

## A Cat Called Rayess

At last we reached the building, it was around midnight; two or three boys were washing the entrance with soap and water. It was cold and Simone was wrapping herself in an expensive black coat collared with fur; it didn't match with the pants that she wore, pants soaked with water at the edges, smeared with spots of dirt all over. Since the power was cut off, we started ascending the stairs toward the tenth floor, when we reached, we were breathing heavily; Simone stopped in the middle of the aisle that leads to the apartment, she looked as if not sure which of the apartments she was after. All of a sudden she rushed towards one of the doors and started knocking the door harshly and calling "Rayess, Rayess" "1" in a way that transmitted vague tenderness.

She told me more than once that he was not a pretty cat at all and that he was dirty, over his body could be living some bucks and other parasites and that someone had volunteered to cut off his Whiskas. She added, in broken English, that that should be the case when a cat was deserted, but for now he started little by little gaining back his cleanness.

A man with a candle in his hand opened the door. He was a chubby young man dressed with a transparent dishdasha<sup>2</sup> I assumed that the man is either Saudi or Kuwaiti, I asked myself: Is it possible that we still have tourists in spite of this mad war?

Simone rushed like an arrow to one of the rooms calling Rayess! Rayess! I explained to the dishdasha man, who was taken by surprise, that she is looking for a small cat. The man made no comment. He started to explain who he is and why he is there. Even without me asking, he started to say that he is Rida's brother, adding that I should have known him. The signs of frustration that appeared on the man's face made me pretend that I knew Rida. I made a face pretending as if my memory had been revived.

- Which Rida?

- Rida Arrawass,

- Eh! Rida!.. Sure I know him. How is he?

The man was relieved and looked less stressed. While we were walking towards the room where Simone rushed, he said:

Rida is the owner of this apartment, as you know, but because of the war and the bombs and all the losses...(and he added many other things about the family that meant nothing to me.

I asked Simone if she found the cat, she shook her head with sorrow, then said; "Impossible! He was here this morning." She looked to the man as if accusing him, he got confused. A queer idea crossed my mind "this man had eaten Rayess". As if the man

felt what was going on in my head, he started defending himself by assuring that he didn't see any cat at all in the apartment, then he turned around making the suggestion to look in other rooms. I noticed the number seven (written in English) on his flannel T-shirt, which he wore under the transparent dishdasha. I decided not to embarrass him with any more questions, though I was sure that he simply opened the door and kicked the cat out when he came to check his brother's apartment.

I met her in one of the Athawra”3” offices, and because I was free from any other obligations, I found it interesting to start a relation with her. I came around, where my friend was having a conversation with her and asked him who she was. He showed a free liberated spirit and asked her in a loud voice

- Tu le reconnex ( do you know... mentioning my name)

She raised her eyes towards me; her look was friendly but didn't express any specific emotion. I smiled and nodded my head calmly. I noticed that she had no great interest in me.

I noticed that my friend was pushing us towards one another. He suggested to us to communicate in English (a language I knew better than he did). She looked interested and started to speak English. She found it difficult to find the words to express her ideas. She wanted to go back to Geneva and asked if she can do that through Beirut.

- Sure you can, why not? (are you a...)

No! No! Nothing like that! The problem is that I came from Geneva through Damascus, because Beirut airport was closed due to war, and I am looking for an airline that accepts me as a passenger from here (she meant Beirut). I scratched my head and my friend did the same, then I suggested asking the Middle East Airlines”4”.

- My God! I already done! It was the first thing I did. They said it's impossible.

- In this case why don't you try the Swiss Airlines?

- Here is the problem! Is this Airline working these days? I couldn't reach any answer, I kept asking and got no answer

This is my opportunity, I said to myself, I raised of my seat, and suggested calling the information center at the airport, they should have a solution for sure. I went to the other room where the telephone handset was placed. She followed me with a sign of relief on her face. My friend stood up and said: I have to go, he looked towards me with an encouraging smile on his face

I started making connections while she was sitting there watching me and smoking heavily. After several attempts, I got an answer from the information office telling that the Swiss Airline is still not functioning. It was affected by bombing, and it will be back in business when the damage is fixed. They gave me a phone number to contact, there I could get help.

I told her about the result of my researches. While she was offering me a cigarette I tried the telephone again and got no answer. I looked at my watch and said, "its lunchtime it could be better to try later on." We smoked two cigarettes out of her packet (a habit she caught from our tradition as an expression of hospitality). Her way of introducing the cigarettes was tough and ridiculous, it made me smile. I think we are on the way to give up this habit, many stopped practicing it. From her side she was trying to show a kind of belonging in this ridiculous way.

