

A Tree Like Rain

For Samer, Nejmeh, Dianne and Shevek.
And also for Rebecca, Kamel and Rima.

A NOVEL BY SAMAR HABIB

A Tree Like Rain



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nebula@nobleworld.biz

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The Experience of Art

Chapter One: The First World

‘Who do you think about when you write?’ asked the teacher. Liberty Parker, forty-five, was attending these late afternoon creative writing classes. In America you could be taught anything—even creative writing. ‘If you’re trying to write a rape scene for example, why don’t you connect with a moment in your past where you might have felt a similar sort of violation? Try to conjure up the feelings ...’

‘What if you’ve been raped?’ asked a young man from the back of the classroom, and the teacher—betraying his philosophical insensibilities for a moment—retorted, ‘Well that’s great then!’

Liberty had been getting these long looks from her teacher, who was at least ten years her junior. She found this so flattering, so amusing even, that she could not care for his age, nor did he notice that the woman, whose legs he had been salivating over, was roaming the earth with those very legs, long before his conception; long before God, or I, thought of him. ‘Next week we will study a new method of creative writing: Freud’s method of free association. Don’t forget to bring your Jesus stories as well next week. When you do finally get to write that best-selling novel, it may not be necessarily set in this day and age, and it may not necessarily deal with characters that you have met—at least they will come in different disguises. Remember there are two kinds of people in the world: those of us who walk on the elevator in the mall and those who just stand there.’ With this astounding piece of wisdom, his

students, a mix of teenagers and mature age failures, pack up their things and hurry out of the classroom.

Liberty however hung back, in a pose where most of her weight rested on her back leg, back arched, finger stuck in the corner of her mouth as if she was tasting something and she looked out of the window, deciding what she would do next. In the meantime the last of the students had left and her teacher, having noticed that she was not about to leave, anxiously awaited her approach, which never happened. That look out of the window coincided with a green Ford that could have been her husband's, driving slowly along the wet asphalt. For a moment, long enough to matter, this knocked in her some kind of ancient feminine loyalty to the nurturing impulse, and with it, she walked out of the room, dissatisfied that she could not arouse either herself or her teacher any further.

She went home and her husband was not there; her children, since they were all past the age of consent, were out fornicating somewhere in other people's cars; it didn't matter. With her husband away, her children independent and her personal desires on hold indefinitely, she took out her vibrator and began to ease herself into a little indulgence. It was routine at first and then wild and fantastical, until the vibrator indicated through a different kind of vibration, a low, limp vibration, that the battery was low and that put her right off. No more! What did cave women do when their husbands or wives were gone, their children independent? They pursued careers, but now, ages later, career pursued and got, there was only the basic instinct left to satisfy. Moreover, it would seem that even *that* was impossible to satiate; not through any chemical greatness of her own, but through the lack of energy and batteries and a whole heap of ennui in the reservoirs of the generational gaps which sandwiched her existence. One gap is always securely behind you, placid, non-threatening, while the other, the one you do not see coming, abandons you on an island—and you have no choice but to watch youth, like a rescue ship, slowly but surely

move out of reach, eventually out of sight, and some time after that you completely forget it was ever there.

She was being melodramatic.

You begin to realise that you're getting old when you stop listening to popular music. Or rather, you start listening to popular music from three or four years back, which is no longer popular. That's when you start getting old. Cultural experts tell us that two years in popular music is a lifetime. Everything is in this fast forward mode, except, it seems, mass thinking—a phrase that is oxymoronic in a sense: the mass doesn't think, it is thought for. It is *represented* rather than thought for, or perhaps, given *representations* of itself by some powerful, invisible hand that leads to the same drooping shoulder that signed the paper: the great Wizard of Oz, pushing buttons. No, at least the Wizard was creative and the hand that signed the paper was in the end a symbolic instrument for a whole bunch of associates. Wasn't it?

It was Friday night and Liberty was feeling a little constrained by her lifestyle. There is not much to do when you are past a certain age and not single. Couples don't need to socialise as single people do. They are self-contained, self-sufficient and families are a more elaborate model of the couple, an extended design, the evolution of the initial compound into a complex. No one knows how this thing with families began, why Homosapiens chose monogamy over promiscuity; chose to sanctify (in the last little while of existence anyway) the family unit, or the couple, over the individual entity. And no one knows whether in some far away galaxy, there are replicas of ourselves whose civilisation is altered beyond our recognition, simply because that urge, that *stir* toward the familial was absent, or at least recessive, in their constructions. But Liberty was far from such thoughts. Taking hold of her was a consciousness of her own dullness and the culmination of her life to this trite moment of insignificance.

