

Circle of Literature Lovers

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THE ROOM

When I was young, one night I dreamed of an empty room with a table full of white sheets of paper, waiting for someone to write on them. This image often appeared in my dreams, but was soon replaced by the images brought on by puberty. When my father died, the room forced its way back into my dreams, and although I tried to ignore them for a long time, they have never left me since. In those dreams, the world outside the room didn't seem to exist, there were only the table and the white sheets of paper waiting to be written on.

When it comes to this room and my own past, all I can say is that my childhood and literature are all I have left. Those two words are the most important things in my life – and not without reason. My childhood years passed without me taking any notice of the passage of time or of any literary texts. I simply lived, I was in the world, without justification, without reason. Perhaps I write about the lost innocence of my childhood because I am afraid to reveal personal secrets from other phases of my life. Or perhaps because I am trying to fight against the overwhelming power of the past. My recollections bring everything back to me as vividly as if it were happening right now in this moment. Everything is so vivid, colourful and impressive that it seems like my memory blocks out the real world so completely that it ceases to exist.

Apart from my childhood, I write about literature, about my father and his friends from the Thursday Meetings. I write so that they can come

alive in my fantasies. Because I believe that I now have the necessary distance from them, but also the necessary imagination. That way it is less easy to manipulate what happened in the past.

Well, the rest is as empty as a blank sheet of paper, so empty, I suppose, that even if I live for another thousand years, in the end, people will only say: I was born, had a childhood, fell in love with literature and died. Our Thursday Meetings reflect this truth, a truth so powerful that it even shapes my perception of the passage of time.

This is how I remember my past: the winter when we read Rumi's *Masnavi*, the spring when we revisited Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*, and so on. These Thursdays completely outshine other memories and structure my calendar. They transport me to my own personal paradise, which gave me my greatest love: the joy of literature.

Everything took place in this bright, friendly room, the largest room in the house, our guest room. There were chairs all around, covered with wine-red satin, a large sofa, which almost looked like a throne with its upholstery embroidered with pearl peacocks on both sides. There was a three-armed chandelier with blue light bulbs on the ceiling, a memento from my dear grandfather and also the most valuable piece of furniture in the room. Three-legged wooden chairs with inlaid seats, crystal plates for snacks and cake and silver serving trays increased the importance of this room immeasurably compared to all the other rooms. In addition, there was a single large oil painting, which caught the eye as soon as one entered the room, because it hung directly opposite the entrance. It depicted a woman who was in danger of drowning in a quiet, dreamy pond on a beautiful summer's day. You could see the fear in her pleading eyes which seemed to look right at the observer of the painting. The sunlight falling through the thicket on the bank onto the water underlined the panic in drowning woman's eyes. No one in our family knew who had painted the image. There

were different, even contradictory rumors about how it had found its way into our house. The dark, compelling mood captured in the painting stood in stark contrast to what usually happened in this room. This painting was not just one of the many things that made up the reality of these Thursdays, no, it determined the nature of the room, which in summer was darkened by the dense branches of a fig tree and from which, on Thursdays, before the guests arrived, annoying insects were driven away with naphthalene, and one hour after its application, the large windows overlooking the little garden in the courtyard had to be opened. If our house were a representation of the world, this special room would again be a representation of our house. A silent force slipped through the cracks of the closed door, which was only opened on Thursdays, into the whole house. The room was like a mother, making up the center of our world, like a temple, and was connected to our innermost thoughts and feelings in many different ways.

There were eight of them, ten if you count my parents. If you also include me, who later participated in the meetings regularly, there were eleven of us. Golshan and Mokhtar had already made a name for themselves with a few books and were regarded as established figures in the field of literature and culture. Kuscha was a lecturer in literature, but wanted to go further. He wrote poems, plays, stories and a thousand other things without being taken seriously. Apart from my father, Ashra and Foghahi, who also taught literature, the others, namely the blonde widow, Monsef and Hatam, had nothing to do with literature, but felt connected to it by the incomparable pleasure it gave them, as they said.

As the host, my father enjoyed certain privileges. These included the right to read the texts aloud, unless he didn't want to make use of his special right and gave the task to someone else. Foghahi took on this role more often than the other participants. Tall as he was, he usually stood up, remained motionless in front of his chair and recited the text in an exuberant tone. Now and then he paused and tested the effect of his performance on the audience. To demonstrate his exact understanding of the text, he would sometimes nod approvingly or lift his index finger only to let it sink down again after a while. He would also recite text passages by heart while closing his eyes.

Apart from the widow Motallai, Ashrafi was the only one who never recited texts voluntarily. The pipe in the corner of his mouth and his pronounced belly, his bald head, his round face and his rather small size reminded me of Amir Abbas Howeida, our former prime minister. And I don't remember Ashrafi ever *not* wearing a tie. He had the habit of interrupting the speakers at least once or twice with his usual question: "Could you please repeat that paragraph?"

