

A Cat with Cut Whiskers called Rayyes

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We finally reached the building. It was around midnight; a couple of boys were washing the foyer with soap and water. It was cold; Simone wore a black, fancy coat with a fur collar that seemed inconsistent with her dishevelled look and colourful pants with their many dirt spots. The elevator wasn't working and there was no electricity, so we started walking up the stairs to the tenth floor. When we reached our destination we were gasping for breath. Simone stood in the middle of the long corridor as if she wasn't sure where the apartment was, and then she rushed determinedly to one of the doors, knocking frantically and calling with an intimate and mysteriously gentle voice "Rayyes... Rayyes". She told me more than once that the cat wasn't beautiful at all, that he looked grimy with a few bugs in his soiled fur and that someone had volunteered to cut his whiskers, but then she backtracked with her bad English, asserting that this was due to his homeless days in the streets but now he was slowly cleaning himself up.

Someone opened the door carrying a candle, a round young man wearing a *dishdasha*¹ so I thought he could be Saudi or Kuwaiti, and I wondered to myself: "Is it possible that we still have tourists despite the war?" Simone darted into one of the rooms still calling "Rayyes... Rayyes". I explained to the *dishdasha* man, who seemed scared and surprised, that she was looking for a small cat but the young man made no comment and seemed more interested in explaining to me who he was and why he was in the apartment, even though I hadn't asked. He was Rida's brother, he said, adding that I must know him. As the young man looked frightened, I decided to act as if I knew Rida and pretended to try to remember and asked, "Rida who?" And he answered, "Rida Al Rawwass". I immediately said "Ah... Rida..., of course I know him, how is he?" The young man's features relaxed, as did I, and as I knew his brother he seemed more comfortable, and he continued to say, as we walked towards the room where Simone was searching, "Rida owns this apartment, as you know, but because of the war and the shelling..." and he

¹ A long white robe traditionally worn by men in the Arab Gulf countries.

added information about the family's losses that I don't exactly recall. I asked Simone if she had found the cat and she shook her head worryingly, adding "impossible, he was here this morning" as she cast a suspicious look towards the young man who seemed frazzled. At this moment, strangely enough, it occurred to me that this young man might have eaten the cat. As if he could sense our implicit accusations, he began to defend himself and denied that he had ever seen a cat in this apartment, that he hadn't left since noon... and he turned around, suggesting that we search in the other rooms of this big apartment. I noticed the number 7 written in English on what I assumed was his undershirt under the semi-transparent *dishdasha*, and I felt pity for this young man and decided not to embarrass him any further with questions about the cat, even though I was sure that he had simply opened the door and kicked the cat out when he came to check his brother's apartment.

I first saw her in one of the offices of the revolutionary movement, and since I had nothing to do I thought, why not have a fling, and I leaned towards my friend who was talking to her and asked him about the girl. He immediately behaved like a sport and asked her loudly in French, "Do you know Youssef?"

She cast a friendly but empty glance towards me, and I nodded my head, smiling quietly. It was clear that she wasn't interested in getting to know me further. For some unexplained reason, I noticed my friend was pushing us towards one another; he even suggested that we all speak in English, a language that none of us spoke very well. She was cooperative and started talking in English, searching for the words. Something was clearly bothering her; she wanted to return to Geneva and was wondering if she could go back via Beirut, and I told her: "Of course, you can, why can't you... is there...?"

She answered: "Of course... this is not the problem; the problem is that when I came from Geneva, I flew to Damascus airport because Beirut airport was closed at the time... and now I'm looking to find an airline that will accept to fly me out from here..."

I scratched my head, as did my friend, trying to resolve this dilemma. I suggested that she fly MEA and she answered desperately: “Oh my god, that was my first option, but they said ‘impossible’.”

I said: “Well then, in that case, why don’t you call Swiss Airlines perhaps...?”

She answered: “This is the question: is this airline still flying here or not? I haven’t been able to get an answer to this question even though I’ve been asking for three days.”

‘This is my opportunity’, I said to myself. I got up from my chair and suggested that we call airport information, they would certainly know. I started walking towards another room in the office where there was a phone, and she stood up, full of hope, and my friend got up and said that he had to leave, ‘goodbye’, and he smiled reassuringly at me on his way out.

