

Two Short Stories by Mohammad Ali Taha

Jamal Asadi

Abstract

This paper introduces two short stories by Mohammad Ali Taha: "A Rose to Hafeeza's Eyes" and "Wild Honey." These two stories, which will appear in my *Mohammad Ali Taha's 'A Rose to Hafeeza's Eyes' and Other Short Stories*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, are not necessarily the two most celebrated stories by Mr. Taha.* My aim rather is to introduce Taha to scholars and readers interested in Arabic literature in English, a language they can cope with more easily.

Introduction

According to Mohammad Ali Taha, now a retired teacher, born in the village of Meár, Galilee, in 1941, writing is a very difficult task. In a series of interviews I conducted with him (See Introduction to *Mohammad Ali Taha's 'A Rose to Hafeeza's Eyes' and Other Short Stories*, 2008), he told me that when he plans to write a story, he chooses the hero and finds him/her a suitable name. Then the hero and he learn each other. They share their daily tasks for days and weeks. They drink coffee together, have picnics together and travel together; they talk about various subjects; they agree and disagree on current affairs. They tell jokes and anecdotes. They sing, laugh and even cry together. Only when he feels that he knows this person, does he embark on the tiring task of writing the first sentence.

When I asked him if he remembers the conditions under which he wrote "A Rose to Hafeeza's Eyes," he answered that he, "won't take the risk of interpreting my stories. It is the worst thing a writer can do! But I would like to tell you that all my heroes are unreal despite the fact that many readers have the illusion that my heroes are people whom they know or have met

* This article had been written before the book saw light.

somewhere. Let me give you an example. A lot of critics and readers believe that I am the protagonist of "A Rose to Hafeeza's Eyes," but they are wrong. There is no doubt that I depicted the different spheres of lives which I have lived in my childhood, and there is no doubt that more than one picture of barren women from my village inhabited my imagination while I was writing; but the characters are merely fictional. I also remember"—his forehead wrinkled—"that this story flowed out of my pen just as a spring burst out of stone." "Many critics wrote that Hafeeza stood for Palestine and approached the story politically. I don't know where they got this interpretation. I did not intend it. Still I tell myself that perhaps unconsciously I did think of my cause. Who knows?"

"Ok, then. Will you say the same about "Wild Honey?" I asked.

He replied, "Now listen to this story. I was walking along the beach once when a man in his fifties invaded my privacy. He wanted my company. We walked together more than an hour without either of us saying a single word. The following day the invader's lips parted and resisted reunion. He told me about his exciting adventures with single girls and married women. The man told me about fascinating affairs he had had with women from Russia and Romania and with French and American tourists. I knew that my story-teller spoke only one language: his mother tongue. So his stories were fake, but interesting. One day I was fed up with his fabrications and lies. I made up a scene to make him understand that I was no longer interested in his company. The man stood in front of me in his bathing suit and looked at me with ease and confidence, and said, 'Mr. Mohammad Ali Taha! I enjoyed your company but before I leave I was wondering whether you are sure of your request!'

"The sea, on that day, was stormy and there was a black flag warning swimmers of the dangers of swimming. I felt my companion had caught me red-handed. He knew his stories pleased me and I was shocked when he

called me by my name. A few days afterwards, the character of Sameeh as-Safadi was given birth. The new character not only replaced my nameless companion but enriched my imagination with more adventurous plots and daring encounters. Eventually 'Wild Honey' was created."

A Rose to Hafeeza's Eyes

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Our neighbor, Sameeh, once told me that his father, Mahmoud, told him that the tribal leader of our village, the *Mukhtar*, once said, "Glory be to *Allah*, Who did not create a brother to Hafeeza." The crowd around him were skeptical, said, "A brother or sister, *Mukhtar*?" He replied smilingly, "A brother, folks. If she had had a brother in whose veins the blood of men flowed, he would surely have killed one of us and then he would be executed by the government. On the other hand, if he'd kept quiet, his emotions would have exploded inside him and he would have been killed by his own thoughts!"

And Hafeeza was the most famous woman in our village; she was known by men and women, the old and the young. This is so not because our village was so small that we know the food prepared in each household, but because Hafeeza captured the minds of the old as well the hearts of the youths and aroused the jealousy of women so much that they wished she'd go blind and die young. So much for wanting that! *Allah* does not listen to the prayers of the jealous.

And since Said az-Zurīe, son of the bleary-eyed woman, sang his famous folk song, our village was turned upside down. The married women feared the loss of their husbands. Nobody knows how many women had a dream, the essence of which was that Hafeeza had stolen their man! And the mothers fretted about their sons who had just seen hair on their own chests

and whose upper lips were green with baby moustaches, for love is a calamity and passion is a disease.

They say that it was so hot that the sun could burn the tail of the bird. The barley, sowed before first rain, had already yellowed; the village had a rest before the days of harvest.

And they say that one day Hafeeza's mother combed Hafeeza's hair in a way that stimulated the senses, tied her hair with an orange kerchief, sprayed some drops of perfume that the locals called Sudanese bride, and said, "Your hair, the light of my eyes, makes my mouth go dry; please, go to the spring and fill the jar with water! May *Allah* protect you!"

When Hafeeza got to the spring, the men were having a siesta under the cherry tree; nobody noticed her. This world, however, is run by fate and His judgment; feet, doors, foreheads and ankles can be omens of goodness or evil. So by sheer coincidence, Said az-Zurīe, the son of al-Amsha, the bleary-eyed woman, was running after a crazed and wall-eyed kid goat to try to wean it. In fact, the kid goat was Satanic. It jumped from rock to rock with the young boy, Said, following it. While he was running and jumping, Said stumbled and almost fell a long way, but his hands shot out and stopped his fall. Exactly then, Said heard a soft voice saying, "I appeal to You, our Protector!" He raised his head and saw His miracle--Glory be to Him--speaking to him through Hafeeza, who was carrying the Gazan jar. Astonished, he stared at her but she walked away, deliberately slowly, towards water outlet of the spring. Moved, Said sang, screaming his head off,

Oooooooooof!

