crazy."

"I know. Yes. I'm just being irrational. I know that. But Kasi is special."

"Jesus, you sound like her mother." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Every child holds all the possibilities for the future in their little hands. You're getting personal; I warned you, you can't get personal. People here won't think more of you. And imagine the damage to the Association's reputation. They'll say we're a group of child thieves."

"That's horrible." I never thought seriously of the damage I would cause, so I said, "But what about the women who want more for their daughters? And besides, I'll be gone, so what do I care what anyone around here thinks?"

Patrick tensed, but I forced a smile and tugged on him until he relaxed. Behind my smile I remembered the matron, and as I moved closer to Patrick I thought of slim shoulders in a yellow room.

"And the Association? Can I point out again this is crazy? What about your reputation? What about mine?"

I considered my answer carefully. Patrick had been with the Association for over a decade. "You could say you terminated my contract because I mentioned my plan to you, and that I went ahead without your knowledge."

"Wow. You're seriously considering this."

"No," I said, but my thoughts rose above my life before I met Kasi, moving around the Association like mist, cooling my pillow as I drifted into sleep. I spared no tears for reputation; mine, Patrick's or the Association's. I wondered what Robert would think when I told him about her. I wanted to live the dream.

In my dream Kasi has never seen a plane up close in person, let alone taken two international flights. I have never taken a private plane before, so it's a first for both of us. She doesn't cry, despite the pain in her ears, despite leaving all she knows. I give her a piece of gum.

"Chew it hard, it helps your ears pop."

"Wow, gum!"

I give her the whole pack.

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In the morning I woke next to Patrick. He stared up at the ceiling, granted me a corner of his eye.

"Did you dream about her?"

I forced a smile. "I'm going back. I wasn't just saying that."

"Were you just saying everything else?"

"... Yes. I just.... I miss her." Not Kasi. I didn't sit at Kasi's bedside as she wasted away, rubbing Vaseline on the sores to either side of her nostrils. I didn't know the color of Kasi's bedroom.

"I know." Patrick said, but how could he?

In the dream Robert meets us at the airport. I keep my sunglasses on when we kiss; better that I keep him at arm's length at that moment. I cannot gush "I love you" until we have it out. But I am back. When he sees Kasi he sees Natalia at my side, his eyebrows freeze in peaks that form more wrinkles than I remember. It makes him look wise, distinguished. When she extends her tiny hand to shake his, a grin creeps over his face, and I know he loves her too.

In reality Robert did meet me at JFK, but I was not cool and collected. I laid my head on his chest and cried, and he hugged me and cried. But even after he turned the den back into a nursery, I dreamed of cinnamon and sunflower paint.

The End