I started my enquiry while she sat in front of me, smoking heavily. After a few attempts the nice information officer confirmed that Swiss Airlines were not open yet because its offices had been shelled and were being renovated to re-open soon. He suggested that I call another number, which he gave me, ‘maybe they will know something’. I gave her this information as she offered me a cigarette. I tried to call the other number, but the phone rang but no one answered. I looked at the time and told her there was no one at the office, maybe you should try again in the afternoon, and I gazed at her quietly. We smoked two cigarettes from her pack, and I noticed she had picked up one of our national habits of offering cigarettes, but in a crude manner that made me smile. I think we’ve become a little bit more conservative when offering cigarettes to others... but for her, she wanted to show that she belonged here... funny Simone!

I exclaimed suddenly as I looked at the time, “Have you eaten?”, and she shook her head, so I suggested we go out to eat. “How about Raousheh?” I asked, but she proposed instead that we head to the commercial district to take photos of the destruction, and I said, “leave the destruction for now, I need to catch sight of the sea – it has been a long time since I last saw it.” She agreed and grabbed her purse and camera and we left the office.

When we got out onto the street, I suggested we take a taxi, and she objected and urged that we take the “*Servees*”² instead. I liked the idea, and her sense of financial solidarity with a freedom fighter who presumably didn’t have a lot of money, so I agreed. But I told her we must walk at least ten minutes before we reach the nearest “*Servees*” station.

“I want to walk,” I added, “and I assume that you can walk because you’re Swiss and people’s primary hobbies in Switzerland are skiing and walking.” She smiled wearily and asked me not to treat her like that, asserting that she views herself as a global citizen. She then added, in a whisper, as if talking to herself: “I don’t think I love my country, nothing ever happens there.”

We started walking under the warm winter sun, taking slow strides, but we were quite breathless. I was exerting an effort to maintain a calm tone and not to expose my emotions, and as for her she was talking spontaneously with an audible gasp.

I lost track of the road as she started telling me about the Jewish neighbours they had had when she was a child, and the compassion of the Jewish lady who used to tell her that she was thinking about Jewish and Palestinian children and how the adults needed to do something for their sake. I kept silent, determined not to delve into these thorny issues that burnt my soul, and I almost asked her to stop talking but instead I stared at the sky and said something about the sea. She didn’t hear my comments about the weather and the sea, and continued: “I think my family might be Jewish, my family name is Jewish, but I don’t know much about this, my parents are Christian...” I told her I didn’t care whether she was Jewish or *Siknaj* or...

She was curious about the word “*Siknaj*”, and I said, maybe it’s a distortion of the word “Ashkenazi”, or it could be the name of an old western Jewish cult. She asked enthusiastically if they were the ones with sidelocks, and I said: “Exactly, and they are the ones who put Vaseline on their sidelocks.” Her enthusiasm mounted and she said, “Yes, I saw them once when I was in Israel.”

² A public transportation system in Lebanon where the taxi takes multiple persons heading in the same direction for a fixed fare. The direction is set by the driver depending on where the passengers are going. The passenger would state his/her destination and the driver either accepts or refuses to take them.

That word penetrated my ear, and I involuntarily stopped walking and asked her slowly as I felt myself impersonating a clever security man: Did you say you were in Israel?

She answered spontaneously, without taking note of the ‘security-man’ tone in my voice: “Yes, in 1974, after the war. I went as a journalist to see what happened to them there.”

I asked: “And how did you find them?”

She answered: “They were nice to me, but the prices were staggering, I’m surprised they can survive such extremely high prices.”

We reached a military checkpoint, one of the ones that only stop cars, but the officer looked us over and pointed with his gun for us to come close and asked for my ID. I showed him my political party ID, which he perused as he looked up at me, and at Simone who started searching through her papers. He gave a long stare at my ID for the second time, and brought it close to my nose asking: “What is this word?” I said, “it’s my name”. He said, “no, the word opposite profession”. I said, “freedom fighter”. He lowered the ID and his machine gun together and shook his head deeply with a cynical smile on his face, commenting as he returned the ID to me “Ha... all of you are freedom fighters!” He stared at me, and at Simone. I didn’t respond, took her hand and we walked away without looking back.

I don’t know how things would have been between us without Jean-Pierre Filioux, who appeared the moment we sat at that restaurant overlooking the sea. It was as if Jean-Pierre was destined to be our third leg the whole time – and he left the same time that Simone left, but on another flight to Paris.

I felt from that first moment that I would never like this person. There are people who you cannot like, no matter how hard you try, and for me Jean-Pierre was certainly one of them...

However – and this is the irony – Jean-Pierre was very dear to Simone. He was one of those rare people who could get Simone to laugh that scandalous exquisite laugh which often embarrassed me as we walked down the street. The love she had for him was

certainly not because he was the only foreign journalist in Beirut during those difficult days, there were tens of journalists and spies and other foreigners...

