

House of Flesh

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Translated by C. Lindley Cross

The ring, beside the light. Silence prevails, ears cannot see. In silence, the finger sneaks.
It puts on the ring,

In silence, the light is extinguished.

Darkness consumes all.

In darkness, eyes cannot see.

The widow and her three daughters. The house is a room. The beginning is silence.

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The widow is tall, white, and slender, thirty-five. Her daughters are also tall, erupting. They do not remove their black, enveloping clothes, whether in mourning or not. The youngest is sixteen, the oldest, twenty; ugly girls, who inherited the father's dark body, equally disproportionate in lumps and hollows. They barely got their mother's figure.

Despite its small size, the room is big enough for them. Despite its extreme poverty, it is neat and elegant, infused with the touch of the four females. At night, their bodies are scattered about, some on the bed, others around it, like large piles of warm, living, flesh. The sound of hot, restive breathing is rising up from them, sometimes gathering into a deep sigh.

Silence has enclosed them since the man died. The man died two years ago, after a long illness. Sorrow was gone, but the habits of the sorrowful persisted—mostly, silence. A long silence, never broken, for it was in truth a silence of waiting. The girls have grown, their anticipation has drawn out, but no husbands have come calling. What fool would knock on the door of these poor scarecrows, and orphans at that? There is, of course, hope, for every bean has its basket, and every girl has her man. If they were poor, there's always someone poorer; if they were ugly, there's always someone uglier. *Dreams do come true—if you wait, they'll come to you.*



Silence, unbroken by anything except the sound of recitation, rising up in routine, devoid of novelty or feeling. The chanting is by a Qur'an reciter, a blind one, over the soul of the deceased, and its appointed time never changes. On Friday afternoon, he comes, he raps on the door with his cane, he accepts the hand offered to him, and he sits cross-legged on the straw mat. When he is done, he feels around for his sandals, he extends a farewell which no one bothers to answer, and he leaves. Out of habit he arrives, out of habit he recites, out of habit he departs. No one senses his presence any longer, or pays him any attention.

Silence everlasting. Even when the recitation of Friday afternoon disturbs it, it has become as if it were interrupting the silence with silence. It is endless, like the waiting, like hope, a slim hope but there all the same. It's hoping for the least. For everything small, there is something smaller. They do not aspire to anything more. They never would.

Silence endures until something happens. Friday afternoon arrives, but the Qur'an reciter does not. For every agreement, no matter how long it may last, there is an end. The agreement has ended.

Only now the widow and her daughter come to understand the essence of what was happening. It wasn't just the only voice that was breaking the silence, it was the only man who—if but once a week—came knocking on the door. They even began to realize other things. True, he is poor like them, but his clothes were always clean, his sandals inevitably polished, his turban wrapped with a precision that would confound a seeing man, and his voice was strong, deep, and resonant.

The suggestion begins: why not renew the agreement, right now? Why not send for him this very moment? He's busy? Fine! Waiting is nothing new.

Around sunset, he comes and recites, and it is as if he were reciting for the first time.

The suggestion grows: why shouldn't one of us marry a man who fills the house with his voice for us? He's a bachelor, never married; he has just the hint of a promising mustache. But he's young! He'll get us talking, and he's also looking for a nice girl.

The girls suggest, and the mother looks over their faces to pick the lucky one. But the faces turn away, suggesting—merely hinting—saying without words, *After all this time waiting for Prince Charming, you'd give us a toad?* They are still dreaming of their husbands, and husbands are usually sighted. The poor things did not yet know the world of men. It was impossible for them to understand that a man isn't made so by his eyes.

—You marry him, Momma! You marry him!

—Me?! What a disgrace! What would people say?

—Whatever they want! That’s nothing compared to a house empty of the ringing voice of a man!

—Me, marry before you? Impossible!

—Isn’t it best for you to get married before us, so our house knows a man’s step? After that, we’ll get married. Marry him! Marry him, Momma!

And so she married him. The number of bodies increased by one, fortunes increased a little, and a greater problem arose.

To be sure, the first night went by with the two of them in their bed, but they didn’t dare approach each other, even by accident! The three girls are sleeping, but from every one of them, a pair of spotlights is trained precisely on the space that separates the two—spotlights of eyes, of ears, of senses. The girls are grown up. They know. They are aware. It’s as though the room has been cast into broad daylight by their watchful presence. By day, there was no longer any excuse, and one after another they crept away and did not return until around evening, hesitant and bashful, a foot forward and a foot behind, until they get close ... and then it startles them, confuses them, causes them to fall into laughter. The booming laughter of the man intertwines with the giggling of the woman. That must be their mother laughing! And the man, from whom they’ve never heard anything except politeness and humility—look how he’s laughing! Still laughing, she takes them into her arms, her head uncovered, her hair damp and combed, still laughing. Her face—that which they instantly realized was nothing more than an extinguished lantern that spiders and wrinkles had nested in—was suddenly lit up in front of them, like a bright electric lamp. And how her eyes shine! They have emerged and become clear, glistening with the tears of laughter which had been concealed in some deep, faraway place.

The silence faded and disappeared entirely. At supper, before supper, and after supper, jokes, stories, and singing abound. His voice is sweet as he sings in the style of Umm Kulthum and Abdel Wahab, a powerful voice, hoarse with gaiety as it resonates.

—You’ve done well, Momma! And tomorrow the laughter will attract the men. After all, *it takes a man to catch a man.*

—Yes, girls, tomorrow men will start to come, and husbands soon after.

But in truth, what had her attention weren’t men or husbands, but this young man. So what if he’s blind? How often are we ourselves blind from truly seeing people, merely because they cannot see! This strong young man, bursting with vigor and health and life, is her compensation for years of sickness, weakness, and premature aging.