To the well of faithfulness came Hafeeza;
She let her black pigtailed hang down, Oh Hafeeza;
Happy he who is chosen by Hafeeza;
Sing! Even if you became a door- to- door beggar.

All men taking a siesta woke up; and Said's song reached every house. It was sung by shepherds on the slopes of mountains, by the harvesters in the fields and by the old people drinking coffee, playing *Mancala*, or playing cards and laughing when some players managed to marry the "Queen" to the "King." Even young children sang it when competing on their hoppyhorses made of cane. And a great many men had new gowns tailored from *Rosa*, or bought new Usefian embroidered hats, wrapped their head-covers Kurdish style, put indigo on their trousers and exchanged their bills for coins that could tinkle in their pockets, all for the sake of Hafeeza's eyes and pigtails.

As for the women in our village, it is said – and this saying has no reliable source – that Hasan Darweesh's shop, the only shop in our village, ran out of sugar. The women, you see, had bought all of it and turned it into *Aqeedah*, a special mixture made to remove body hair. In the wake of this, women's legs shone and their eyebrows became as thin as pen lines. Even the *Gazan* door-to-door salesman, upon visiting the village, wondered vaguely what had happened to all the *kohl* in the village, when the supply he had brought was sold out. And the sugar story was confirmed by Mustafa al-Ghul's tale of his wife, Hishmah. Hishmah was known to have an unfriendly relationship with soap and water, and Mustafa al-Ghul was often repelled by her smell. He used to insult her, saying, "If I had put you in the wilderness at night, your smell would catch me three hyenas!" One evening, that same Mustafa al-Ghul took Hishmah by surprise when she was bathed and perfumed; her eyes powdered with antimony, and her body free of hair.

May *Allah* take your soul, Said az-Zurie!

What did you do, son of the blear-eyed woman!?

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I was a young kid playing with apricot pits and making circles, triangles and squares and other shapes with them as my mother sat at night with our neighbor, Hafeeza. They were on the porch of our home on a moon-lit, bright summer night. I needed some more apricot pits to play with so I passed between my mother and Hafeeza to fetch them from inside, and I stumbled over Hafeeza's out-stretched legs and fell between her arms; on the spot, she started kissing me sensually on my cheek, forehead and long hair. Then she tickled me in my chest; annoyed, I shouted loudly and my mother cried out, "Hafeeza! Has fire blown between your legs!?" Terrified, Hafeeza let go of me. I was pleased to have gotten rid of her so I could get back to my play. But Hafeeza, I saw, was frozen with no trace of fire or heat and then I heard Ma say apologetically, "Don't get angry with me! I did not want your eyes to hurt my child. They say that green eyes can blow a solid stone to pieces."

Hafeeza's eyes got as wet with tears as grass got wet with dew in April. She left the porch without even wishing us good night. But my mother said loudly, "May *Allah* endow you with a baby-boy!"

Hafeeza stopped visiting us for days, perhaps weeks. Even now I do not know the conditions under which my mother resumed peace with Hafeeza. Stranger yet, I myself felt a breeze of pleasure blowing on my face and flowing into my veins when I saw her, again, spending the summer nights with my mother on our porch.

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For seven days and nights the whole village danced, sang and played the drum and flute. Strong men competed against each other lifting weights. Gold glittered on brown and white forearms, on the chests of wives and

virgins. Bells, mouths and hands were filled with *kubbah*, rice and boiled and red-cooked meat. And every night the *Mukhtar* fired seven bullets from his English rifle which he had bought to keep himself safe back at the time of the Palestinian revolution against the English, in the 30's. The village had not had such a similar wedding party or so much excitement since the English killed *sheikh* Aaref, led the rebels away to torture them with cactus, stole the crops of wheat, oil, and sesame, and destroyed the house of Ahmad, the local leader of the rebels.

The wedding party came when people ached for pleasure. The bridegroom was Hassan al-Abed, his mother's only child, and the bride was Hafeeza, who had spouted unexpectedly in the village like a beautiful rose in the midst of drought and sadness following the revolution. Indeed, she was a girl whom, to quote the *Imam*, could be described as a nymph from Eden. She had a big, harmonious body with two black pigtailed reaching to her buttocks. Her face was brown and pretty and her eyes were green.

And, while shaking her bottom, whetting the appetite of her friends, Rukayya hinted at Hafeeza's wedding, "Dance, damned girls! Now Hafeeza is safely married off, and you will not have to share your husband with her!!"

Rukayya sang proudly,

We are the daughters of nobility.

Allah has endowed us with reverence and dignity!

The women's songs, which embraced heavens and carried to the yard where men gathered, were so tantalizing that men's lips glistened, their bodies trembled, and their necks stretched as they listened. The crowd of men urged Said to blow the flute and the excited youth danced in a big circle. Then, Ahmad al-Majeed jumped in to sing his dirty songs. Excited, Ahmad left no female part not fully described, and the men got as enflamed

as camels who'd eaten artichoke and cactus. Sensing this, the women left their yard and came close to men's, to eavesdrop on their songs. Rukayya got so wound up that she guffawed, and the men heard her loud laughter. So Ahmad, the singer, turned to her husband saying, rudely, "Your filly is calling her stallion! Go home!" It was then that Said az-Zurīe, son of the bleary-eyed woman, again sang his famous folk song, making men to shriek and scream. And someone added to Said's song:

Hasan al-Aabed is surely rich!
 He is not a beggar.
 And his bride is a catch,
 That makes his richness even bigger!

The young men spent that night tossing and turning in bed, jealous of Hasan al-Aabed while married men slept with their wives with the lantern off each imagining that his mate was Hafeeza, with her two long pigtails and two green eyes. And Rukayya was said to have confided that she had never experienced such pleasure, not even during the first night with her husband.

