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My Daughter the Racist

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ONE MORNING MY daughter woke up and said all in a rush: 'Mother, I swear before you and God that from today onwards I am racist.' She's eight years old. She chopped all her hair off two months ago because she wanted to go around with the local boys and they wouldn't have her with her long hair. Now she looks like one of them; eyes dazed from looking directly at the sun, teeth shining white in her sunburnt face. She laughs a lot. She plays. 'Look at her playing,' my mother says. 'Playing in the rubble of what used to be our great country.' My mother exaggerates as often as she can. I'm sure she would like nothing more than to be part of a Greek tragedy. She wouldn't even want a large part, she'd be perfectly content with a chorus role, warning that fate is coming to make havoc of all things. My mother is a fine woman, all over wrinkles and she always has a clean handkerchief somewhere about her person, but I

don't know what she's talking about with her rubble this, rubble that – we live in a village, and it's not bad here. Not peaceful, but not bad. In cities it's worse. In the city centre, where we used to live, a bomb took my husband and turned his face to blood. I was lucky, another widow told me, that there was something left so that I could know of his passing. But I was ungrateful. I spat at that widow. I spat at her in her sorrow. That's sin. I know that's sin. But half my life was gone, and it wasn't easy to look at what was left.

Anyway, the village. I live with my husband's mother, whom I now call my mother, because I can't return to the one who gave birth to me. It isn't done. I belong with my husband's mother until someone else claims me. And that will never happen, because I don't wish it.

The village is hushed. People observe the phases of the moon. In the city I felt the moon but hardly ever remembered to look for it. The only thing that disturbs us here in the village is the foreign soldiers. Soldiers, soldiers, soldiers, patrolling. They fight us and they try to tell us, in our own language, that they're freeing us. Maybe, maybe not. I look through the dusty window (I can never get it clean, the desert is our neighbour) and I see soldiers every day. They think someone dangerous is running secret messages through here; that's what I've heard. What worries me more is the young people of the village. They stand and

watch the soldiers. And the soldiers don't like it, and the soldiers point their guns, especially at the young men. They won't bother with the women and girls, unless the woman or the girl has an especially wild look in her eyes. I think there are two reasons the soldiers don't like the young men watching them. The first reason is that the soldiers know they are ugly in their boots and fatigues, they are perfectly aware that their presence spoils everything around them. The second reason is the nature of the watching – the boys and the men around here watch with a very great hatred, so great that it feels as if action must follow. I feel that sometimes, just walking past them – when I block their view of the soldiers these boys quiver with impatience.

And that girl of mine has really begun to stare at the soldiers, too, even though I slap her hard when I catch her doing that. Who knows what's going to happen? These soldiers are scared. They might shoot someone. Noura next door says: 'If they could be so evil as to shoot children then it's in God's hands. Anyway I don't believe that they could do it.'

But I know that such things can be. My husband was a university professor. He spoke several languages, and he gave me books to read, and he read news from other countries and told me what's possible. He should've been afraid of the world, should've stayed inside with the doors

locked and the blinds drawn, but he didn't do that, he went out. Our daughter is just like him. She is part of his immortality. I told him, when I was still carrying her, that that's what I want, that that's how I love him. I had always dreaded and feared pregnancy, for all the usual reasons that girls who daydream more than they live fear pregnancy. My body, with its pain and mess and hunger – if I could have bribed it to go away, I would have. Then I married my man, and I held fast to him. And my brain, the brain that had told me I would never bear a child for any man, no matter how nice he was, that brain began to tell me something else. Provided the world continues to exist, provided conditions remain favourable, or at least tolerable, our child will have a child and that child will have a child and so on, and with all those children of children come the inevitability that glimpses of my husband will resurface, in their features, in the way they use their bodies, a fearless swinging of the arms as they walk. Centuries from now some quality of a man's gaze, smile, voice, way of standing or sitting will please someone else in a way that they aren't completely aware of, will be loved very hard for just a moment, without enquiry into where it came from. I ignore the women who say that my daughter does things that a girl shouldn't do, and when I want to keep her near me, I let her go. But not too far, I don't let her go too far from me.

The soldiers remind me of boys from here sometimes. The way our boys used to be. Especially when you catch them with their helmets off, three or four of them sitting on a wall at lunchtime, trying to enjoy their sandwiches and the sun, but really too restless for both. Then you see the rifles beside their lunchboxes and you remember that they aren't our boys.

'Mother... did you hear me? I said that I am now a racist.'

I was getting my daughter ready for school. She can't tie knots but she loves her shoelaces to make extravagant bows.

'Racist against whom, my daughter?'

'Racist against soldiers.'

'Soldiers aren't a race.'