Monsef had a birthmark in the shape of large scab on his face. He and Hatam, the violinist whose accent betrayed his Kermanshah origin, were reserved and very polite. The most noticeable thing about Hatam was the fact that he always looked surprised. Whatever text we read, he always muttered: "Ajab, ajab, incredible, incredible!" With his metal-framed, round glasses and his thick black moustache, he resembled Walter Benjamin, whom I often saw in photos later on.

The Thursday circle always sat together for several hours. After the work was done, some of them went home, others stayed. For those who stayed, a small table had been set in a corner of the room, where they could have a cheerful dinner. They drank the best Vodka, made by an Armenian and served in crystal jars, to the health of those

present and, as the atmosphere became more familiar, took on a variety of topics, from politics to jokes. Those were always told in a hushed voice, the narrator bending towards his listeners, and then suddenly making everyone shake with laughter, even the three-armed chandelier on the ceiling. In the end, however, they always returned to the topic of literature. In this room, literature was the beginning and the end of every conversation.

THE THURSDAY MEETINGS

When I was little, I believed that I was made up of several people. My father, my mother and my grandmother. And another person, unknown to me, whom I was constantly searching for, but whom I secretly suspected to be connected to the woman who occasionally came to our house to help my mother, even on Thursdays.

This strong countrywoman had been coming and going for many years, was practically a member of the family – she knew all of our secrets – and came early each Thursday to prepare the house for the special day. Since she came so early in the day, I never noticed that she was already in the house and that she had already completed her first duty, which was to clean and dust the guest room, before my brother and I even woke up.

(...)

Ghamar, Moon, is what we called the not exactly beautiful, but robust countrywoman, who had had a purple anchor tattooed on her forehead and whose breasts were big and firm like two water hoses made of animal skin. Ghamar had a son my age and, as my relatives reported,

had once given me milk as gladly as she had nursed him and had used even the slightest excuse to pull me towards her breast, calm me down and nurse me. Later, my aunt told me how eager I was to drink and how I used to hit Ghamar on the chest with my little fists while nursing. Apparently, and much to my mother's dismay, I liked Ghamar's milk better than hers. Every time my mother heard that, she would shake her head vigorously: "I don't remember this at all."

In an attempt to appease my mother again, my aunt started telling other stories from the past. But my mother reminded her: "As I said, on the other subject, you're exaggerating, I'm sure of it."

But because my aunt persistently held on to her view of things, my mother put an end to the discussion at some point: "Please, let's just leave it there" and changed the subject.

(...)

Otherwise, I wasn't particularly fond of Ghamar. On the contrary, sometimes when she tried to come up with an excuse to give me a kiss on the cheek, I felt disgusted, closed my eyes and groaned. I was uncomfortable with the thought that some of her life's juices were also flowing through my veins, but perhaps only because, unlike my always pleasant-smelling mother, she always smelled of Indian spices and fried onions, a smell that also clung to her clothes.

My mother criticized Ghamar for sticking her nose into almost all of our family affairs. Overall, however, she believed that she was sincere and kept the secrets of our house. Ghamar was in and out of our home until the end of her life. I noticed that my mother and her sometimes put their heads together and whispered. One time, my mother suddenly stopped talking while Ghamar, waiting for the story to be continued, looked at her confusedly. My mother shook her head -

trusting that her sudden silence would confirm the suspicion that had started to form in Ghamar's mind, while Ghamar sympathetically patted her hand and stammered a few words in a choked up voice. Ghamar looked as if she might start to cry at any moment. She had nothing in common with my mother, but when I saw her sighing compassionately and comforting her, I thought it was a sign of camaraderie in struggles of little importance, like entering the female menopause.

The fact that a virtual stranger, although she was now relatively close to our family, had breastfed me from time to time, later nourished my suspicion that I was not my parents' child at all, but that I had been adopted for some strange reason that I could not understand. To support my suspicion, I often recalled certain things that only my brother was allowed to do, or other differences that my parents had made between the two of us. If they were unjustly angry with me or reprimanded me, this only strengthened my suspicions. I would sometimes study my parents' faces for days when they were both at home, looking for differences between them and me. Later, when I discovered similarities between me and my mother, I felt fairly certain that she was probably my mother after all. When it comes to my father, I was never quite as sure. I have hidden these doubts from everyone I know all of my life. To reveal them would have meant that I was accusing my mother of something. To reveal them would have been slander.