May *Allah* punish you, damned break-neck Said az-Zurīe!

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As time went on, Hafeeza got more and more beautiful, as if she were a species unto herself. Each new baby in our village was born as attached to her as if her beauty were a minaret to which eyes and hearts were drawn. Her face never wrinkled; she had no grey hair and her flesh never got flabby. As Rukayya said, "Nothing can kill the bodies of Eve's daughters but pregnancy and delivering babies. And we women are a species that is forever hungry."

After one year of married life, Hafeeza visited the doctors of the area, the she-*sheikhs* and the he-*sheikhs*. She got syringes, took potions, wore one amulet after another, used numerous charms, drank water that dripped off

charms soaked with dew first thing in the morning. She abstained from eating rumens, lungs and the meat of improperly slaughtered animals.

Unfortunately, Hafeeza did not get pregnant, nor did she give birth.

When my mother said to Hafeeza on the porch of our house that summer, moon-lit night, "May *Allah* endow you with a baby-boy," Hafeeza felt sad and cried. Now when my mother repeated her wish to Hafeeza, the latter would comment, "Who cares, Um Sabri: a boy or a girl? Both are the creatures of *Allah*. All I hope for is a baby!"

She vowed to have a sheep slaughtered at Abu al-Heajah's Temple if she got pregnant. She waited for a whole year but nothing moved inside her womb.

Next, she went to the expense of having a big bull slaughtered at al-Khadr's Temple and again waited for a year but her period each month disappointed her.

As a last resort she whispered to her husband, Hasan al-Aabed, "Perhaps you should have a medical check up!" He slapped her on the face, shouting, "You are a she-mule that can never get pregnant or deliver a baby!"

She shouted back, staring at his face, "I am a genuine foal! You'd better know who you are!"

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My mother used to comb my hair and divide it in the middle, dress me in an embroidered shirt that looked exactly like girls' dresses, insist that I wear the Blue Bead on my neck and say chants to protect me against evil eye. On Friday nights she would fumigate my brothers and me with sage and summon the blessing of the prophet, Muhammad, saying, "May *Allah* pray on you! Oh! Muhammad!" I was annoyed by this extra care and did not like the embroidered shirt that kept me from playing in the dirt and jumping on

the dump in search of colorful glass, empty cans and broken surveyors' equipment. I often messed up my hair once I got away from my mother, afraid the other boys would tease me,

Here's a girlish kid!

He is shit, we bit!

I feared they would not let me play with them.

Many times I made my mother angry when I refused to put on the embroidered shirt and fought her combing my hair. She would scold me hitting my hand, but our neighbor Hafeeza was always there to protect me.

And one day I remember I returned home with my hair ruffled and my clothes, feet, legs and palms stained with dirt from playing with my friends in the soft ground of the dump. Seeing me, my mother went crazy and swore by my grandfather's tomb she would break my hands and legs. I stood at the end of the lane waiting for a savior to rescue me. To my delight, our neighbor, Hafeeza, came, drew me by hand and led me to her house where she washed my hands, legs and face with water and perfumed soap. Then, she fed me a slice of white bread and the thigh of a well-cooked chicken. And when I got up at night I found my head on her arm, my face close to her half-naked chest while the odor of her perfume invaded my nostrils.

I was confused.

I got scared when it was really dark, so she put my arm around her neck and I hugged her the same as I did to my mother. As of that night my relationship with my neighbor got stronger. I no longer worried about my mother's beating and threats. On the contrary, I stayed out longer, played with my friends more and became more devilish. Every child had a home, I had two; each child had a mother, I had two and each child had a lap to lean his head against; I had two.

And the truth was that I felt comfortable at our neighbor's house, which was clean and tidy while ours was full of children with their instinctive hostility to tidiness, order and cleanliness. Moreover, Hafeeza's house was quiet, ours noisy. Hafeeza used to receive me with a wide, pleasant smile, a hug and an embrace, while my mother would pepper me with questions like, "Where have you been? What have you done? Who stained your clothes? And what's that dirt on your hair?"

In addition, Hasan al-Abed, our neighbor's husband, was quiet and had no partner in bed while my father, upon entering our house, would declare emergency rules and never go to bed lonely.

And whenever my mother had a hen slaughtered, a strong battle over who got to eat it started and I could hardly achieve any success—while, at our neighbor's house, I was always the lucky one, in fact, the only lucky one. I ate what I desired when I desired however I desired and she tempted me to have more.

As for sweets, seeds and nuts, which our house knew only on special occasions, they were lots of them in the cupboard of our neighbor, Hafeeza.

And so it happened that I left our house at a very young age and moved to our neighbor's, to the lap of Hafeeza.

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One of my classmates asked me once while we were passing a summer night at the central yard of the village, where harvests were gathered, "Do you really sleep with Hafeeza on the same bed and under the same cover?!"

I proudly and innocently answered, "Yes."

"And what do you do at night, son of a ...?"

"If only I were you!" wished another.

Then I got angry and resentful and my friend quickly answered, "Don't get angry! Her husband is impotent. They have been married for fifteen years and still she hasn't got pregnant! Look at Hasan al-Aabed's bottom! Doesn't it look like a castrated guy's?!"

I wondered why they said all those nasty things about our neighbor and her husband, Hasan al-Aabed. I went back home and sat on a big stone at the entrance of the lane, reviewing what the children had said and linking it to what our neighbor, Hafeeza, did to me at night. She used to kiss me ferociously and hug me so hard that I narrowly escaped being slipped into her womb. Sometimes she took her breast out and put her nipple into my mouth saying, "Suck, Nono!" She pinched my thigh. She never beat away my hand when, pinching and playing, it swam on her body.