I said suddenly while looking to my watch:

- Did you eat?

She shook her head. So I suggested going somewhere to eat. I said:

- let's go to Ar-rawsheh"5". She wanted, going to the downtown ruined commercial center, to shoot some photos of the great damages caused by war. I said:

-Let us from wreckage and ruins, I like to be at the sea, it's a long time since I was there. I miss the sea very much.

She picked up her bag, her camera and said: agreed!

When we were on the street I suggested that we pick up a taxi, she said: no, we will go by *service"6"*

In this case (I explained): we have to walk for about ten minutes, do you mind? I don't think you do, since you, in Switzerland, are used to walking and skiing. She smiled and asked me not to treat her as a Swiss because she wanted to relate to humanity in general, then added as if for her own self:

-I don't think I love my country, nothing of importance happens over there.

It was a warm, sunny winter day. Our steps were slow but our breathing was heavy and I was trying to keep my breath inaudible, but, she, from her side, remained natural. She was talking, allowing her breathing to be heard. I wasn't paying any attention to the surroundings; she was telling me about the Jewish family that neighbored hers when she was a child. She talked about the nice humane Jewish lady that pitied Palestinian and Jewish children and suggested that because of them the great men should do something. I kept silent. I didn't want to share in an issue that sickened my heart. I asked her to stop talking and I started looking towards the sky and saying something about the sea, but as if not listening she continued:

I think that I have a Jewish blood, my surname sounds Jewish, this matter means nothing to me. My parents are Christians.

I answered: It doesn't make any difference if you are a Jewish or a "Yetchkani".

She asked wondering, what “Ytshkani” means?

- May be it is from “Yetchkinaz”, a group of old oriental Jews.
- Are they those who leave their hair to grow like ropes?
- Exactly! And they wax them as well

She got more excited and added: I saw some of them when I was in Israel

The word pierced my ears, and I found myself stopping involuntarily saying in a slow deep tone as if in investigations:

- Did you say that you were in Israel?
- Yes... In 1974, after the war’7’, I went to see what happened to them over there.
- And how did you find them?
- They were nice to me, but the costs of living were impossible, I wondered how they could survive these imaginary prices!

We reached a military barrier, though these barriers didn't usually target people on foot (they are after passing cars), the armed man in charge, looked towards us and ordered in a sign of his automatic gun to come forward. He asked for my identification, I gave him my Athawra card. He looked deeply through it, moving his sight between me and Simone who started searching for her identification. The man looked for a second time at my card and pushed it to my face saying:

- what is this word?
- It's my name
- No the word relates to profession
- A struggler. (I answered). The word was faded by time.

He put away the gun and the card and nodded his head in a sarcastic deep sense, saying while handing me my card:

- Eh!.. you are all strugglers.

He looked at me once and at Simone gave another look. Without saying any word, I held her hand and started walking forward without looking back.

I couldn't imagine how things could have gone between us if it wasn't for John Pierre Philipe who appeared at the same moment we took our places in that restaurant that over-viewed the sea. It was like destiny to have John Pierre as our third companion all the time. He also left the country at the same time that Simone did, but on a different plane.

I felt from the very first moment that I was not going to like this man by all means. There is a sort of people that you couldn't like however hard they try to please you, and John Pierre was one of them. There was something in him that made me feel uneasy and it had nothing to do with Simone. The painful truth was that he was the nearest to Simone's

heart. He was able to make her burst in a loud scandalous laugh, which bitterly embarrassed me every time we were out in public. I was sure that it wasn't because he was the only Westerner around. (Beirut at that time was full of Western journalists and spies).

I admit that his jokes and comments were very funny, they were nice even with the broken English he expressed himself with. He was a nice person, but there was something in him that made me reluctant in his presence, Our contest over Simone has nothing to do with the issue, I was sure that Simone liked him more. She made it clear when she asked me, after a couple of days of living together, if he could move in with us. She explained that he had no money left and had no place to stay. I asked how could a journalist be left without money! She said:

- He works for the leftists in France, so his earnings are limited.

She started to talk about him in a sincere manner more than you usually talk about a friend or a colleague, in a motherly passionate manner. I felt sympathetic when I heard that tender woman pitying that huge man who was not less than thirty-five years of age. This made me change my attitude towards him. I started welcoming him warmly and I suggested to go looking for him and bring him home. She showed no enthusiasm about the idea, but moved her hand and said:

-Not to that extent! We will see him tomorrow.

