

Those Memories (from the novel)^(☆)

Emily Nasrallah

Two years ago Hanan left her elegant home in Beirut. I still recall how she came to me on that cold morning, anxious and sinking in an ocean of confusion and bewilderment.

«Farid has decided to leave for London,» she said. «He believes that there is no future for his work in Lebanon. So he has signed a contract to work for a British company.»

Farid has been disillusioned with Lebanon for quite some time now. He was always criticizing the Lebanese society: the life-style, the manner of raising children, and the moral degeneracy. He yearned for the day he would escape from the «Human hell», as he called it, and take his children to a «Civilized world.» I would always confront him and try to persuade him to stay for the sake of Hanan - Hanan, who is deeply rooted in the soil of Beirut, who loves her country in all its beauty and all its ugliness. I would tell Farid «Hanan does not want to leave. You are forcing her to leave.» «She is free. Let her stay here beside her mother. But for my part, nothing will stand between me and my decision.» At that Hanan would lower her head calmly.

Two years went by. During the two years I received news of Hanan from travelling friends. I learned that Farid had bought an elegant house in the suburbs of London and was «making a fortune».

A woman follows her husband while he looks for work, the ladder of his ambition and his glory. Farid's work had led him to a plateau of wealth while his homeland was sinking into the abyss of misery. He would boast to his friends that he had anticipated the eruption

in Lebanon and had been able to rescue himself and his family at the right time.

This news reached me and increased my anxiety over Hanan. I know her well enough to understand that her silence does not mean content.

I would wonder about her fate and the fate of many friends who had left the country while shells and the horror fell on Beirut, isolating us in shelters and underground vaults where we spent our nights waiting for death. In those hard times I would ask myself, Do I wish to be away from my country at its dying moment? Do I envy Hanan and the others like her who ran away? My conscience evoked her reprimanding image, and I immediately regretted my doubts.

My doubts continued until one day I received a letter from Hanan written in English.

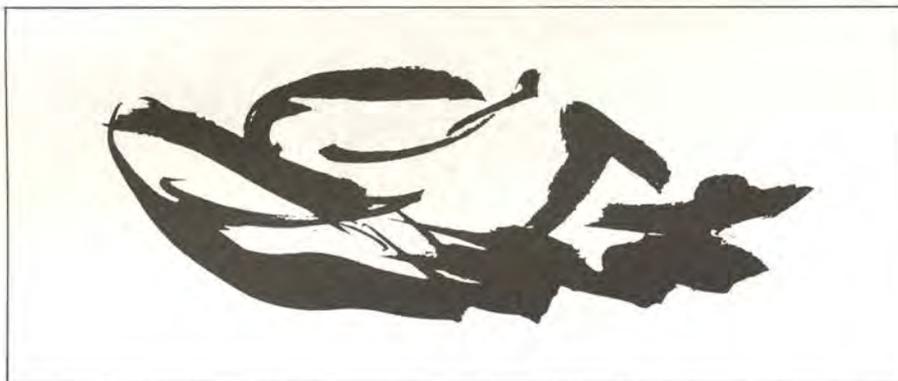
Dearest friend,

How I yearn for you, and think about you and miss you. I miss you a lot. How are you? What is occupying your thoughts, and who shares them during those hard times?

I need not say that I respect you and value and appreciate your good spirit, and often I wish that you were living near us in this small town in the suburbs of London.

Here we have many treasures of knowledge, for London is an important center of culture and it has much that nourishes the soul and mind.

I just finished reading The book of Mirdad in English. I believe that Mikhail Naimy is a great writer and his



book is one of the greatest books written in our age. Naimy's work offers a great deal of mental nourishment, but in *Mirdad* one finds nourishment for one's soul. Here our Lebanese writer has reached the level of the prophets. How much I regret that I did not have the pleasure of talking to this great man when I lived in the same city with him for years. Do you think I will have the chance again?

You know how much I yearn for inner growth. I am always looking for a way to realize that goal, to gain more wisdom and patience, so I may be able to survive in this frozen human environment. I miss our quiet visits and long conversations about what really matters in life.

I tell you, the more we learn and the less we care for material things, the better we are to understand life in some depth. Then we stand happily and freely, watching life pass by without allowing it to crush us.

I feel sorry that the «storm» that swept across Lebanon has taught people so little of what they ought to know. Some let emotions sweep and destroy them. So now as the war quiets down, they find themselves crushed, melancholic, empty, and broken-hearted.

My dear Maha, read the spiritual books. They are spring of inner tranquility and they give consolation and peace.

I want you to stay as I knew you, steadfast in the face of storms, preserving that inner calm. I want you to remain a pillar in your environment as you always have. I wish you all the peace in the new year.

Your friend,
Hanan

So this is how she spends her time! She tries to benefit from contemporary civilization. She reads Naimy in English in order to understand him better. Can that be a sign of Farid's total domination.

My friend was no longer an individual person. She has become a symbol. She represented the thousands of Lebanese citizens who have been led to the roads of dispora by the war.

Hanan, in her letter to me, was trying to defend a situation that she had been led into, with no regards for her own will, in total submission to the will of her husband.

When she chose to write me this letter, she was reassuring me that the expatriation had not severed relations between us and had not crased the memories of past days. She told me about all the confusion, desolation, and alienation that was oppressing her, but she had not specified her feelings.

I thought, How many times before had Hanan been lost on the roads of life; her new expatriation had increased her sense of loss, but it had added more strength and depth to our relationship ●

Translated from the Arabic by Mohamad Khazali and abridged by Randa Abul-Husn.

(☆) Source: *Woman and the Family in the Middle East*. edited by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985, pp. 183-186.