

Mahmoud Al-Wardani

Heads Ripe for Plucking



A MODERN ARABIC NOVEL

Translated by Hala Halim

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for Plucking

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While avowing full responsibility for the text, I wish to point out that the passages presented as quotations from Iqbal Bakri's *Saratan al-rawh* (Cancer of the Soul) are extracted from a book by my late friend Arwa Salih that bears the same title. For the events of al-Husayn's martyrdom narrated here I consulted a substantial number of medieval chronicles.

Due acknowledgment should be given to the works of the late intellectual Hadi al-Alawi and to Muhammad Husayn al-Aaraji's book *Jihaz al-mukhabarat fi-l-hadara al-islamiya* (The Intelligence Apparatus in the Islamic Civilization). Finally, I had recourse to most of the testimonies and autobiographies of detained Communists, as well as Dr. Rifaat al-Said's book *Al-Jarima* (The Crime).

Part One

OH WELL, IT'S TIME I GOT SOME REST after all. I caught the last train—or so I was told—at the last minute, just as it was starting to drag its carriages slowly out of the station, the screeching of its wheels mingling with the sound of the diesel engine. As I came from afar I had my eyes glued on the train, which was brand new, its trunk sparkling in the dusk, as if it had just come fresh from the factory.

I raced down the slope that overlooks the station with an impetus I couldn't curb, and with amazing agility got onto the last carriage and made straight for the roof of the train. My companions who'd preceded me were sitting around in groups, eating, smoking, and chatting, everyone enjoying the refreshing breeze wafting from the fields. I found myself telling them my story. I said I'd caught the last train, that they themselves might have seen me and known that I'd relied on myself alone. Then I threw in that I deserved to get some rest, after all, and that this might well be my last trip.

I sat there overjoyed, wondering just how to celebrate. I got up and broke into a sprightly dance, bounding down the roof of the train, with my eyes shut for a few seconds and my arms outstretched to bask in the mild daylight, the sky above open and clear. Then I'd shut my eyes again and reopen them before leaping across the gap between one carriage and another. But one time, when I opened my eyes, I did not manage to duck at the right moment, so the first iron bridge hacked off my head. At first, I sensed my body separating from me, and how it pained me that it kept staggering on its own with no control over its steps until I fell under the wheels, while my head was impaled atop the iron bridge with my eyes open, gazing toward the south.

I remain until this minute open-eyed, suspended between the pinnacle of joy and the shock of the iron bridge, gazing at the sky until the sun sets when I rest for a little while and brace myself for a sun that shows no mercy all day long.

1

THIS WAS NOT THE FIRST TIME I parted with my head; I had parted with it several times before, just as others who preceded me had likewise parted with their heads.

And was the first among them the “Master of Heaven’s Youth,” notwithstanding that his noble head was often-times graced with the munificent hand of his grandfather, which he often caressed? Regardless, al-Husayn’s head lay one evening in front of Ubaydallah ibn Ziyad, the agent of the new caliph, who was hard at it day and night exacting the oath of allegiance in all the cities on pain of death. Just then, Ubaydallah was poking the noble mouth and jabbing the tip of his sword between its teeth, before it was to be carried with the remains of al-Husayn’s people and his enslaved women to the residence of the new caliph.

Indeed, the noble head escaped later, while it was being conveyed with the procession of captives on the way to Damascus,

the seat of the Ummayyad court, and landed in the arms of a woman known as Umm al-Ghulam in one of Cairo's alleys, an incident the veracity of which some have doubted on the grounds that Cairo had not yet been built at the time.

Barely fifty years had passed since the death of the Prophet when the head of his daughter Fatima's son was severed and his descendants were mutilated in this shameful fashion. Al-Husayn's may have been among the first heads that valiantly went forward to meet their ordained fate. He paid no attention to the advice given him by Abdullah ibn Mutie when he resolved to leave Mecca for Medina, fleeing from al-Walid ibn Utba ibn Abi Sufyan, who sought to secure the oath of allegiance for the new caliph Yazid in the wake of the death of the latter's father, Muawiya, who had fought al-Husayn's father, Ali ibn Abi Talib. When he learned of al-Husayn's intention, Abdallah ibn Mutie advised him not to head for Kufa, that ill-omened city that had witnessed his father's murder. "Be on guard," he reiterated. "The people of Hijaz revere no one more than you. Therefore summon your followers to you there."

It thus became clear to al-Husayn that Yazid had every intention of usurping the oath of allegiance or killing him just as Muawiya had brought about his father Ali's downfall and usurped the caliphate. Was history to repeat itself until the progeny of the Prophet would be plucked by the root and decimated? And yet, al-Husayn continued on his way in the company of his sisters Umm Kulthum and Zaynab, his nephews, and his brothers Abu Bakr, Jaafar, and al-Abbas, leaving behind only his brother Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiya.