The next day the following happened to me:

Salwa, a daughter of one of our neighbors, was coming down off their roof. I let her mount the highest stair of the wooden ladder, then started up myself. She shouted, "Sabri! Get down! Make way!" I ignored her pleas and continued my ascent, fully aware that our neighbor, Hafeeza, was watching us. When Salwa and I were on the same rung, I wrapped my arm around her neck and kissed her, sure that she couldn't get away of fearing falling down. After I freed her, she went down the ladder cursing my father, my mother and my dirty upbringing. Our neighbor, Hafeeza, however, called me, "Come!" She took my hand and led me into her house. At night I heard her saying while kissing me, "You have become a man, damn you! You are the rooster of the neighbor's daughter, aren't you? Sleep well. Here's your hencoop." And she inserted my leg between her thighs while her breath got as fast as if she had got the fever.

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Our neighbor, Hafeeza, was the most famous and the prettiest woman in our village. Her face was brown and eyes green. And more, she was the most honest. All she wanted was a "piece" of a boy or a girl but her husband, Hasan al-Aabed, who had the bottom of an impotent man and the quietness of a castrated guy, never pleased her. Every man in our village, ranging from the *Mukhtar*, to the *Imam*, to the night watchman, wanted her. They wanted her first when Said sang to her, and they wanted her on the day when she was married to Hasan al-Aabed. But their desire got an extra push when they realized her husband was impotent. They thought she was an easy prey.

Saleem an-Nemr, for example, who had the biggest *divan*--the room in a house for receiving guests--our village, was a strong, handsome and rich man. One day, he learnt that Hafeeza was alone in the western field. He shaved, perfumed himself, put on the most elegant of his clothes and headed out of the village, walking north to hide his intentions. Then he turned west and caught Hafeeza by surprise, while she was uprooting wild grass in her field.

He said, "May *Allah* endow you with good health!"

"The same to you, Abu an-Nemr!"

"Hafeeza, I feel tired and need to sit in the shadow. I need a sip of water, too. And I know that the shadow I look for is there under your breast, and the water can come only through your lips!"

"Not all birds are edible, Abu an-Nemr. Shame on you and the sugarless coffee you offer in your *divan*! What an utter disgrace! Get away or I will let the whole village learn about your nastiness!"

He left disappointed.

He was one of many who tried their luck. All came back empty-handed.

It was only after I grew up that I understood why Abu an-Nemr used to summon me to his *divan*, especially when he was alone. He tried to make me

drink coffee one time; another, he sniffed at me and said, "Say hello, child!!"
He did not mention Hafeeza's name.

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Yesterday, our neighbor Hafeeza passed away. She had a very modest funeral in which tens of men took part as the *Imam* recited the usual *Quran* verses that remind listeners of death, break the backs of strong men and make devout believers shake with fear.

No folk songs were sung of her past glory when her coffin was carried away. She had no sons or daughters, no grandchildren or granddaughters!

No one offered condolences to Hasan al-Aabed. Rather, people stared askance at him. One could hear comments like:

"If she had been barren, Hasan would have married another woman."

"She was very genuine."

"She didn't have children because her husband was impotent."

"She did not tell her husband's disgrace in public."

"Had she mentioned that, she would have insulted him."

"She was a source of temptation to men."

And Rukayya said, "You, daughter of Eve, have nothing but patience!"

And Saleem an-Nemr, he of the large *divan*, said, "May *Allah* have mercy on you! You were chaster than the pigeons of Mecca."

And some people made signs one to another with their eyes.

When I got home, I cried and cried and cried.

Long ago I returned to my mother's house after spending some years in the city. I got married to Salwa. Then, I moved to the city where I started work at a restaurant.

Oh! Our neighbor, Hafeeza: I kept the secret for many years. May *Allah* forgive our sins! May *Allah* forgive our sins!

Oh! Our neighbor, Hafeeza! Please consider this story from me as a green plant laid across your green eyes and as a red rose placed on the part dividing your black hair into two long pigtails.

May 1980.

Wild Honey

This story is like an untamable filly—a wild-hearted filly which simply refuses to be broken. Whenever I embark on the task of writing, my power declines and the words do not obey me. Some years have already passed and I still ponder the idea. Like a desert gazelle, it always turns from me and runs away. I spend a great many hours at night looking for the first sentence; at the moment of the meeting, the moment of discovery, I arrange the words and sentences in my mind but when I get up in the morning and I mean to write, I can't do it. Sometimes, I write one sentence or two, one line, two or five lines. Once I wrote two full pages before the words simply ran out. I felt exhausted, so I put my pen on the desk and tore all I had written. I complained to my friend, Ibrahim, (a well known critic and a good reader of fiction) who chastised me for tearing the sheets of paper; he asked me to keep the drafts of every story I wrote. I gave him my promise, but I didn't keep it.

Yesterday I managed to write seven lines but again I tore up the paper. What is strange is that this story really happened, and to me, and to tell it I did not need special inspiration or cinematic tricks. All I needed to do was to write down what happened in the exciting meeting between Mr. Sameeh as-Safadi and me. Here lay my problem. For some moments it came to me to call this story "The Occurrences of the Exciting Encounter with a Heedless Youngster." But I dropped the idea because the name reminded me of a title from the Turkish era and that was incongruent with globalization and modernity. As for what happened yesterday, I said loudly while sitting on

my desk, "Mr. Sameeh as-Safad'i, damn you! You neither sleep nor let me sleep!" My wife heard me and rushed in to make sure I was safe and sound; she inquired about Mr. Sameeh as-Safad'i, that young man, whom I met only once. How did he break into my privacy without permission and make me meet him without making an appointment before or even after? How did he manage to make me listen to him and converse with him for three hours and fifteen minutes without me feeling the loss of time or its escape then he vanished? I do not remember if he bade me farewell or not. He disappeared and did not come back yet. I waited for him for days, a week, two weeks, one summer, two summers but he did not return. And the truth was, he never said he would. Why was I waiting for him, then? Why did I insist that I sit at the same place and turn my neck towards the gate of the swimming beach, whenever I saw somebody stepping inside? Was Sameeh as-Safadi a type who comes and does not come? Why did I wait so long? What's more, why did I feel sad on some days when I imagined that something bad happened to him? Why did I smile at some moments, while imagining him sitting next to a wild honey jar licking or sipping however much he wished? He did not tell me where he was from. He did not leave his address or the numbers of his home phone or his mobile. Even his name, why did I believe that his name was Sameeh as-Safad'i? Perhaps it was a fake name, a gang name. It is true he stretched out his hand when he shook hands with me and said, "Apologies, I am Sameeh as-Safadi." Naturally, he must have organized the words well. He chose the name, organized the surprise and made me be attracted to his story without me asking him about his address or his belonging.