My suspicions reached their peak one autumn day when I heard a small branch of the tree in front of our house, with only a few leaves on it, scratching at the bathroom window, moved by the wind, an unpleasant noise, and I saw my mother's pubic area through the crack of the bathroom door at the exact same time. It is extremely difficult for me to explain how these two things are connected.

As usual, I came home from school at noon and called for my mother. If children do not have the certainty that their mother is at home as soon as they enter the house, they will not find peace. Anyway, that's how I felt. I found my mother neither in the kitchen nor in the living room. She was neither in the yard nor on the veranda. And when I went up the stairs to the first floor in search of her, I heard very clearly that the tap was running in the bathroom. At the same time, the ugly sound of the branch scratching the glass grew louder, and then I saw her: she was sitting upright in front of a big blue washtub, wringing out a piece of clothing, completely naked. I could see everything and was stunned to realize that her body also included this part that was so shocking to me.

I involuntarily took a step backwards and closed my eyes. That was all I could do at that moment. Only God knows how fervently I hoped then that my mother hadn't noticed me. Luckily, that seemed to be the case.

When I opened my eyes again, it was like a huge hole had opened up in front of me that I would fall into as soon as I took the next step. But as I could not remain standing forever at the bathroom door, I closed my eyes again and took a step forward. Nothing happened. The hole, this deep abyss, had probably only opened up inside of me. And because it is still there today, I am firmly convinced that it really exists.

I went back to the ground floor, still heard the branch scratching at the window pane, felt a strong pressure on my chest and had a terribly bad conscience. I had committed a great injustice, unintentionally, but I had nonetheless made myself guilty. When our Koran teacher, a young mullah, wanted to illustrate the summit of disrespect to us, he always compared it to seeing our mother's loins without permission. Boys who

grow up with one or more sisters know the physical differences between men and women from a very young age and consider them to be perfectly normal, natural. Which is why it is no big secret to them. But I had no sister.

I relived the scene I had observed through the crack of the bathroom door many times in my dreams. In those dreams, I longed to hug my mother. But she would always refuse to embrace me. I was 11 years old and she would tell me: "You know... ..you're becoming a man now."

A man. The word sounded mysterious then, and I was saddened by it, even if I wished for nothing more than to grow up as quickly as possible and be accepted into the circle of grown-ups to finally attain endless freedom, just like them. Freedom which, just like everything that was still unknown to me, caused me a lot of anxiety.

The more I grew aware of my environment, the more curious I became and at some point I wanted to know exactly where babies come out of their mother. My mother had explained to me that they came out of their mother's tummy. Since I had seen the bulging bellies of pregnant women before, I believed her, even though there were no signs of pregnancy on her belly. Later, I was shocked when I saw the gap between a woman's legs depicted schematically in a women's magazine. I was uncomfortable at the time to imagine that I too had crawled out of such a gap. I made this strange discovery a year after the accident with the half-opened bathroom door. Since then, my mother and I had treated each other differently, a strange reticence had developed between us, which did not change for years. However, I wondered if there was an external, tangible reason for this change. Perhaps it was just my perception, my feelings that cast a shadow on our relationship and turned it into something that I found strange and

even frightening. In any case, my mother had suddenly lost her status as a saint. My almost idolatrous love for her faded with the discovery in the bathroom. My mother, however, seemed to pretend that everything had remained normal. Or was she pretending? Then why did I never seem to notice?

What happened a year later complicated things even more. Thanks to a friend and classmate who was only a few months older, I was initiated into the secrets of reproduction. My friend described the affair in an amazingly objective and convincing way, and even though he described everything from his father's point of view, his self-confidence clearly indicated that he knew everything in detail. Since I did not find his explanations completely satisfying, I asked him to clarify some aspects of the matter, but received only a scornful look while my friend repeated what he had told me before. Maybe with a little more enthusiasm, but without any additional information. Then he asked me condescendingly, "How old are you, you little squirt?" At home, the topic of puberty was treated with absolute silence. Of course, I couldn't expect my mother to explain these things to me. But why did my father remain silent? Later I found out that my brother had been initiated into the secrets of conception and procreation by his playmates.

It seemed completely normal at the time that this topic was not discussed, not even at school. Sometimes, during Koran school, we would be told that we were going to learn about topics like prayer and fasting later, once we had reached sexual maturity, but we were only given vague hints about the actual physical signs of this mysterious next step in our development, hints we only understood much later. Accordingly, my puberty and its many crises disturbed me a great deal,

especially the intense feelings of guilt that seemed to increase in proportion to my growing sexual urges.

But that's not all. A few months after I entered puberty, something happened that made the situation even worse. One evening, after I had gone to my bedroom and was playing with myself, I heard footsteps. They stopped in front of my door, which was slightly ajar, and left shortly afterwards, trying to make as little noise as possible – so it seemed to me.

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