It was only a few days after he had settled that one of the notables of Kufa went to him. He brought al-Husayn fifty messages from the nobles and chiefs asking him to come to them that they might pledge their allegiance to him so he would lead

the insurgency against the corrupt caliph whose father had imposed him on the Muslims by sheer force. Messengers soon flocked to him with letters that filled two saddlebags urging him to set out from Iraq and continue on until he had vanquished and overthrown the caliph. Al-Husayn's response was an identical letter in which he informed everyone that he was sending them his paternal cousin, Muslim ibn Aqil, who was among the most trustworthy of his people, to get to the heart of the matter and let him know what he had ascertained. For al-Husayn was adamant not to repeat his father's tragedy, which he could not for a minute forget, and resolved to take every precaution.

At Kufa, Muslim hid in the house of al-Musayyab where the followers of al-Husayn came to him in secret. Word of his whereabouts spread and naturally reached the prince of Kufa, al-Nuaman ibn Bashir, as well as the heads of the new caliph Yazid's intelligence apparatus, Muslim ibn Said al-Hadrami and Umara ibn Uqba, who were both charged directly by him to keep a close watch on al-Husayn's followers. Without a moment's hesitation, they both immediately apprised him of what was going on in this remote spot, out of reach of his direct control. Responding in writing, Yazid ordered al-Nuaman removed and replaced by Ubaydallah ibn Ziyad, emphasizing to the latter in the letter of appointment that his mission was first and foremost to arrest Muslim ibn Aqil without fail and by any means.

Before the first night after Ubaydallah ibn Ziyad's appointment had elapsed, Muslim had fled in disguise to the house of Hani ibn al-Urwa, one of the notables of Kufa, to prepare for a more advanced stage of planning for the insurgency. He obtained pacts and oaths of allegiance to al-Husayn from all the followers who sought him out there, until they numbered eighteen thousand men.

As for the new prince, Ubaydallah, he had all but run out of strategies when he thought of turning to a client of his from the Levant, a man called Aqil whom he charged with the search for Muslim, starting out from the Great Mosque, where he was likely to find the beginning of the trail that would lead to the center of the rebellion. Just before Aqil left the prince's mansion, Ubaydallah gave him a sack containing three thousand dirhams. Indeed, Aqil succeeded in his mission to infiltrate al-Husayn's followers and hence found out the whereabouts of al-Husayn's emissary, Muslim.

At first, he resorted to a ruse in order to secure Muslim's head. He summoned Hani ibn al-Urwa, who was sheltering the fugitive, to the emirate palace. When Hani was brought in by the soldiers he, of course, refused to deliver his guest. Thus began the first season of beheadings, which would only continue to escalate.

2

EVERY MORNING, THE SUN SMACKS ME across the face and I open my eyes wearily into an onslaught of rays: thus begins a new day. On summer mornings like this, swarms of flies gnaw at me. I while away the time awaiting the afternoon breeze that will give me some respite from the bites by recalling earlier beheadings I underwent.

I couldn't believe I'd made it as I settled into my seat on the airplane getting ready for take-off and, fastening my seatbelt, closed my eyes.

Here I am after ten years broken up only by three vacations, each one a month long, which passed in the wink of an eye. Before I knew it, I'd find myself back in a hellhole that, in hindsight, I've no idea how I managed to bear. I'll make up for all those years with Nagat, Heba, and Ali in the Alexandria apartment I bought and even got to furnish on my last vacation. It's time I got some rest, some sense of calm. I have a month ahead

of me, and then I'll get going on my project. I've now amassed all of \$100,000 in the three trust funds in the bank. And that's apart from my private account that keeps me from dipping into the trusts, plus the taxi, which nets a minimum of three hundred pounds a month.

As for Nagat—she of the cutest belly and the most scrumptious navel among all the women I've known—I'm going to nibble at every inch of her. She'll lie beneath me and writhe the minute I bring out my surprise gift for her from the carry-on bag: a *collier* and a matching bracelet that set me back two thousand dollars.

As the airplane started to take off, the lights flickered and were turned off, then the sound of the engine drowned out everything else.

I was thinking that the last three years had been different from all the ones before them over there. When I moved ten years ago to 'the Mermaid,' as they like to call this town in the Gulf, having landed a contract with a school, I sent in my resignation from the post of librarian in the headquarters of the ministry, just to make sure I'd burned my bridges. Mine was an uncommon specialization—proof of which was that the number of students in the Archives and Librarianship Department at the university never exceeded two hundred in any year's class. So for me to end up working as a librarian who sits around doing nothing all day long and can't even make ends meet meant that grabbing the chance of a lifetime was a foregone conclusion. Within two months, I'd also gotten an evening job as an accountant for al-'Isa'i Trade Company, and my old passion for fixing electric appliances also opened doors. Soon, I was going to the houses of colleagues and acquaintances to fix their appliances and satellite dishes, both services for free, and, having gained access to people's houses, I started giving private lessons

in homes from sunset until ten in the evening. When I went home at the end of the day I'd be dead tired, overcome with sleep the minute I opened the door of the room I shared with four Egyptians, a Palestinian, and a Sudanese. I barely remembered Nagat and the children, except at the beginning of the month when I sent them their allowance.