The sea was angry that day. It seemed that some creature had provoked it so much that it was foaming with rage. Not a single bather dared to get in the water. There were two black flags flying over the two lifeguard towers on the coral beach while the beautiful bodies, of course female bodies, were

enjoying a sun bath on the silver sand. These were bodies covered by bikinis like scraps of fabric forgotten by fashion designers and tailors. Yes, these were bodies which received the sun and challenged it with the victory signs, while other bodies gave their backs to the sun and let its rays slide on their bodies, white as snow.

Unhappily, I gave up the idea of swimming, because my daily program from early May till the beginning of October was to get to the coral beach at seven o'clock in the morning, jog on the beach for one full hour, swim for half an hour, get a shower, enter the pub and drink a glass of lemonade or iced beer.

I have been practicing this hobby for ten years. I walk, run, stretch out on the sand, swim, sing, think of what I am going to write, have dialogues with the heroes of my stories, drink juice, have ice cream, drink iced beer and, above all—I hope you can keep it secret—enjoy looking at the young, beautiful, exciting, and provocative feminine bodies which were barely covered by a shy piece of cloth, which was once called a bathing suit. No one knows me here. No one disturbs me. No one watches me. And no one criticizes me for my hungry and lusty looks. No one will say to me, "Shame on you, man! Aren't you ashamed of your white hair? Your eyes are adulterous!"

The coming of Sameeh as-Safad'i that day and his invasion of my marine world reminded me of an event, narrated by Tawfeeq al-Hakeem, the Egyptian writer, in one of his books. The story is about what happened to him while studying in Paris. Every afternoon he used to sit with a very old man, whose name he did not know, watching the legs of women passing in the garden and competing in descriptions of their beauty. One day an official Egyptian delegation happened to visit Paris to attend a peace conference. The Egyptian delegation wanted to recruit other participants in the conference to support the cause of the Egyptian independence. Some

members of the Egyptian delegation happened to meet Tawfeeq al-Hakeem while sitting in the garden with his old Parisian friend. The next day the members of the Egyptian delegation summoned Tawfeeq al-Hakeem and asked him to convince his elderly friend to write an article supporting the Egyptian Independence for one of the Parisian newspapers. The man, they told him, was highly influential and his article would certainly have a profound impact on all other delegations. "That old imbecile!?" wondered Tawfeeq al-Hakeem. "Don't you know that he is the most popular writer in France?" they answered. "He is Alexander Dumas. One word from him will open closed doors."

In the afternoon, Tawfeeq al-Hakeem did go to the garden and sat next to his elderly friend and told him about the request of the Egyptian delegation. Struck, Dumas looked at al-Hakeem and said, with sorrow and sadness, "Our friendship is over."

Dumas stood up and walked away.

I, on the other hand, did not stand up. Nor did I walk away when Sameeh surprised me, "Mr. Mamdooh Nasrallah?"

I abandoned my view of the fascinating gulf, of the Carmel Mount that pushed the sea with its beautiful nose, of the blue water of the gulf which washed the nose of the Carmel, of the ships lying outside the sea port and having shelter in the tyranny of the mountain, of the fishing boats dancing on the waves, of Acre wall which did not give a damn to the roars of the sea, of the minarets and churches of the city praying to God and of the gulls disturbed by the stormy sea. I looked at the source of the voice with astonishment and I saw a young man, fully dressed, standing next to me. He did not wait for me to say yes or no. Rather, he took a chair and sat while saying, "Apologies! I am Sameeh as-Safadi."

I was confused. I did not think not even for a single moment of turning him away. He did not give me the moral right to do so. He started to talk. He claimed that he had looked for me everywhere and that he had tried to phone me, but eventually he decided to come to the coral beach. He did not tell me how he knew that I came here daily. I did not inquire him. What did it matter? How and whence did he know? What mattered was that he sat on the chair and started to talk. Rather than asking him questions, I let him ask them, and sometimes he answered.

He said, "Of course, you read books. Rare books. The books of masters. I mean books which tell *halal* from *haram*, lawful deeds from unlawful ones. Those old books which our good forefathers passed to us centuries ago when the Arabs were really Arabs and Islam was really Islam, with all due respect. The books which sketch life."

His small eyes showed intense worry. He talked tensely as if the rumbling of the sea reflected his mood. I confess I got mixed up in the beginning. I didn't know whether I should let him say all he wanted or if I should ask questions and investigate him.

He did not give me the opportunity to speak. He went on to say, "The case, our revered Master, is great. I mean worrying. I tell you the truth: I live in torture. Torture follows me, chases me. Sometimes I feel that my bed is made of thorns. I turn up and down in my bed but sleep escapes me.