'Soldiers aren't a race,' she mimicked. 'Soldiers aren't a race.'

'What do you want me to say?'

She didn't have an answer, so she just went off in a big gang with her schoolfriends. And I worried, because my daughter has always seen soldiers – in her lifetime she hasn't known a time or place when the cedars stood against the blue sky without khaki canvas or crackling radio signals in the way.

An hour or so later Bilal came to visit. A great honour, I'm sure, a visit from that troublesome Bilal who had done nothing but pester me since the day I came to this village. He sat down with us

and mother served him tea.

‘Three times I have asked this daughter of yours to be my wife,’ Bilal said to my mother. He shook a finger at her. As for me, it was as if I wasn’t there. ‘First wife,’ he continued. ‘Not even second or third – first wife.’

‘Don’t be angry, son,’ my mother murmured. ‘She’s not ready. Only a shameless woman could be ready so soon after what happened.’

‘True, true,’ Bilal agreed. A fly landed just above my top lip and I let it walk.

‘Rather than ask a fourth time I will kidnap her...’

‘Ah, don’t do that, son. Don’t take the light of an old woman’s eyes,’ my mother murmured, and she fed him honey cake. Bilal laughed from his belly, and the fly fled. ‘I was only joking.’

The third time Bilal asked my mother for my hand in marriage I thought I was going to have to do it after all. But my daughter said I wasn’t allowed. I asked her why. Because his face is fat and his eyes are tiny? Because he chews with his mouth open?

‘He has a tyrannical moustache,’ my daughter said. ‘It would be impossible to live with.’ I’m proud of her vocabulary. But it’s starting to look as if I think I’m too good for Bilal, who owns more cattle than any other man for miles around and could give my mother, daughter and I everything we might reasonably expect from this life.

Please, God. You know I don't seek worldly things. If you want me to marry again, so be it. But please – not Bilal. After the love that I have had... you don't believe me, but I would shatter.

My daughter came home for her lunch. After prayers we shared some cold karkedeh, two straws in a drinking glass, and she told me what she was learning, which wasn't much. My mother was there, too, rattling her prayer beads and listening indulgently. She made faces when she thought my daughter talked too much. Then we heard the soldiers coming past as usual, and we went and looked at them through the window. I thought we'd make fun of them a bit, as usual. But my daughter ran out of the front door and into the path of the army truck, yelling: 'You! You bloody soldiers!' Luckily the truck's wheels crawled along the road, and the body of the truck itself was slumped on one side, resigned to a myriad of pot holes. Still, it was a very big truck, and my daughter is a very small girl.

I was out after her before I knew what I was doing, shouting her name. It's a good name – we chose a name that would grow with her, but she seemed determined not to make it to adulthood. I tried to trip her up, but she was too nimble for me. Everyone around was looking on from windows and the open gates of courtyards. The truck rolled to a stop. Someone inside it yelled: 'Move, kid. We've got stuff to do.'

I tried to pull my daughter out of the way, but she wasn't having any of it. My hands being empty, I wrung them. My daughter began to pelt the soldier's vehicle with stones from her pockets. Her pockets were very deep that afternoon, her arms lashed the air like whips. Stone after stone bounced off metal and rattled glass, and I grabbed at her and she screamed: 'This is my country! Get out of here!'

The people of the village began to applaud her. 'Yes,' they cried out, from their seats in the audience, and they clapped. I tried again to seize her arm and failed again. The truck's engine revved up and I opened my arms as wide as they would go, inviting everyone to witness. Now I was screaming too: 'So you dare? You really dare?'

And there we were, mother and daughter, causing problems for the soldiers together.

Finally a scrawny soldier came out of the vehicle without his gun. He was the scrawniest fighting man I've ever seen – he was barely there, just a piece of wire, really. He walked towards my daughter, who had run out of stones. He stretched out a long arm, offering her chewing gum, and she swore at him, and I swore at her for swearing. He stopped about thirty centimetres away from us and said to my daughter: 'You're brave.'

My daughter put her hands on her hips and glared up at him.

'We're leaving tomorrow,' the scrawny soldier told her.

Whispers and shouts: *the soldiers are leaving tomorrow!*

A soldier inside the truck yelled out: 'Yeah, but more are coming to take our place,' and everyone piped low. My daughter reached for a stone that hadn't fallen far. Who is this girl? Four feet tall and fighting something she knows nothing about. Even if I explained it to her she wouldn't get it. I don't get it myself.

'Can I shake your hand?' the scrawny soldier asked her, before her hand met the stone. I thought my girl would refuse, but she said yes. 'You're okay,' she told him. 'You came out to face me.'

'Her English is good,' the coward from within the truck remarked.

'I speak to her in English every day,' I called out. 'So she can tell people like you what she thinks.'