I admit that his comments and jokes were excellent, and I found them so even when they were translated into broken English. He was a nice man and everything, but I found him repulsive nevertheless, not because of any competition we had over Simone – I was certain of my triumph on that front – it's just that Simone used to like him a lot and asked about him. Not only that, three days after moving in with me she asked me outright to invite him to stay with us in my apartment because he had run out of money and didn't have a place to stay. I asked, how can one be a journalist and run out of money, and she explained that he works for leftist media in France so he has a limited income. She started talking about him in a tone that went beyond that of a friend or a colleague to more that of a tender mother. I was touched listening to this young woman who was not yet 22 years of age talking with such compassion about a strong, tough man of 35 – and this transformed my feelings into their opposite and I exaggerated my welcome and offered that we go look for him immediately. But she wasn't enthusiastic about the idea and waved it away saying: "You don't have to go that far... we will see him tomorrow."

And she sat on my knees, covering me with her heartfelt kisses.

I said that I didn't like him when I first saw him when we chose an outdoor table at that restaurant. He was wearing a *kefiyyeh* covering his head and ears as he greeted her from a distance. Then he sat at a table a few metres away from us and started eating. Then he raised his head and removed the *kefiyyeh* a little and asked her a question in French and she answered him. He went back to his plate, then he raised his head again and asked a second question and she answered him. This went on for a while, and I felt like he had a pair of long invisible scissors that he was using to cut through our conversation at any minute. When he asked the last question, as he was chewing, I noticed that he was slightly bald and wore round glasses. I hated his glasses and his early baldness, and I detested the *kefiyyeh* that he was wearing and I almost screamed, "You can go to hell, you and your *kefiyyeh* and your round glasses..." but I kept silent instead, and took a big gulp of wine, feeling my stomach bloating. I looked at Simone, expecting that she might be a bit embarrassed – I wasn't sure – because she kept turning her gaze from him to me,

rotating her head in a semi-circle at least from time to time, when finally the moment came when the situation seemed too ridiculous and dear Jean-Pierre put an end to it, not by concentrating on his plate but by moving to our table with his plates and glasses. Here I realised that whatever fantasy I had about my rights over Simone was merely a figment of my imagination... and I started preparing myself to accept Jean-Pierre as an inexorable fact.

During the first few days she seemed distracted and unable to concentrate on anything, as if she was looking for something impossible to find. I attributed this to her being a kind of gypsy woman, or no more than a street cat. I even bluntly told her that, and confessed that I found her dangerous. She asked, with interest, why that was, and I said because I think she's the type who can suddenly drop a man from up high to fall hard onto the ground. She was surprised, and adamantly denied it, insisting that I give her an explanation. I told her I didn't have clear reasons, it was just a feeling I had (I did have my reasons, but I didn't dare list them because I thought they derived from my feeling of entitlement that had not yet been validated for me to flaunt). She lit a new cigarette and shook her head sadly, saying that I was totally mistaken. She added that she hated to talk about the so-called past. But she found it imperative to tell me her story with the Iranian man she had lived with for at least a year... She tried to recall his name, and popped her fingers several times saying laughingly: "Can you imagine... I forgot his name!"

I smiled wisely, as if telling her: "You see! This is exactly what I mean... you live with a man for a whole year, then you forget his name."

"Ameed... (Hameed)... yes... Hameed... that was his name," and she smiled fondly as if recalling him entirely in her imagination. "Hameed... for a whole year he kept repeating every day that I didn't mean anything to him, that he would eventually put an end to our relationship. Do you hear me? He said that at a time when he used to sleep with me three times a day. And one day he went away on vacation, after saying his last goodbye as he called it. I felt like I wanted to cry, but I controlled myself for I never cry (she cried two days later). I squeezed his hand and kissed his beautiful black eyes, and after he left me the first thing I did was jump at the first man I met."

She asked: “Isn’t that normal?”

I answered that it’s normal in such a case, but I added that this story meant nothing to me.

She said: “Wait, the story isn’t over yet,” and she lit another cigarette. “After Hameed returned from his vacation the first thing he did was come to my room without even giving me a call, and I told him there was another man in my life, and he said ‘leave him, I love you’, and he went down on his knees and joined his hands together begging me, like in the old movies.”

She looked at me as if wanting to see the impact of her story on me and mumbled: “You see, I’m not one of those women who leaves a man just like that.” And she pointed with her hand.

