Half a Life

Aya Sabi

An extract

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Fatna, 1955-1956, at Lalla Touria's

Was it bad with him? It wasn't a disaster that I had to stay inside, or that he was jealous. The disaster lay in the fact that he wanted to see more and more of me, wanted to talk to me. The disaster lay in the fact that he wanted to love me, he placed his heart in my lap even though he could see that there was no room, that I wasn't forming a little bowl for it, that it wasn't soft and warm enough to stay there, that I didn't scratch behind his ears when he lay in the space between my legs. These sheets are mine, and so is the pillow my head is currently resting on. I have a mirror I never look into, hanging above a white sink with a metal faucet, but most of all: no more human hearts are placed in my lap, bleeding organs that have been ripped from other people's chests and bleed down my thighs, making me afraid to get up or lie down, afraid to drop the heart which would make it lose even more blood, afraid to caress it because I don't want to leave any sticky fingerprints on the tissue, feeling an urge to get rid of it so I can finally change positions, stretch my back, breathe more deeply, relieve the tension in my shaky leg muscles.

That's the biggest luxury: not that I have a bed, but that I have a bed to myself. My uniform is hanging from the door. It's a black skirt with a black shirt and a white apron. My husband saw that I was a real woman. Lalla Touria sees that I'm destined for something greater than marriage. I don't understand what it means, because I never look at myself. People look at the morning light, at the perfect number of sesame seeds on a plate of sweetened meat and prunes—pretty things. Lalla Touria wants to take me back to my natal village. She wants to solve things for me. She doesn't know it's too late. They might as well invite the sultan, but everything that happened, happened. I miss my natal village in the way that people miss someone who passed away, someone who will never come back, whose absence you don't really understand, because what does 'never again' or 'forever' mean? Maybe that's what they teach you in school, but I never went to school. School is no place for a woman. Everything you need to know, you learn in your mother's kitchen. That's even harder work, vital. You can't survive on a handful of letters and numbers.

I can no longer return as myself. As who I was before all of this transpired. Before all of this happened to me, like some natural disaster. The people I loved most as a child will greet me as if I were a strange woman, someone who has come to do the impossible: to divorce a husband who was good to her and whom she left anyway to go work in the kitchen of a woman who can drive, but who can't do her own dishes. They'll tell me that I've breathed in too many exhaust fumes over there in the big city, that they've caused my head to swell up, that I've pierced the clouds like a hot-air balloon,

but that my flame will soon be extinguished, hot air always cools off, and then I'll start coming back down again. But I've looked death in the eye and nothing can scare me now, my flame was extinguished a long time ago, there's no fire left to warm the air, the blood seeping from my heart is cold as ice, my extremities have died off. I'm moving my fingers around, I'm wiggling my toes.

My mother couldn't sleep for three days whenever I broke a plate, she would still be telling people the story on the fourth day, whether they wanted to hear it or not: that her daughters were useless to her because each of them had two left hands – that's six left hands in total – and they were so careless. The best thing for her to do was to marry us off to whomever was available. 'But of course, those men aren't blind! They can also see that these girls are lost causes!' Then she would laugh so loudly, and the other women would laugh along uncomfortably. She didn't mean any of those words, I think. It was a way to complain without complaining about the things that really mattered. Without saying what really hurt. It was a way to be one step ahead of anyone who might think badly of us, to not give them the chance to criticize her own children. That, or she did it to keep the evil eye at bay. Who can tell?

What I do know is that this will cause her a lot of sleepless nights. I didn't break a plate this time. I broke a good marriage, and the worst part is that I don't care at all.

Essay #2: ON THE HISTORY OF MY PAIN

As a woman

I started writing this exactly one year ago. I watched productivity guru videos, made my bed each morning, turned off my internet connection after ten at night and went to bed with a book, I trusted God, I trusted the heavy sorrows that (will) befall me and the insignificance of daily life, I did cardio exercises, went for a walk every other morning, I'd achieved the highest possible goals as a migrant child, was in a good place in my life and knew that everybody I had lost was in an even better place, I grieved for as long as was necessary and afterwards kept my loved ones at an appropriate distance, close by, I watered my plants, not too much, not too little—life is about finding the right balance—I went out to dinner with friends on weekends, practiced yoga, derived a lot of satisfaction from my job (hosting workshops at libraries and museums, you can book me at www.littlesunshine.com), I went rock-climbing with my mother each Friday, and yet I felt a pain inside of me that I couldn't seem to heal.

As the granddaughter of my grandmother

Time heals all wounds—as you get older, you'll start to forget—and the past is dead. Popular lunacies, collective lies: as if you just have to wait until it fades, until oblivion kicks in, until the hard edges are worn so you can unbox yourself without getting cut. Bullshit. I watched my grandmother deteriorate when she started dementing, her name was chiseled out of her broken language, she even lost her toilet training, like a toddler, but her pain stayed. The continuous forgetting exposed the thing she had always tried to forget, the thing she never told me about, even though I was her favorite. Instead, it was dug up more and more each day. For over ten years she had been saying that she was fed up with it, but she kept waiting politely for God to send for her. That happened two years ago (see essay #1), but not before, for the past ten years, she was cruelly and slowly extracted from life.