We stepped aside then, my daughter and I, and let them continue their patrol.



My mother didn't like what had happened. But didn't you see everyone clapping for us, my daughter asked. So what, my mother said. People clap at anything. Some people even clap when they're on an aeroplane and it lands. That was something my husband had told us from his travels – I hadn't thought she'd remember.

My daughter became a celebrity amongst the children, and from what I saw, she used it for good, bringing the shunned ones into the inner circle and laughing at all their jokes.



The following week a foreigner dressed like one of our men knocked at my mother's door. It was late afternoon, turning to dusk. People sat looking out onto the street, talking about everything as they took their tea. Our people really know how to discuss a matter from head to toe; it is our gift, and such conversation on a balmy evening can be sweeter than sugar. Now they were talking about the foreigner who was at our door. I answered it myself. My daughter was at my side and we recognized the man at once; it was the scrawny soldier. He looked itchy and uncomfortable in his djellaba, and he wasn't wearing his keffiyeh at all correctly – his hair was showing.

'What a clown,' my daughter said, and from her seat on the cushioned floor my mother vowed that clown, or no clown, he couldn't enter her house.

'Welcome,' I said to him. It was all I could think of to say. See a guest, bid him welcome. It's who we are. Or maybe it's just who I am.

'I'm not here to cause trouble,' the scrawny soldier said. He was looking to the north, south,

east and west so quickly and repeatedly that for some seconds his head was just a blur. 'I'm completely off duty. In fact, I've been on leave since last week. I'm just – I just thought I'd stick around for a little while. I thought I might have met a worthy adversary – this young lady here, I mean.' He indicated my daughter, who chewed her lip and couldn't stop herself from looking pleased.

'What is he saying?' my mother demanded.

'I'll just – go away, then,' the soldier said. He seemed to be dying several thousand deaths at once.

'He'd like some tea...' my daughter told my mother. 'We'll just have a quick cup or two,' I added, and we took the tea out onto the verandah, and drank it under the eyes of God and the entire neighbourhood. The neighbourhood was annoyed. Very annoyed, and it listened closely to everything that was said. The soldier didn't seem to notice. He and my daughter were getting along famously. I didn't catch what exactly they were talking about, I just poured the tea and made sure my hand was steady. *I'm not doing anything wrong*, I told myself. *I'm not doing anything wrong*.

The scrawny soldier asked if I would tell him my name. 'No,' I said. 'You have no right to use it.' He told me his name, but I pretended he hadn't spoken. To cheer him up, my daughter told him her name, and he said: 'That's great. A really, really good name. I might use it myself one day.'

‘You can’t – it’s a girl’s name,’ my daughter replied, her nostrils flared with scorn.

‘Ugh,’ said the soldier. ‘I meant for my daughter...’

He shouldn’t have spoken about his unborn daughter out there in front of everyone, with his eyes and his voice full of hope and laughter. I can guarantee that some woman in the shadows was cursing the daughter he wanted to have. Even as he spoke someone was saying, May that girl be born withered for the grief people like you have caused us.

‘Ugh,’ said my daughter. ‘I like that sound. Ugh, ugh, ugh.’

I began to follow the conversation better. The scrawny soldier told my daughter that he understood why the boys lined the roads with anger. ‘Inside my head I call them the children of Hamelin.’

‘The what?’ my daughter asked.

‘The who?’ I asked.

‘I guess all I mean is that they’re paying the price for something they didn’t do.’

And then he told us the story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, because we hadn’t heard it before. We had nightmares that night, all three of us – my mother, my daughter and I. My mother hadn’t even heard the story, so I don’t know why she joined in. But somehow it was nice that she did.



On his second visit the scrawny soldier began to tell my daughter that there were foreign soldiers in his country, too, but that they were much more difficult to spot because they didn't wear uniforms and some of them didn't even seem foreign. They seemed like ordinary citizens, the sons and daughters of shopkeepers and dentists and restaurant owners and big businessmen. 'That's the most dangerous kind of soldier. The longer those ones live amongst us, the more they hate us, and everything we do disgusts them... these are people we go to school with, ride the subway with – we watch the same movies and play the same video games. They'll never be with us, though. We've been judged, and they'll always be against us. Always.'

He'd wasted his breath, because almost as soon as he began with all that I put my hands over my daughter's ears. She protested loudly, but I kept them there. 'What you're talking about is a different matter,' I said. 'It doesn't explain or excuse your being here. Not to this child. And don't say 'always' to her. You have to think harder or just leave it alone and say sorry.'

He didn't argue, but he didn't apologize. He felt he'd spoken the truth, so he didn't need to argue or apologize.

