

# He, She, and the Inevitable Us

**Ish Ait Hamou**

**An extract pp 76-81; 113-114; 127-128; 150-152; 231-233**

**Original title** Het moois dat we delen  
**Publisher** Angèle, 2019

**Translation** Dutch into English  
**Translator** Jonathan Reeder

© Ish Ait Hamou/Jonathan Reeder/Angèle/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

p 76-81

## She

There are no windows in the waiting room, only doors. Large, heavy doors leading to who knows where. I sit under a flickering fluorescent light. Across from me, a few seats to the left, sits a skinny woman. Next to her is a man with a mustache, presumably her husband. He's wearing gray jogging pants and black slippers. The tips of his fingers are yellow, like his nails.

It's quiet here, and calm. Occasionally there's the sound of a distant voice or a closing door. Or a rolling bed or cart. The only constant is the hum of the vending machine—even in a hospital you can buy Coke, chips, and candy.

Every now and then I glance at the door to the waiting room. Father hasn't arrived yet. I'm far too warm, but I try to ignore the discomfort. No one has come out yet, neither for me nor for the couple across from me. A doctor is tending to Karim and I'm anxious to know how he is.

The man with the slippers looks at me. He's probably wondering who would dress like this. The sweat under my three pairs of socks makes my feet itch, but my shoes are too tight for me to wriggle my toes. I look at my feet. Shoes are telling, because if there's one article of clothing that can reveal the state of the wearer, it's shoes.

The man with the slippers mutters something at me. His words get stuck in his long, bristly mustache, like an insect in a spider's web. I have no idea what he wants from me, not the faintest idea of his intentions. Come on, where's the doctor? The man asks if I understand Dutch. Why would he assume I don't? I apologize and say I didn't hear him. He looks surprised, the wrinkles and lines on his forehead come to life.

'Ah, I thought you were one of them who won't learn the language.'

'Sorry, I didn't mean it badly.'

'Sure. You people never mean it badly, do you?' He laughs.

I do my best to ignore him.

'Just kidding, heh. That's a lot of blood. I saw you two come in. It don't look too good. You start 'em young, don't you?'

He laughs again. 'Well, y'know, sometimes people just get fed up.'

I feel a cramp in my stomach; he's baiting me. I endure his words in the hope that he'll get bored with my passiveness and leave me alone. But he's not finished yet.

He takes out a packet of shag and starts rolling a cigarette. His fingers know exactly what to do, so well that they no longer need his eyes.

'But do you get that? That sometimes we just get fed up? You got to understand that. We can't always look the other way. Really, I got nothing against you people, but sometimes it comes to this. These things happen.' He licks a piece of cigarette paper. His teeth and tongue are as vile-looking as his words.

'But a lot of you don't see that. And that gets on people's nerves, 'cause it's almost like we're not allowed to be honest anymore. And if you can't be honest, what's left, eh? In the end it comes down to gratitude, you know? Maybe that's what people want: that you folks show this country a little gratitude. I mean, you're far better off here than there. You're grateful to us, right? Are you grateful?'

I look around. I want to leave, but I have to stay for my little brother. If the doctor comes looking for me, I have to be here.

'Lemme put it another way,' he says, pausing to finally roll up the cigarette. 'Do you people have this in your country? That when you're sick or get beat up you can just waltz into a hospital, free and all? Do you have that there?'

'I...'

'It's them little things, see, we take pretty good care of you people and don't expect so much in return. Learn the language, work, just act like normal people, be normal. You know, we got values here, either you go along with them or you leave. Not that I'm sticking up for the racists, but sometimes they've got a point. If somebody don't like it here then they can just go back where they came from. And by the way, some of your people are friends of mine, and they think the same way I do.'

He looks at his cigarette, satisfied. 'So the question is: are you grateful to be allowed to live in this country?'

It sounds so simple that his words almost become self-evident. But the message behind his words infuriates me. I am ashamed when my lips surrender to the power he has over me: 'Yes.'

'Well, well. Good to hear. You people might want to say so now and then. That, and sorry. Sorry's something we could do with hearing a little more often. Now I'm gonna go smoke this thing, if you're gonna poison your lungs, what better place to do it than in a hospital.' A big fat guffaw, and off he walks. His wife hasn't moved a muscle the whole time.

I check back with the receptionist. I ask if there's word about my brother. If she has any idea how long it might take. She says she doesn't know and that I should wait here. So I wait.

The longer it takes, the more my blood boils. This is my home, you idiot. idiot! I was born here. I'm here and there, I'm good and bad. I'm not half, I'm double. That's what I should have answered back.

I calm down when I see the waiting room door open. He looks tired, worried, but he's here. Father has arrived.

I walk down the third floor corridor carrying a coffee in a plastic cup. Father wants it black with two sugars. Some of the doors are open. For some people, this hospital is where they begin their life, for others, it's the end. I think of Mama. Hers was room 423. On her last day she said that a deathbed is the only place you can forgive the devil, not so much because his wickedness can't harm you anymore, but because you realize forgiveness brings you peace. I wonder if she'd have forgiven me. I wonder if I can ever forgive those two kids who did this to my little brother. I'm not sure if forgiveness is still done anymore. Nowadays people see being harsh and judgmental as a sign of strength.

A few drops of coffee splash onto my shoe. Karim's door is open, too. Father is sitting next to him. From here it's hard to say if my brother is asleep or awake. His eyelids are purple and swollen. He's got two stitches.

