

Outside The Folk

I overstepped all her boundaries, broke down all the fences she strived to lock me in for the last ten years, our existence in this continent. I broke down all her taboos. One more offence such as wearing a ring in my nose could be enough to cause her a nervous breakdown or a heart attack She used to sigh, wiring her lips and striking one hand with another, every time seeing me hanging around barefooted with Jeans torn around the knees or under the bump.

- Few tattoos here and there and you will be one of the street kids. Go out of my sight before I lose my temper and commit a crime

Since her comments never end, they meant nothing to me. She isn't happy with any thing I do: not the way I pronounce English, eating half the word; nor me hanging around exposing my skills in cycling in the streets and lanes of the neighbourhood, going in spiral spins on one wheel hassling drivers and walkers who in turn spread over my head a rain of swears and curses; nor when I throw my body heavily on the bed with my sweated clothes, while her rules say not to approach a bedroom before going through a chain of bathing, brushing and perfuming. But the most that teased her, was my attitude towards Uncle Sarkis. The farce I always cast behind his back.

- For God's sake! show a bit of respect to uncle Sarkis, if it wasn't for myself, for your dad at least

- Professor eh! and I go mimicking in a cynical way every thing in him: the limp in his walk, the harsh accent he speaks, the way he is always dressed that reminds of Charley Chaplain, the way he throws himself on the soft fluffy armchair, minding his pipe in a theatrical way, moving his eyeglasses to the top of his nose when preparing to one of his comments that impress no one but my parents.
- The professor, son, is a very important man, he is the only one of all our relatives who was able to keep up his prestigious job. Your father was a great lawyer back home, look what he is doing now for living

Hopeless of dragging me to her side, she seeks my father's help: For God's sake! Say a word Rafik.

But Rafik who is drenched in his disappointments and anguish says no word. So she leaves me and turns her anger against him

- You don't give a damn to the children's mannerisms. You care for nothing but to whinge about the silly system that deprived you the right of practicing your profession as a competent lawyer. Be practical dear, move away from your past. We are making money from this business that you don't respect twice what you used to do in past days.

My father's silence encouraged me to go further in my sarcastic attack.

- Your professor is nothing but an empty straw, a statue good enough to be put in museums; he impresses you by information he memorizes like a puppet. Sooner there will be no need for people like him; he will end up unemployed, seeking his living like the homeless, beating a guitar over the streets of the city or in its subway stations.
- Keep your mouth shut Issam, I wish you be like the professor one day. Grow up boy, till when will you stay childish and irresponsible?!

Lady Azab (my mother's name) didn't perceive that I am fifteen, hadn't divorced my childhood yet, and I have spend long hours behind closed doors watching with narcissism the handsome figure I see in the mirror, and flattered by what I read in girls' eyes wherever I go: the girls at school, the young ladies at the counter in Grace brothers and David John; my mum's friends who visit on the weekend; even my aunt Jamila who touches wood every time she sees me

- God bless him! Every day grows prettier and prettier!!

Few steps and I will be eighteen, and few months and I will end my schooling years. My spirit started to calm down. I started to feel for the people around myself. So I might hurry, without being asked, to help the old single lady Anna in her load when coming back from her weekly shopping or rush to a driver who was suddenly let down by his car in the middle of the road. I might involve myself in a fight that could lead to a police station or to a hospital, if I see a girl harassed by any of these teenagers who flow the streets seeking preys. I started to feel that there is some thing dying within myself. Nothing of my old habits seduces me any more. No noisy frenzied music crying from my CD. My bicycle missed me. No aimless journey here and there, she is not my pleasure any more; she became a vehicle used for certain reason only. My beloved girl friend Jolie doesn't ignite any emotion in my heart, no excitement in being with her. I started meeting her with less passion even with no passion at all some times, going out with her on weekends became an obligation, a kind of duty differs not so much from mowing in a hot day in December.

These endless talks about getting higher grades in the HSC, about universities, high courses and low ones, about subjects that guarantee acceptance in medicine and law schools, about private tutoring that my father started to murmur about; meant nothing to me.