"When I was a young kid, grown-ups used to tell us about the story of the she-companion, the ghost. She used to live in the Pomegranates Valley. She could take any color and shape she wished. Sometimes she would appear as a young girl. She would cry and beg others to save her saying she was a lost child, or, better yet, that her parents were dead. Other times she would appear in the figure of a beautiful girl or a gray-dark young woman with two pigtails long enough to touch her buttocks; she had heart-shaped,

yellow gray eyes which sparkled with love. First, she would stop passers-by in the valley. Then, she would call them and speak with them softly, 'Take me with you! I beg you!' If the passer-by were a horse rider, she would ask him to let her sit in the saddle behind him so that he could not resist her temptation. When she was seated behind him, she would change her figure: her legs, now covered with black hair, would become longer; her face would become ugly and rectangular; her sharp tusks would stand out and the nails of her long finger would get long as skewers that she could drive into the sides of her rescuer. When he looked back, he would see a horrible sight!! If the man were brave he would take out his knife and cut the saddle from the horse; then he would jump on the neck of the horse and let the companion fall together with the saddle on the ground. She would cry again, 'Stop, brother! Take me with you!'

"Such is my situation, sir! Whenever she called me, I forgot all about the world. I forgot my mother's tips. I forgot what *Allah* (all Praise and Glory be to Him) and His messenger say and I ran after her.

"She would appear through the window smiling. Moons and stars were smiling on her lips. Angels and Satan would jump out of her eyes and call out with a soft sound mixed with wild honey, 'Sameeh! Sameeh!' Right away one thousand Satans and one thousand horses would move in my body and I would forget all that was around me and rush to her. I would jump, run saying, 'I'm subject to your command!'

"Sir, I'm, Sameeh as-Safad'i; I descend from a noble family—honest, folks. My father, Ibrahim as-Safadi, was a manager of the Arab bank four years before he retired. He was a good man who did pilgrimage, visited the tomb of the prophet together with my mother twice, did three *ōmras*[†] and prayed five times a day, on the dot and with groups in as-Salaam Mosque.

[†] . Pilgrimage performed at other times than the regular fixed season of pilgrimage.

Even in the coldest mornings he did the dawn prayer in the mosque with others. For ten years he had put two orphans under his custody. He gave them monthly payments. My father is a good man; people in the neighborhood look him up. He takes his breakfast daily with my mother and heads towards a place where old people meet and does not get back until the noon prayer. And my mother is also a *hajjah* (pilgrim). She knows how to read and write. She is pious and fears *Allah*. She raised me to love the good, to love people. So many times did she tell me, "Listen Sameeh! Our prophet commanded us to take care of our closest neighbor, then the next and the next until the seventh neighbor. He said, 'Gabriel has been directing me to take care of my neighbor until I thought he was going to give the neighbor the right to inherit me.' So Sameeh, Watch out! Do your utmost to guard your neighbor and his possessions. Never desire his wife or daughters.'

Enough, mother of Sameeh! Enough! That is too much! Our neighbor's wife is not my sister or aunt. Nor is she among those women prohibited to me for marriage. Our neighbor's wife is a woman. She is very pretty. She has a voice mixed with wild honey. Whenever she calls me out to meet her, a thousand Arab stallions run in my veins. I am driven crazy. I run towards her. I say 'I am subject to your command!' And with her, I forget all about the universe. But when I get back home and see the pious *hajjah*, supplicating long after each prayer, I remember her advice. 'Remember, Sameeh, moral ethics!' Moral conduct is the base of religion. It is the real core of every human being. When Allah (Be Exalted) praised His messenger, He said, 'And thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character;'[‡] He did not say, 'You are from *Quraish*, you descend from the tribe of *Banī Hashim*'[§] or you are handsome;' rather, he said, 'And thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character.' Morals mean treating other people well. One should

[‡]. *Sūrah* 68: *Al Qalam*.

[§]. These are names of noble families from Mecca.

not lie, commit adultery. These are major sins which *Allah* tortures trespassers for. 'Well, *hajjah*. I see. Damn major and minor sins! I did not steal anything. Nor did I lie. I have an exalted character, *hajjah*. I have an exalted character. What is my guilt?'

"She appears through the window, smiling. Moons and flowers dance on her mouth. She calls me out with a voice mixed with wild honey, 'Sameeh! Sameeh!' I forget all about *hajjah*, the messenger, the angels and run towards her home. 'I am subject to your wish, my neighbor!'

"That day my father took his breakfast, drank his coffee and went towards the house for the aged as before while my mother was busy in the kitchen. She was preparing *molokhiyya* ** with chicken. As usual, I got up late. To tell the truth, I am a spoiled child. I am my parents' only child who came to this world after my parents had given up hope of a child. My parents overwhelm me with over-love and gifts. They never forbid me to have anything. On the contrary, they provide me with all I wished. I finished my high school one year ago and plan to attend university next year to study computers.

"I took the coffee kettle, the cup, a biscuit and the red pack of Marlboros and went out to the veranda. I drank the first cup and lit the first cigarette. The odor of our garden flowers stirred my senses. The red roses were already in bloom and thus tempted two birds to chirp. A bee flew from one rose to another and sucked nectar. The white pink flowers smiled but did not blossom yet. The sun was warm. The trees, flowers and grasses and the sun were smiling. Suddenly I heard a soft voice which was as sweet as wild honey, 'Sameeh! Sameeh!' I turned towards its source. It was her, our

** . A very popular (originally royal, hence the name) food, like soup, among Arabs made of a green herb bearing the same name.

neighbor, the pretty Hala, staring at me and smiling. There were stars dancing on her cherry mouth.

"Come!" she pointed with her small hand.

"I stood up off from the chair. I left the coffee and cigarettes. Our neighbor wanted something. She wanted my help. Her husband works in the south and comes back every two weeks to spend two nights here. What happened to her? Did she see a scorpion in the house she wanted me to kill it? A cricket? A lizard? A mouse?

"I walked ahead. I went out of our house and walked towards the neighbor's house. '*Hala!*' I cried. I rang the bell. 'Come in!' she said. I went in. 'Close the door after you, Sameeh!' I did. 'Come over! Where have you been? I say to you, come! Come on! Why are you embarrassed?' 'No. I am not embarrassed..., but.' 'No buts and no anything. Come over. I do not want anything from you but to rub my back. To massage me. Take this palm fiber and rub my back with your hand. Don't be shy. Don't be embarrassed. Aren't you a young man, a man! Come!'