She sat over my lap showering me with her kisses

As I said before, I didn't like the man when seeing him for the first time at that restaurant. He greeted her from a distance the same moment we set to a table on that open restaurant, He was wearing a Kufia"8" that covered all his head and his ears and sat on a table few meters away from ours, and started eating, then he moved his head up and moved his Kufia a little aback and asked her something in French, she answered, he went back to his eating. He raised his head another time, asked another question, got the answer and back to his plate. He did that for several times. It made me feel as if he was in possession of invisible scissors that enabled him to cut a conversation at any time. When he directed his last question, I noticed that he was wearing small round eyeglasses and was almost bald. I hated his glasses and his baldness, and the Kufia that he was wrapping himself with. I was about to shout: "To hell with you and your Kufia and the small round eyeglasses", but I kept silent and sipped a big sip of wine that made my stomach swell. I watched to see if Simone was embarrassed, since she kept moving her field of vision from me and him and back, turning her head in a complete turn toward him as a sign of admiration, every now and then. The situation started to look ridiculous, so John Pierre put an end to it not by leaving us alone and concentrating on his eating, but by carrying his plate and joining our table. I discovered that what I had considered an insinuated commitment from Simone to me was nothing but illusion in my head. So I started to accept John Pierre as a real truth that could not be escaped.

For the first few days she seemed confused, she looked about her as if looking for something that could not be found. This made me think that she was a kind of gypsy

woman or a street cat. I confessed to her about all my doubts, and that I thought her to be a dangerous woman. She was concerned and asked wondering: “why?” I said that I thought of her as a kind of a woman who makes a man falls, all of a sudden, on solid concrete. She was shocked by my way of thinking and denied my accusation firmly. She asked me frequently what made me think of her in that way. I said that I had no concrete reason but unexplained tangibility (feeling). (There were reasons, but I wasn't brave enough to declare them, they were due to egoistic beliefs that made me imagine that I had the right over her, but that right wasn't clear enough to be disclosed). She lit another cigarette and nodded her head with anguish and said: “You are wrong”, then added that she doesn't like to talk about the so called the past, though she started telling me about an Iranian man that she lived with for about a year. She tried to remember his name; she cracked her fingers many times and said while laughing:

- Imagine! I had forgotten his name

I smiled as if to say: you see! This is what I meant exactly. You lived with a man for one year and you forgot his name.

- Hamid... Yeh... Hamid...that was his name

She smiled as if presenting in her memory the full story of Hamid. She said:

- Hamid kept saying for the whole year that we spent together, that I meant nothing to him and he would put an end to our relationship. Did you hear me? He used to say so, while he was sleeping with me three times a day. One day he went on a holiday, after a last farewell, as he named it. I felt the urge to cry but I forced myself not to, I never cry. [She cried a couple of days later]. I pressed on his hand and kissed his black pretty eyes. When he left, the first thing I did, was jump at the first available man. Is this normal?

-It's normal. But it means nothing to me

-Wait the story isn't finished yet.

She lit another cigarette and went on:

-When Hamid returned from his holiday he came rushing to me without even a phone call. I told him that I was with another man, he said: “leave him. I love you!” He knelt on his knees, joined his hands together and implored, as it happens in the movies

She gazed in my face to see the influence of her story upon me, then murmured:

-You see! I am not a kind of woman who deserts a man just like that (making a meaningful sign with her hand).

Rayess looked frightened and unsettled, as if expecting a kick at any time. That was the result of being deserted for days after that night with the dishdash man. (Simone found him a certain morning later on). Bit by bit he started to be more relaxed and confident, it was due to the passion and warm love she flowed over him. She was ready to kiss him and pamper him at any time even when we were to be in our most intimate moments, she might kiss his dirty mouth and his body which was full of fleas and bucks. For the first couple of days he used to excrete around the corners of the rooms, and she was to get up from the warm bed to wash with soap and water the excretion he had left, adding few

drops of kerosene (an idea I had suggested). Occasionally she would become tough on him and punish him, crying angrily at his face. Her anger would ease down at seeing him run away, frightened, to the kitchen.

-look at him! How cute he is when running, escaping

She called him kindly, he came huddling, she gave him a motherly tender passionate hug. When he felt the warmth and the love again he sat curled and started sucking one of his nipples (not only female cats have nipples, males do have them as well, as I learned). When I saw that for the first time I felt disgusted especially after seeing some red spots over his belly. I assumed that it was some kind of a disease, but Simone explained that they were his nipples, and what he did was a kind of compensation, because when Rayess was a baby his mother, for certain reason, didn't breast feed him long enough and now he was compensating. It's the same way that children do, suck their thumbs, when their mothers stop breast feeding them. John Pierre who was listening to all of that, commented that that was a cheap sentiment, assuring that there are millions of children deserving of care and love more than cats. He jumped straight to attacking strongly that great concern about domestic animals, saying in a sharp tone and a trembling nose - This is nothing but bourgeois hypocrisy

Here, Simone lost her temper and started talking aggressively; neglecting to include an expression of apology, as it was the case when she usually wanted to express herself in a diplomatic way. John Pierre lost his temper in return and I kept on watching the hot fight calmly without comprehending any word except "Tal-Ezzatar" "9". They were mentioning the word five to six times in a minute. Simone proved that she was strong enough to stand firmly for her beliefs and her beloved ones, the cat and myself. ( Since I had loved Rayess). I found myself outside that family argument; so I shrunk to the kitchen, opened a can of sardine, gave half of it to Rayess and ate the other half.