I worked seven days a week. I'd asked Abu Khalid to give me access to the office after the Friday prayers so that I could catch up on the backlog of work I claimed was piling up—and I didn't request overtime. This was one of my first tactics to gain their confidence, and it worked: they transferred me to the headquarters in the capital. There, things began to look up, and my savings just multiplied, and this, in turn, motivated me to double the accounting I did on the side for the small-time traders who cropped up all the time, now that I knew all the ins and outs. There was so much going on: agencies, stores, supermarkets, and shopping malls that sprung up overnight into which they'd stuff tons of merchandise brought in from the four corners of the earth. It was as if all the locals worked as traders—but then, who were the buyers? No matter, all I cared about was that each of these merchants occasionally needed some small job done for him, and I was the man who delivered in a single evening.

The first five years were the toughest. I had to buy the apartment in Faysal Street at the beginning of the Pyramids district, then there was the apartment in the Mustafa Pasha Towers in Alexandria, and the taxi. Actually, the taxi was an investment: I arranged with Muhammad Saad, the driver, to settle the accounts with Nagat every week. And I taught her how to go over the accounts carefully with him by checking the meter. So the Lada covered the children's expenses and I devoted myself to saving.

Nagat would be there to receive me at the airport, with Heba and Ali. I called her up last night and asked her to leave the stuffed pigeons and the rolled vine leaves—stuffed as well—in the oven so they'd keep warm, and come to the airport at 11 a.m.

In just three hours you'll be in my arms, Nagat. I'll buy a bottle of Chivas Regal from the duty free store and pour it out on her bellybutton then sip all night. I have \$100,000, with which I'll open a mall in the Pyramids district that'll be the talk of the town. I'll call it the Hidaya Right Guidance Mall and it'll make me the owner of the fourth mall in all of Egypt. It'll be two stories high at first, then I'll add a third. The plot of land I bought for it is as big as the plans I worked out over years on end. I managed to secure it during my first year abroad with a down payment to my colleague the mathematics teacher who was looking for a buyer.

I wasted no time on the flight, and kept asking the hostess for coffee after coffee so that I'd stay alert and ready for the long day that lay ahead of me. First, I'd have to give my documents to Dirbala, the customs clearance man. I had everything worked out: I called him up and let him know my arrival time so that he'd take care of everything while I went home with Nagat and the children. He'd done the customs clearances for all the appliances I'd brought back on previous trips.

For three years, Nagat, I settled for phoning you once every month or two. Then, of course, it'd slip my mind amid all the work that had to be done—they sometimes sprang business trips on me to one of the towns close to the Gulf, or to the hinterland towns in the middle of the desert to get something or other done for one of the branches of the company. Deep down, I was satisfied that the children were getting their allowance, and felt there was no need to rush things as I edged, slowly but surely, toward the figure I had set for my savings. I replaced women

with porno videos after three experiences that each left me more terrified than the one before it. Every time, I thought I'd repent, and would even make a vow to myself, but circumstances would bring me face to face with irresistible temptations. So I went for videos of which there were an endless variety, some pairing men with women, others men with men, and yet others women with women, and in fact there were even films starring famous Arab actresses and dancers.

I felt totally safe picking any of the women performing on the screen in front of me and fantasizing about her at my leisure. There was no need for risky adventures, like that time one of my colleagues took me along to a "house" of Filipinas. We were in the Mermaid where legends about the tightness and smallness of Filipinas' vaginas echoed like drumbeats. I went to bed with one of them, but it was only minutes before she started screaming when she saw my organ. I put on my clothes and left; then, when I'd reached the top of the street, I thought of going back since I'd barely gotten to know the woman. I turned to find that the police had surrounded the area: my friend and I ran as fast as our feet would carry us, with me nearly pissing my pants.

The second time was with Abla, whom I shall never forget. She was the daughter of Zayd, my Yemeni colleague in al-'Isa'i Company. After I'd fixed all Zayd's electric appliances without asking for a penny, he agreed to negotiate for me with the landlord—my being a single man made me unwelcome among families—so that I could rent the small apartment adjacent to his in the residential building that was quite close to the offices of the branch of the company. I actually didn't notice Abla at first; after all, she was just a fourteen-year-old girl. If I remember correctly, she was the one who made a pass at me. Whenever we met on the street, she'd stop me and practice on me, mimicking the way Egyptian actresses speak in movies and TV dramas