Later in the evening I asked my daughter if

she was still racist against soldiers and she said loftily: 'I'm afraid I don't know what you're referring to.' When she's a bit older I'm going to ask her about that little outburst, what made her come out with such words in the first place. And I'm sure she'll make up something that makes her sound cleverer and more sensitive than she really was.



We were expecting our scrawny soldier again the following afternoon, my daughter and I. My daughter's friends had dropped her. Even the ones she had helped find favour with the other children forgot that their new position was due to her and urged the others to leave her out of everything. The women I knew snubbed me at market, but I didn't need them. My daughter and I told each other that everyone would come round once they understood that what we were doing was innocent. In fact we were confident that we could convince our soldier of his wrongdoing and send him back to his country to begin life anew as an architect. He'd confessed a love of our minarets. He could take the image of our village home with him and make marvels of it.

Noura waited until our mothers, mine and hers, were busy gossiping at her house, then she came to tell me that the men were discussing how

best to deal with me. I was washing clothes in the bathtub and I almost fell in.

My crime was that I had insulted Bilal with my brazen pursuit of this soldier...

‘Noura! This soldier – he’s just a boy! He can hardly coax his beard to grow. How could you believe –’

‘I’m not saying I believe it. I’m just saying you must stop this kind of socializing. And behave impeccably from now on. I mean – angelically.’

Three months before I had come to the village, Noura told me, there had been a young widow who talked back all the time and looked haughtily at the men. A few of them got fed up, and they took her out to the desert and beat her severely. She survived, but once they’d finished with her she couldn’t see out of her own eyes or talk out of her own lips. The women didn’t like to mention such a matter, but Noura was mentioning it now, because she wanted me to be careful.

‘I see,’ I said. ‘You’re saying they can do this to me?’

‘Don’t smile; they can do it. You know they can do it! You know that with those soldiers here our men are twice as fiery. Six or seven of them will even gather to kick a stray dog for stealing food...’

‘Yes, I saw that yesterday. Fiery, you call it. Did they bring this woman out of her home at night or in the morning, Noura? Did they drag her by her hair?’

Noura averted her eyes because I was asking her why she had let it happen and she didn't want to answer.

'You're not thinking clearly. Not only can they do this to you but they can take your daughter from you first, and put her somewhere she would never again see the light of day. Better that than have her grow up like her mother. Can't you see that that's how it would go? I'm telling you this as a friend, a true friend... my husband doesn't want me to talk to you anymore. He says your ideas are wicked and bizarre.'

I didn't ask Noura what her husband could possibly know about my ideas. Instead I said: 'You know me a little. Do you find my ideas wicked and bizarre?'

Noura hurried to the door. 'Yes. I do. I think your husband spoilt you. He gave you illusions... you feel too free. We are not free.'



I drew my nails down my palm, down then back up the other way, deep and hard. I thought about what Noura had told me. I didn't think for very long. I had no choice – I couldn't afford another visit from him. I wrote him a letter. I wonder if I'll ever get a chance to take back all that I wrote in that letter; it was hideous from beginning to end. Human beings shouldn't say such things to each other. I put the letter into an unsealed envelope

and found a local boy who knew where the scrawny soldier lived. Doubtless Bilal read the letter before the soldier did, because by evening everyone but my daughter knew what I had done. My daughter waited for the soldier until it was fully dark, and I waited with her, pretending that I was still expecting our friend. There was a song she wanted to sing to him. I asked her to sing it to me instead, but she said I wouldn't appreciate it. When we went inside at last, my daughter asked me if the soldier could have gone home without telling us. He probably hated goodbyes.

'He said he would come... I hope he's alright...' my daughter fretted.

'He's gone home to build minarets.'

'With matchsticks, probably.'

And we were both very sad.



My daughter didn't smile for six days. On the seventh she said she couldn't go to school.

'You have to go to school,' I told her. 'How else will you get your friends back again?'

'What if I can't,' she wailed. 'What if I can't get them back again?'

'Do you really think you won't get them back again?'

'Oh, you don't even care that our friend is gone. Mothers have no feelings and are enemies of progress.'

(I really wonder who my daughter has been talking to lately. Someone with a sense of humour very like her father's...)

I tickled the sole of her foot until she shouted.

'Let this enemy of progress tell you something,' I said. 'I'm never sad when a friend goes far away, because whichever city or country that friend goes to, they turn the place friendly. They turn a suspicious-looking name on the map into a place where a welcome can be found. Maybe the friend will talk about you sometimes, to other friends that live around him, and then that's almost as good as being there yourself. You're in several places at once! In fact, my daughter, I would even go so far as to say that the further away your friends are, and the more spread out they are, the better your chances of going safely through the world...'

'Ugh,' my daughter said.