"She appeared out of the bathroom. Her beautiful body looked like the body of an angel; her breasts challenged me. They invited me. Her mouth said, 'Come!' The two cherry fruits said, 'Come!' Her ivory neck said, 'Come!' The drops of water on her brown, beautiful body said, 'Come! Come! Come!'

"I went towards the bathroom door. 'Young man! Kid! Does a young man enter the bathroom with his clothes on? Take off your clothes and come! Be a man!'

"I do not know how I took them off. I found myself together with her in the bathroom. Under the shower. In the basin. She and me. Her body and mine. I saw what I did not know before.

"I rubbed her while she was laughing. She laughed and said to me, 'Take your time! Be slow!' I did things that did not occur to me even in dreams.

"I went out of her house. The house of Hala. I almost flew, I flew.

"After I went into our house and sat on the veranda, lit my cigarette and filled a cup of coffee again, I saw her wearing a bathrobe and rolling her hair up with a piece of blue cloth. She put her forefinger on her lip as if telling me not to tell.

"Hala knows that we, young adults, like to pride ourselves on our adventures, especially in presence of our friends. Hala also knows that we sometimes lie and make up imaginary stories to look like heroes before friends. We tell each other about adventures with girls and women, about meetings and kisses and hugs. All take place in our imagination. We lie and lie. We sprinkle lies like salt.^{††}

"What will Sameeh do?

"Hala requests me not to tell about our meeting. I must keep the matter secret. Well, I am not a boy, not a teenager. No. No. I won't tell anybody. The secret will remain secret.

"You made a mistake, Sameeh! What if her husband returned home and found you with her in the bathroom? Would he kill you? Would he stab you with a spear? What a scandal there would be in the neighborhood? What if your father found out what you did? Your father, the pilgrim, who visited the house of *Allah* twice? What would your mother, the pious and fearful *hajjah* say? Where did the education you sucked from your parents go? Where are the codes of good behavior? Where is your religion?

^{††} . It is a wisdom which means that young men lie as much as they use salt.

"But I am not a solid rock. It was she who invited me. She said 'Come!' She said, 'Come in!' She said, 'Take your clothes off!' She said, 'Rub my back!' She said and said and said.

"It was a mistake—a mistake which I won't repeat. *Allah* is oft-Forgiving, most Merciful. Undoubtedly, Hala's conscience must be bothering her. She won't do it again. Hala is a beautiful young woman and her husband is a handsome young man. He works in the south. He brings her money. They love each other. That's what things seem to me. Why did she betray him? Why??

"Hala's forefinger says to me, 'Be silent! We will not do it again.'" She will not do it again. I will not do it again.

"I went in my room and tried to sleep but I couldn't. I tried to read a book but I could not.

"I went outside. I wandered down the streets of the town. I wandered and wandered, but her body did not leave me. Her fingers did not leave my body. Her words rang in my ears. Hala was with me, next to me, in front of me.

"I went back home.

"I took lunch with my parents. My mother asked me why I did not eat as much as usual. 'Food? What food do you mean?'

"I claimed that I drank a lot of coffee, which reduced my appetite. And at night I could not sleep.

"Hala's body was inviting me. Her mouth was calling me 'Come!' Her breast was calling me. The nut fruit was burning my body.

A thousand Arab stallions were running in my veins.

And my father....

"What do you want from me, father of Sameeh? *Hajj*, Abu Sameeh as-Safadi? I am a grateful child. I obey my parents. I fast Ramadan in full. I do

not lie. I do not steal. I do not inform against anybody. I do not desire.... NoI... what is my guilt? She invited me. She said to me, 'Come!' She said to me, 'Come in!' She said, 'Do not be embarrassed!' She said, 'Take off your clothes!' She said 'Rub my back! Rub me with the fiber! Bathe me!' Am I a rock? I am a nineteen year old young man. I am waiting for the results of the entrance exams to the university. I am a guy with morals. I was raised to have good moral conduct. *Allah* (Exalted be His Name) and His messenger (Peace and Prayers Be Upon him) said....'

"I will not come back, Hala! I will not come back! I will not come back, Hala!

Long was the night.

Long was....

In the morning I got up. I shaved and put perfume....

I put on my clothes.

I tried to give myself an elegant appearance.

I prepared coffee and took out some biscuits.

I carried the kettle, the cup, a pack of cigarettes and went out to the veranda.

I filled the cup with coffee.

I took the first sip.

I took a piece of biscuit and dipped in the coffee and ate it.

I lit a cigarette.

Will she come?

She won't come.

Will she come?

Perhaps she will.

I drank some coffee and took a breath of the cigarette.

"Then her soft voice came to me. It was as sweet as wild honey. It said, 'Sameeh! Sameeh! Come!' I looked at her. She was smiling and the flowers of jasmine and jonquil were blossoming on her mouth.

"I left my coffee and cigarettes and rushed towards the voice. 'I am coming! Coming!'

"I heard the voice of my mother saying, 'Where are you going, Sameeh? You did not drink your coffee.'

I did not answer.

I opened the door and went in.

I took off my clothes and rushed into the bathroom.

The door was open.

The angel was naked.

She laughed. She said while embracing me, 'You grew up, Sameeh!'

Yes, I grew up and learnt yesterday's lesson.

I knew how cherries were eaten.

I knew how coffee was drunk with milk.

I knew how to break.

I knew how to break the nuts.

'Oh, Hala, my teacher! My neighbor! You are Eden and you are Hell.

You are wild honey and you are the needles of bees.

You are the flowers and you are the thistles.

You are the angel and you are Satan!