The silence has faded, seemingly for good, and the clamor of life has rushed in. The man is her lawful husband, married by the tradition of God and His Prophet. What is there

to be ashamed of? Everything that she is doing is permissible. She no longer has any care about hiding or keeping secrets. Even when the night comes and all of them are together, free reign is given to minds, bodies, and souls, until the girls, scattered about and separated, understand and realize. They are nailed to their beds, their breaths and voices quivering, suppressing any cough or tremor. Sighs suddenly emerge, to be concealed by the sighs.

Her day was washing in the houses of the rich, and his day was recitation in the houses of the poor. It wasn't originally his habit to come home in the afternoon, but as his evenings grew longer and kept him ever more awake, he began to come back in the afternoon to relax his body for an hour from the travails of the previous evening and to prepare for the coming night. And then one time, when they had satisfied the night and the night had satisfied them, he suddenly asked her what had been going on with her that afternoon; why she was so chatty now, when then she had been totally silent? And why is she now wearing the ring that is so precious to him—for it was everything he put into the marriage, the ring, the dowry, the bride-gift, and presents—and not before?

She could have risen up to her feet, shrieking in despair. She could have lost her mind. Someone might have killed him. For what he said could only mean one thing, and what a depraved, horrible thing it was!

But all of this was held at bay by a suffocating agony that cut off her breath with it. She was silent. Turning her ears into noses, senses, and eyes, she began to listen. Her first concern was to know who had done it. For some reason, she was sure that it was the middle one. There was a boldness in her eyes that bullets could not kill. But she listens. The breathing of the three girls rises up, deep and hot as if in a fever; burning with longing, it moans, faltering, halting, interrupted by forbidden dreams. In its fitful rhythm, the breathing turns into hissing, a hissing like the heat that erupts out of thirsty soil. Her anguish grows deeper and grips her ever more tightly. It was the breathing of the hungry she was hearing. Even when harnessing the totality of her senses, she cannot distinguish between one mass of hot, living flesh and another. All of them are hungry! All of them are sighing and murmuring. The moaning in their breath is not just respiration, but a call for help, or begging, or maybe more.

She had plunged into her second obligation and forgotten her first—her girls! The waiting had become bitter, and even the mirage of bride-grooms no longer appeared. Here she is, suddenly stung, like one woken in panic by a hidden call. The girls are hungry! Yes, the food is forbidden, but starving is even more so. Nothing is more sinful than this kind of hunger! She herself knows it, and it knew her. It had withered her soul and sucked her bones dry. She knows it, and however satisfied she may be, it was impossible to forget its taste.

Starving! And it is she who used to take food out of her own mouth to feed them! She whose duty it was to feed them even if she went hungry! She is their mother! Had she forgotten?

No matter how much she was tormented, the anguish turned into silence. The mother fell silent, and from that moment on, silence never left her.

And at breakfast it was the middle child, exactly as she had guessed, who was silent.

Perpetually silent.

The dinner comes, and the young man, happy, blind, and having a good time, is still joking, singing, and laughing. Nobody shares in the laughter except for the youngest and the eldest.

Patience wears on and its bitterness turns into illness. No one is paying attention.

One day the eldest notices her mother's ring on her finger and remarks how much she likes it. She asks her to wear it for a day, just for one day, no more. The mother's heart is racing. In silence, she pulls it from her finger. In silence, the oldest puts it upon hers.

The following dinner, the eldest is silent, unwilling to utter a word.

The young blind man is noisy, singing and laughing, and the youngest joins in.

But with time, worry, and lack of luck, the youngest grows old. She starts to ask about her turn in the game of the ring. In silence, she takes her turn.

The ring, beside the lamp. Silence prevails, ears cannot see. In silence, the finger sneaks. The one whose turn it is puts on the ring, also in silence. The light is extinguished. Darkness consumes all. In darkness, eyes cannot see.

No one left, boisterous in joke and song, except for the young, blind, man.

But behind his noise and clamor there lies a desire, pushing him to revolt against the silence and hurl himself against it, smashing it into pieces. He also wants to know—to know for sure. At first he would say to himself that it is women's nature that refuses to stay the same; for one time she is fresh and graceful like a drop of dew, worn and depleted another, like water in a stagnant pond. Soft as the touch of a flower petal one time, coarse as a prickly pear another. True, the ring is always there, but the finger that it encircles is different every time. He almost knows, and they certainly all know. Why doesn't the silence speak? Why can't it open up?

But one time at dinner, the question suddenly came upon him: what if the silence revealed its secrets? What if it could speak?

The mere question choked the food in his throat.

And from that moment, he took total refuge in silence and refused to leave it.

Now it was he who has become afraid that the abominable would be spoken, even once, and crack the silence. If a single word was let out, perhaps the whole edifice of silence could collapse, and woe be upon him if it fell.

A strange, different silence that everyone had begun to take refuge in.

A willful silence this time, brought on neither by poverty nor ugliness nor patience nor despair.

It was in fact the deepest kind of silence, for it was silence agreed upon in the strongest way—that which comes about without any agreement.

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The widow and her three daughters.

The house, a room.

The new silence.

The blind reciter who came with that silence. With silence, he began to confirm to himself that his partner in bed was always his spouse and lawful wife, true and pure, wearing his ring, young one moment and old the next, alternatively soft and hard, sometimes thin, sometimes fat. That's her business alone—rather, it's the business of the sighted and their responsibility alone! It is they who own the blessing of certainty, since they are able to distinguish. The most he can do is to doubt, and doubt can never become certainty except with the blessing of sight. As long as he is deprived of it, he will remain deprived of certainty. After all, he is the one who is blind! *No blame is there on the blind.*

Is there?

—*fin*