Her eyes were blue in the morning, green at noon and olive on the evening. She has got the longest and darkest eyelashes I had ever seen in my life. I assumed that they were artificial, but she corrected me and to prove me wrong she started tugging at them. It worried me that she might hurt herself, so I held her hand and stopped her from doing it and said:

-Ok! I am mistaken

Her face was full of freckles. After a while, I got used to them and saw her as attractive as a wild flower. She had sexy swollen lips. I saw in her, especially when she blinked with her left eye, the charm of the first feminine cell when acknowledged itself as a woman. Opposite to that, were her thin legs and her way of walking. She walked in a ridiculous way, twisting her legs in no harmony at all, a matter that drove me to think that she must have had polio when a child. Asking her, she denied and said it was only her way in walking. Once, looking deep into her face I made her wonder what I was be thinking and I told her that she reminded me of a certain person. She asked:

- Of whom?

-A man (I said)

After few days an idea crossed my mind. She looked like my friend Sameeh Alqudsy.

she asked with a French accent that destroyed the meaning and the pronunciation of the name

-Who is Samih Alqudsi?

I told her the story of a man that I had known in Amman (capital of Jordan) more than twenty years ago. Sameeh went on to accomplish university education in Turkey. Instead of concentrating on studying he chased Turkish women, sending news to his father, at the end of each schooling year, that he had gone well. He kept lying for five years. To cover up his failure, he followed an intelligent plan. He was to treat every person coming from Amman to Turkey very well, welcoming him warmly and treating him with exceptional generosity. When the visitor was up to return home, he was to press his hand and say:

-Keep up what God doesn't want to be revealed

Once, I noticed that she had a smile similar to that of Hussein Fahmi, the famous Egyptian movie star. When I told her that, she got upset. She turned her back and said in a childish way:

-You always see me like a man

I explained that I did not intend to hurt her feelings, but her smile was really like that of Hussein Fahmi. I suggested that we go watching a movie at Strand"10" theatre to let her know that I was not joking. (For my good luck, there was a movie starring our look-a-like). When we reached the theatre, we saw at the entrance five photos showing the movie star, with that deep smile on his face. When she saw the photos she cracked her loud scandalous laugh and kicked my back, then stuck her body to mine murmuring: "*mon amour*". She wanted to kiss me, I stopped her while looking around and said: "not in this place".

We passed slowly from bewilderment to cognition, to unity, till at last we became not able to sleep but on each other's arm, where she lay naked the whole night.

She used to say: "*Bonjour*" every morning and evening. During the nights, her eyes glowed with light and honey. God bless that small woman.

She left and kept her cat in my care. He and I have to live up with that situation for a full long winter

Notes

(1) - A word means boss, here used as a proper name

(2) - A white gown known as the traditional dress for men in the Arab Gulf such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait

- (3) - During the seventies many offices were opened in West Beirut for different Palestinian parties, such as, Fatah, Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine, and others, and were known by the name Athawra offices.
- (4) - It was the widest Lebanese airline at that period (sixties, seventies)
- (5) - A tourist place in Beirut known for its elegant coffee shops and restaurants that look over the sea and the famous rock known by the same name.
- (6) - A commuting way known in Lebanon and other Arabic cities, that carry people from place to place in a car of the same size and shape of a taxi. The difference is that you pay the fair as a passenger: that is one fifth of the taxi fair
- (7) - In 1973 a war took place between Israel and Egypt. Israel was defeated and this led to a peace treaty between the two countries and to Israeli withdrawal from the occupied parts of Egypt (Sinai and Sharm sheikh which were under occupation since 1967)
- (8) - A cover for the head has worn by men in some rural areas in the Middle East such as Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. In the last few decades it became as symbol of Palestine
- (9) - A Palestinian refugee camp was located in the eastern suburb of Beirut. All its people were killed or massacred or evacuated on the hands of the Lebanese Christian Militia, in 1977
- (10) - One of the famous theatres in what is known as Alhamra Street, a famous suburb in West Beirut.

Translation and Notes  
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