Hours and hours used to pass while I sat by myself on the uncovered terrace that my father built on the same style back in his old village. Hours and hours I spent watching, without any interest, the topped brick houses that grow like mushrooms below; the speeding drivers rushing to their families in the evenings, the drunkard teenagers returning home on Saturday nights vandalizing here and there. I didn't feel any belonging to these people. The only thing that attracted my attention was the movement of the shinning stars above my head. I was attracted to these millions and infinite points of light. Wonderful circles flow over and create a magnificent world. These fields of stars which were only points of lights during childhood, which I admired for the way they were arranged, (a shape of a sword or a belt or a slice of watermelon), now appeared to me like facade concealing deep visions and meanings. I started to feel the insignificance of my being compared with what floats over my head. I started to feel that all these prominent values and events like love, birth, death that we cherish in our lives are but trivial accidents in this magnificent charming world

Little by little I might return back to my existence, feel the darkness that surrounds me; perceive the texts and books laying over my desk. Unexcited about any thing, I felt that I am nothing but a trivial creature that makes no count in this world, nothing was enough to motivate my interests in this life. Neither my mother's expectation nor my father's promises nor my friends' compliments were able to put a fire in my soul. What does it add to this magnificent world if I became an engineer, a doctor or a man of wealth earning hundreds of thousands of dollars every year and own an elegant mansion with an overlook to the Harbour Bridge or North Sydney?! All but dust in the wind, mere balloons of soap. How people come to care that much to these balloons?!

It was around the end of the year, and I was about to finish my eighteen. My mother had arranged a big party for the occasion, exposing through it all her skills in cooking. She invited all our relatives and friends, ordered different kinds of flower arrangements, borrowed some nice china from neighbours and friends, covered the tables with snow white tablecloths, but the man of the show was absent in mind and soul from this big festival. Different kinds of presents offered to me that I opened, but with indifference that embarrassed my parents. After the "show" aunt Jamila approached me. She stretched her arm around my shoulder; (she tried hard with the help of the high heels she wears to reach these shoulder), she walked me towards my room and closed the door. Up till that moment I didn't notice that my aunty hadn't given me a present

- Look son, it's time to know some thing about your culture. Don't give me that dirty look, we have some thing you could be proud of.

I murmured to myself: roots, values, pride, all but nothingness, me and billions like me are nothing but small dark points in this wide spread infinitive world.

My carelessness didn't intimidate my aunt; she started to untie the nice wrapped parcel laid aside on my desk.

- This is a copy of Gilgamesh epic¹, I spent weeks searching for it, and it took me a long way to find an elegant copy good enough for a young man like you. It's a piece of art...go through it, Love, when you feel lonely or tired of serious studies. You will enjoy the wisdom and the art of talk in it

Gilgamesh! Who told her that Gilgamesh interests me? But the great respect and love that I harbor for her, prevented me from showing any sign of disregard

For weeks and weeks the volumes stayed resting on my desk, till one day I was intrigued by curiosity or boredom, (I can't be specific). I started reading some paragraphs here and there...started feeling the urge to go further, I read and reread this paragraph and that several times to comprehend the events and the wisdom behind the world. I got involved, I started to live with Gilgamesh, trot with him on thorns, suffered his bewilderments, lived his perplexity between faith and doubt. I questioned with him the meaning of eternity, death and life.

I became Gilgamesh ...became Unkidu, the tear between humane and animalism...became the handful of mud thrown away by Auroraⁱⁱ in the prairies. I became the Sumerian who printed scriptures on the tablets of clayⁱⁱⁱ

I was sad to watch my mother leaving the office after a meeting with the career adviser, loaded with disappointment and pain

He said: “ By a word Mrs. Rafic, I am sorry to tell you, it is impossible for Issam to become a doctor or a professor...his mind is busy in affairs away from our school concerns”

Nejmeh Habib
30 April, 2002

Notes

ⁱ Gilgamesh: an important literary Middle Eastern epic, written in cuneiform on twelve clay tablets about 2000bc (some historians return it to 4000bc). This heroic poem is named for its hero, Gilgamesh, a tyrannical Babylonian king (the god of son) who ruled the city of Erech (now Waraka, Iraq). According to the myth, the gods respond to the prayers of the oppressed citizenry of Erech and send a wild brutish man, Enkidu, to challenge Gilgamesh to a wrestling match. When the match ends without neither being a clear victor, Gilgamesh and Enkidu became close friends. They journey together and share many adventures. After Enkidu's death Gilgamish seeks out the wise man to learn the secret of immortality. The sage recount to Gilgamesh a story of a great flood (details similar to the later biblical accounts of flood). After much hesitation, the wise man reveals to Gilgamish that a plant bestowing eternal youth is in the sea. Gilgamish dives into water and finds the plant but later lose it to a serpent, and disconsolate, returns to Erech and end his life.

ⁱⁱ Aurora: is the goddess who implanted a handful of clay in the prairie so when Enkidu ate them became a jewel in his heart and enchanted Gilgamesh

ⁱⁱⁱ The Sumerian: Is the ancient writer who wrote Gilgamesh epic on tablets of clay and melt in them