"Had it not been for you, I would not have known the woman. Nor would I have known the body. Nor would I have known the caves of evil. When I am with you I do not give a damn to what mother or father says; when I get back to my room and lie down on my bed, I hear the voice of my mother and the voice of my father saying, 'Guard your neighbor, Sameeh!'

Allah ordered us to guard our neighbor! And you make love to his wife on his bed and inside his bathroom?'

Am I a rock?

'Tell me, Sir. Please, you are an educated man. You read books, useful books which tell *halal* from *haram*. I mean those books where one would find the words of *Allah*, His messenger and His scholars.

"When I leave her house, I swear it will be my last visit to her, my last betrayal. And I say I will not drink my morning coffee on the veranda. But when morning comes, when I make the coffee and carry the kettle, the cup, the biscuits and cigarettes and go out to the veranda....

"Please, help me, Sir. Is my deed considered one of the major sins, which *Allah* does not forgive? Am I guilty? She tells me to come; she calls me. She is my evil companion. 'Come, Sameeh!' Wild honey calls me.

"I have no one but you to help me.

"Tell me what to do. She is pretty. She is pretty and dark brown. I tell you frankly that paradise is in her house. Can paradise be bad?"

I was on verge of telling him, "Listen, young man! You need an *Imam* or a scholar of religion, a *mufti*." But I did not.

This young man had an exciting story and lived a violent conflict. He had joy and torture. What would be the use of the *Imam*? Surely he knew what he was doing and knew the path his deeds led to. Perhaps he feared scandals or people's suspicious looks and mistrust. So he came to me and chose to meet me at a place where no one could find us.

I said, "My boy! (It was wise of me to call him so.) Adultery is one of the main sins which *Allah* does not forgive."

He said, "I know. I also know that he who commits such a sin is immortalized in Hell but *Allah* is the most merciful and full of forgiveness,

isn't He? Moreover, my Sir, I am single; I am an ignorant guy, as mother says."

I said, "Clearly, you've prepared your self-defense as if you're in front of a judge. Well, I am not one! Yet, you should know there are different kinds of adultery: the first is that committed by poor people, which is the worst type. The general public denounce it and curse and punish its doers. Adultery committed by the rich is another type. The public do not pay much attention to it and regard it as a sign of progress and modernity. Didn't our ancestors say, 'Two things are not known about: the adultery of the rich and the death of the poor?' Still, I'll tell you what I know from books."

I tried hard to remember a verse from the *Qurān* or a *Hadīth* by the Prophet to bolster my talk so I'd could appear before this young man as an erudite scholar. I did remember a holy saying I'd read a few years before. I added, "It is narrated in *Sahih al-Bukhari* – you know *Sahih al-Bukhari* – that revered companion of the Prophet, Abdullah bno Masud, said, 'Oh! Messenger of *Allah*, what is the greatest of sins?' The prophet (Peace and Prayers be upon Him) replied, 'To commit adultery with your neighbor's wife.'"

Sameeh's face darkened and his eyes dimmed. Then he said sadly while staring at the ground, "I'm dead! I told her more than once that what we did was wrong but she said that it was not and that she loved me. I buried my head on her breasts and said, 'I love you too.' Now what shall I do? What do you do when you are hungry and ripe fruit is available? Don't you eat?"

I said to myself that I should be soft with him and answer him nicely but I didn't know anything about the books he imagined I read. So why not make use of my linguistic skill? I could make up sayings and ascribe them to different books.

I stared at his face and said, "It was narrated in *The Flood of the Mind about the Punishment of Great Sins* by the well known scholar, Abi-l-Muataz Kamal Bni Abdul- Jawad as-Sukkari al-Qahiri, that he who commits adultery with his neighbor's wife is immortal in the fire of Hell and no repentance or amendment for the sins will be accepted.

He said, "It means that he will die and be condemned to eternal prison."

I said, "Abul Mutaz adds in his above mentioned famous book that on Doomsday the adulterer walks with his neighbor's wife riding on his back. Then he cries out in exhaustion, 'Get down off my back, adulteress!' She answers him in front of everyone, 'Be patient, beast! The journey is long and I will not get off your back even if Hermon Mountain went down to the Jordan Valley.' Then the people who hear her will engulf her with spitting and throw their shoes at her."

He said, "Woe is me!" And he wept.

I said, "But in the famous book by the judge of judges, Abi Sohaib Bni-Mustafa al-Halabi, *The Ruling of Trusted Scholars on the Punishment of Adulterers*, it is said that when the trumpet is sounded on the Doomsday, both the adulterer and the wife of his neighbor are resurrected while she is hanging on his neck. People look at them and wince at their bad smell and ugly look, because all the perfume she put on her body and clothes in this mundane world is turned into dirt and muck. He tries to run away to avoid people's looks but where to? She punches him on his neck and says commandingly, 'Cover my nakedness, traitor!' He answers her, 'You broke my neck in this world and in the after world.' Then he screams, 'Ouch! Oh my neck!' He lifts his hand and feels his neck."

I asked him, "By the way, is your neighbor fat, heavy?"

He answered, "She is slim, well shaped."

I said, "Good, then you can bear her." I smiled then added, "*Allah* forgives all sins, except the sins of believing in gods other than Him and of doing harm to other people, for He is oft-Forgiving and most Merciful. All you have to do is to distance yourself from her and repent."

He looked at me with astonishment and said, "Is this the solution? I took it upon myself many times to be away from her but when her soft voice which is as sweet as wild honey comes to me I lose my mind."

I said, "I found it. When her husband returns home, pay him a visit and ask him to take you away to work with him in the south. The answer and the solution are in her husband's hands."

He gave me a strange look which contained both a question and a feeling of loss and complaint and....

He stood up and left.

I followed him with my eyes. "Sameeh as-Safadi! You now take wild honey and want to replace it with bitter cucumber?! Where did you go? There are a few things I would like to tell you, a few things I would like you to hear. Did you tell me all you have so that I can tell you all I have?"

I don't think so. I don't think so."