Rayyes also seemed lost, with no self-esteem, with that scared wobbly walk giving the impression that he was expecting a blow any time, because he was in the streets before Simone found him again on the morning after the night of the *dishdasha* man. But her kindness and steady love gradually instilled confidence in him. She had the patience to kiss him and pamper him at any time, even during our private moments, kissing his dirty mouth and fur, which clearly contained some bugs. During the first two days he loved to pee in one of the corners of our room, and she would get up from the warmth of the bed and wash his soil with water and soap and then add two drops of gasoline as I advised her. She didn’t hesitate to punish him firmly and scream at him with an angry tone, which he sensed and he would scurry away to the kitchen. But when she saw him scurrying off her anger would disappear and she would say, “look how cute he is when he’s running away”. She would call him kindly again, and the damned cat would return. She would hug him with the same motherly passion and kindness. When she did that, when he felt the warmth, before and now, he would turn around and start loudly sucking at one of his nipples (male cats, not only female cats, have nipples). I shuddered when I first saw a red bump on his belly, thinking that it was a kind of disease, but Simone explained that this was only one of his nipples and that this was psychological. Rayyes had not had enough suckling time with his mother when he was a baby for one reason or another, and that

was why he was compensating for this now, just like a child sucks his thumb after weaning.

Great. But Jean-Pierre, who was listening, found all of this corny and exaggerated and asserted that there were millions of children who needed kindness more than this cat. And he immediately launched an attack against what he called the European sycophantic obsession with pets, despite Simone's objections, and he said firmly, as the tip of his nose shook: "This is no more than bourgeois hypocrisy and whoredom."

Simone lost her temper and started talking in French, forgetting to apologise to me as usual when she needed to express herself accurately in front of Jean-Pierre.

Jean-Pierre lost his temper as well, and I remained a quiet onlooker at this violent quarrel without understanding anything except the word 'Tal al Zaatar', which was repeated at an average of once every ten seconds at least. Jean-Pierre's face turned red, even more than it usually was, and Simone proved to be a vicious contender in defence of her opinions, and of Rayyes (and me, too, because I also loved him). As for me, I felt that I didn't have a place in this family dispute and I went to the kitchen and opened a can of sardines; I gave Rayyes half of it and I ate the other half.

Her eyes were blue in the morning, green at noon and olive green in the evening. She had the longest black eyelashes I have ever seen, and I thought they were artificial and told her so. To prove they were real, she gave them a forceful tug and I grasped her hand, fearing that something bad would happen, saying: "Ok, I'm wrong." She had a fair, freckled face that eventually became familiar and even attractive. She was a wildflower with luscious lips, and I used to see in them, especially when she winked with her left eye, the charm of the first feminine cell that knew what a woman could be like. Her walk was funny, her thin legs moved asymmetrically to the extent that I thought she had polio when she was a child, but when I asked her it turned out that this was her normal gait.

I often used to stare deeply at her face, and she'd ask me what I was thinking, and I would say that she reminded me of someone I knew. She would say who, and I'd say: a man. Finally, after a few days, it occurred to me that she bore a close resemblance to my

friend Sameeh al Qudsi, and she exclaimed indignantly: “And who is he, Sameeh al Qudsi, for God’s sake?”

I told her the story of this friend who I had met at least twenty years ago in Amman. He went to Turkey to study after finishing high school, but then he forgot why he went and started chasing Turkish women, sending messages to his father at the end of every year saying that he was doing well at University. This went on for five years, all the time his father believing that he would graduate in a year at most. In order to cover up the situation and make sure that his father didn’t hear the truth, he used a smart tactic.

Whenever someone came from Amman to Turkey, for whatever reason, my friend would invite them and take very good care of them, and when the visitor was about to return to Amman, Sameeh would shake his hand strongly and say, “please keep whatever you saw from me to yourself”.

Once I noticed that her lovely smile resembled that of the Egyptian actor Hussein Fahmy. She resented it when I told her, and turned her back to me saying in a childish tone: “You only say I look like men.” I explained that I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings, it was just that her smile really resembled Hussein Fahmy’s smile. To prove that I wasn’t joking, I suggested that we went to the Strand cinema in Hamra street (his film *The Melody of Luck* was playing there) and she agreed. We went to the cinema and at the entrance we saw five posters with photos of the Egyptian actor smiling that great smile. After she perused the photos curiously, she laughed that scandalous laugh, and not only that she kicked me and then held me close, whispering ‘mon amour’ and started to kiss me, but I stopped her, looking around and saying ‘not here’.

We moved quietly from solitude to familiarity to unison, and before I knew it I couldn’t sleep unless she lay naked in my arms till morning.

She would whisper ‘Bonjour’ in the morning and in the afternoon and the night, her eyes glittering with light and honey...

God bless that little woman.

She left, and left me her cat, and now we have to make do with each other in this long winter.

Beirut.

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