So she sat on the sofa in the lounge room, watching her reflection

in the television; enjoying the ambient quiet of the house, with all of its lights switched off whilst the night gains momentum in its darkness—just before street lamps are illuminated and moments after initial sunset. She held the remote control for the television in her hand and after another moment's thought she will go to the answering machine and check for messages. She finds no messages for herself, except for one from Denise saying she is going to kill herself and she needs to talk to someone quick. That doesn't happen. Liberty doesn't call Denise back; she could not handle someone else's as well as her own insignificance.

Not tonight.

She walks back to the bedroom and turns only the desk lamp on, because now it's getting dark and she can barely make out the outline of the bed and the bedside table and the armchair. She sits at the desk. She reaches for the fine milled paper her husband uses in the home office and picks up a pacer pencil, and thinks to herself, poetically, '... the cipher will have to do'. She likes that word, 'cipher'; it has something about it, something ... cryptic. She would begin to write with that creative writing task in mind.

She thinks:

So Jesus has been 'wondering' in the desert for thirty days, ten more days to go. But of course Jesus doesn't know that, so he's roaming thinking that he is there indefinitely and then he comes across this vision: is it the devil pretending to be the angel or is the angel being seen as the devil?

She begins to write.

No, not what we're looking for here.

And with this, simply, her thoughts begin to take another turn. It is unfortunate that we never learn what Liberty would have written about the messiah. Instead, she thinks about her husband who was much closer to her heart. The growing distance between them did not escape her, but she felt that with great effort, and for no reason

other than great respect, she would keep up that energy which occasionally manifests itself as passion. Passion often wilts unless it is for the metaphysical, or the inanimate, or the abstract. When it involves people, passion is simply the fine line that separates the possession of genuine affection from lust.

She writes:

Daniel Parker, forty-five, married, with children.

She pauses.

Daniel Parker had a car accident today.

No. This way:

Daniel Parker, married, with children, drove to the country to meet with his associates. He had left his beautiful wife at home, promising to return that same night, although a little later than usual. The meeting had gone a little overtime and the weather was promising a terrible storm. His associates advised him to stay with them until the next morning and not to drive out in such low visibility. However, he was determined to be home with her.

‘Oh, this is so bad!’ and really she was right.

He drives on against the advice of his colleagues and takes his chances with the winding mountain road and the slippery surface. ‘Once I get to the freeway, things should be okay.’ Daniel Parker does not get to the Freeway ...

She takes a deep breath. Could she commit Daniel to a car accident, even if it was fiction?

Visibility continued to decrease and thin sheets of ice were beginning to form on the road surface ahead of him. He didn’t know that, so he increased his speed to try to beat the storm to the Freeway. When he got to the final turn down the mountain, his steering gave way and when he applied the brakes his wheels locked and he slid along the road, his car gaining momentum as it travelled further down the hill. To him it was like a film played out in front of his eyes: it was slow and he had enough time to give up on the

steering wheel and to put his seat belt on and to utter a prolonged 'shit' with great calm. There was no one else on the road and he kept sliding until he saw that a tree was fast approaching him, and the car, with all the force of a bullet, hit the tree. The glass was pulverised on impact, the car was wrapped around the trunk and the tree shook with such force that its roots appeared from beneath the soil, like the veins on the neck of someone being strangled.

Silence

Silence. And a cricket.

Liberty gets up, pours herself a glass of water from the kitchen tap, stands at the sink, fascinated by the clearness of her vision; a vision she willed into being from nothing, from nowhere. It was all real enough, as if there was a mountain, and a storm and a car crash and a tree and Daniel, in the midst of it all, helpless to what was being done to him, what was taking place, calmly exclaiming 'shit!'. Daniel would do that, he would sit in the car, sliding along, awaiting death; he would put his seat belt on, just in case. What now?

She returns to the desk and before she begins writing again, the doorbell rings. She answers the door and Denise appears; dishevelled, hot, bothered, cross.

'You didn't call me', she says, walking past Liberty and into the comfort of a lounge chair. 'You didn't kill yourself', Liberty answers, and Denise shows no sign of discomfort at the cold remark. 'You should know better than to leave a message like that on the answering machine Denise, besides you're too old to go around acting like you and Tom are still teenagers.'

Denise walks to the three-seater sofa and collapses on it in true psychiatric fashion, knowing that Liberty's view was perhaps sound and that she had come to this very house to hear these reprimands precisely, which might dispel her melodramatic disillusionment and replace it with a realisation of its triviality instead.