At some point the roles were reversed, and while she used to be the speaker and I the listener, I now rocked her to sleep with my words, I cleaned and washed her when it was my turn once a week, I sporadically did what she had always done for me self-evidently and full of love. I did it shamefully

and full of a deep sense of admiration for the tight, translucent skin that held together her skeleton of sugar; she could fall apart in my hands at any moment. My grandmother lay on her deathbed for more than ten years.

The last couple of months, she held on to the edges of the hospital bed in the living room, for hours on end—whether out of constant pain or mortal fear, she couldn't tell us. It's like when a baby keeps crying when you've changed its diaper, you've fed it, and it's had plenty of sleep. You don't know what else to do. When she was a child, the world started over again each day. Now, she carried an entire life with her for days and every day felt old, dusty. What you leave behind in a human life is decline, a lover, half of your body, a piece of heart. Losing language is losing yourself. She didn't swallow the porridge, but collected the mush behind her teeth and spit it out bit by bit over the course of the day. She didn't want to eat, she didn't want to stay alive, ever headstrong, rebellious. She would say nothing for half a day only to then start prattling, uttering primal sounds that lay preserved in some sacred corner of her memory: she was feeding on reserves.

Sometimes I thought that sudden death would have been better, if I would have woken up in the morning and not have been able to wake my grandmother, no matter how vigorously I shook her; she had gone peacefully in her sleep. I was ashamed of this thought: I was a spoiled brat who couldn't watch her grandma suffer, an idealist who didn't want to face the cruelty of a life ending, but that wasn't it. It hurt me that I couldn't save her, that I couldn't lift the laws of cruelty, or even slow them down. She said that she didn't think she deserved the days anymore, not with this half-memory, not with this half-body, and I couldn't help but agree with her. I wanted her to go.

If it's the mother who gives birth and nurtures, it's also the mother who gives birth and abandons, neglects. But it's always the mother who gives a child language. The first neurons light up and make connections when the fetus hears the mother's voice, creating a small supply for when dementia and decline hit and all that's left are a few primal sounds to fall back on, eighty-five years later. Sometimes she called for her mother, like a child, who hasn't lost its language but hopes to learn it still. Each time she found herself in a different moment of her life. At times, I was her mother who reproached her for poking too many holes in the bread; at others, I was her daughter trying to kill her in revenge. Her mother passed away half a century ago, I never met her. What I do know is that from one moment to the next, she went from alive and kicking to stone-dead. Whereas grandma's presence decreased by the day, as if each day she curled up another ten centimeters. Her back bent like a zygote turning into an embryo with a heart and a liver and lungs that, incapable of finding enough room, curls into a ball and hugs its own limbs.

The world was big, but there was no room left in it for her. Sometimes I see the women again, the women she used to be before she had a cerebral infarction, before she was paralyzed. The woman baking pancakes with a thousand holes in them for all her neighbors. The woman braiding her hair and getting dolled up, wearing her newest caftan just to stand in the kitchen all day. The woman who doesn't need a box for all her jewelry, because she wears it all the time. The woman with the gap in between her teeth that shows when she smiles, which is almost always. All of these women were once a part of her; there were multiple losses, not of one woman but of all the women she had been. There's something cruel about a life that goes on for too long, maybe even more so than a life that ends too soon.

When she didn't remember my name, she called out 'Mother!' in a way that made my ovaries ache. She was talking to some primal instinct that I didn't think I possessed, because I knew I never wanted

to have kids. But when I saw her lying there so helplessly, I preferred for her to be a newborn I could protect from the world, and not the grandmother who probably knew the world better than I did, but who had by that point completely forgotten it. Whenever she woke up, fearful and sweating, I didn't know how to pull her back into the real world—by slapping her? I would have done it. Once she calmed down, I would sit down on the edge of the bed. I'd hold her hands. 'She wanted to kill me,' she said one day. 'Who did, grandma?' 'My own daughter. What will people say? My very own daughter, she wanted to revenge me, she was carrying one of those butcher's knives with a serrated edge—no, a bread knife. I like bread with olive oil on it. You do too, don't you?'

I didn't say anything, squeezed her numbed hands even tighter, so that her brain would register my touch. Another random moment: 'Will you dig the hole for me later?' 'What hole, grandma?' 'The hole to bury me in, once that witch over there kills me.' She pointed at my mother, who pretended not to hear. Then grandma said: 'No, the other one, her older sister, I mean.' My mother doesn't have a sister. At times like those, language was available to her again, to voice the pain. I lost all of my language. I knew that my mother and my grandmother had a complex relationship, that my mother probably had reason enough to want to seek revenge, although I thought aiming a serrated bread knife at her went one step too far. I didn't ask any questions, because we smile, that's what glues each generation to the next: the sarcasm, the jokes, the anecdotes, we are women with a great sense of humor, we are women who never bore you, we are not the women with questions, with pain, with impolite curiosities about festering pasts. And I dutifully conformed to this tradition.