I walk over to Father, hand him the coffee and perch on the edge of the windowsill.

'Where were you?'

'The machine was all the way downstairs.'

'Where were you when Karim was in the park?'

'I... was home. On the computer, looking for work.'

'Why are you dressed like that?'

'I was about to go jogging.'

Father raises one eyebrow. 'Go home and pick up some things for your brother. He'll have to stay here for two or three nights. I'll wait until he wakes up.'

## She

*It was 4:20 a.m., I was lying in bed and could barely keep my eyes open. They had booked a cheap flight from Paris to Nador, at least that's what they said. The only thing was, they needed to catch an early-morning bus from downtown Brussels. And the first bus from our town to Brussels left too late.*

*I checked my watch occasionally, knowing they would ring the doorbell if I was even a minute late. I did not want Father or my little brother to be woken up.*

*I was already in my father's car when I heard their suitcase come rolling up. They had one big gray roller suitcase, and a small backpack each. I wanted to help them load their luggage, because the last thing I needed was a lecture from Father on account of a scratch on his new car. But he said he'd rather do it himself. We didn't say much on the way. I wanted to put on some music, but didn't. I knew they had become ultra-religious and I didn't feel like having to defend my favorite songs at half past four in the morning.*

*So anyway, we got to the bus station in Brussels. I got out and watched as they took their luggage out of the trunk. I was surprised how little they had with them, for a trip to Morocco. You usually brought at least a shirt, trousers, or pair of shoes for each family member, and every year the family got bigger. Expectations can be pretty high. That's the moment I should have known. There's so much I should have known. But you don't know something until it's too late, and realize you should have asked questions much earlier. So I drove home, the music on quietly, and hoped my brother would let me sleep in. At that moment they walked into the bus station, where they waited for a third person. Three hours later I was lying in bed when they blew up the gray suitcase. They took the bus station and sixteen people with them.*

## He

The silence in the house feels different today. As though it's even quieter than usual. I roll onto my side, give myself a boost, and sit up cautiously. I think I know what it is. I push my feet into my slippers. It takes me a while to stand completely upright. Today I manage it on the third try.

I shuffle to the bathroom and listen as I look at the bathtub. I don't hear it anymore. The dripping. The faucet, it's no longer dripping. I go a few steps closer, bend over, and notice that a single droplet is clinging to the bathtub spout. And just stays there. My eyes well up. I wait. I sit down on the toilet seat lid and stare at the bathtub faucet. The silence is now ear-splitting. Her silence.

I gasp for breath, feel warmth trickle down my cheeks. I can't even cry properly anymore. My vocal cords are sore. Damn that faucet.

I hoist myself up by the handrail on the wall, begin the day, fill the sink with water. I hold my hands under the stream, wash them and rub the gold wedding ring a few times. It's still shiny. I fill my cupped hands with water and bring them to my face. But they're too slow, the water runs down my forearms and into my pajama sleeves. Then I comb my hair, letting my arm rest every few strokes. The toothbrush is propped in the cup, next to hers. I don't brush anymore, at least not regularly. Haven't in a while. I never much liked it but I knew she appreciated it. She had a way of getting me to do things without having to ask. Except for the leaky bathtub faucet: she didn't manage that in time.

My hand reaches for the banister. I breathe deeply a few times before heading down. I stop halfway. I think I've heard something upstairs, but I'm not sure. My breathing disrupts everything.

I wait until I've caught my breath again. Now I'm sure. I hear it. Release. The fear that had me in a chokehold is gone. Droplets fall from the bathtub faucet.

A bit lighter now, I walk to the kitchen. I'm relieved. The bathtub tap is leaking. The droplets fall. I hear her ask when I'm going to finally fix that faucet. Comforted, I take some bread out of the freezer. She is still here.

---

p 150-152

## He

The match will be starting soon. I've been ready to leave for a while now, my team scarf in hand, waiting for Hassan. I shuffle restlessly from the kitchen to the living room and back. He should have been here by now.

Being late is probably normal for them, but damn it, now it's starting to annoy me. I'll call Thomas later and tell him I want someone else. I want to get going, but I put it off for a minute, then another. The choice is simple: either I wait here and miss the beginning of the match, or I leave and have to pick up the groceries myself at Hassan's later.

I've never been late for a football match. Well, a few times, because of Maria. She always took her time getting ready. I would stand at the front door, doing my best to stifle my impatience. You could hear the hair dryer blowing upstairs. A persistent noise, it infuriated me, but at least then I could swear out loud without Maria hearing. Then it was quiet between us on the way to the playing field.

But then once we were there, sitting among all those people, cheering, swearing, and shouting, I would occasionally glance to the side. At her. What I saw, I'll never be able to explain to anyone. I couldn't even explain it to Maria, how much love I felt for her. And even if she spent way too much time up in the bathroom on Saturdays, I had the privilege of sitting next to her in the bleachers.

I look at the clock. Another fifteen minutes late. The match is about to start, but I try to contain my anger. I've got to stop being so grumpy. I should do what I should have done back then. I could have told her how pretty she looked, could have told her what a lucky dog I was.

They say grief is as deep as the love was. Some days I appreciate how lucky I was to have had Maria at my side for so long, and other days I think that if she hadn't been at my side for so long, missing her wouldn't be so hard. Every day I have to decide whether I'm grateful or angry, but the only damn thing I want is to have her back. That's what I want. And then I'll finally know how she reacts when she's the one who has to wait. I chuckle.

The doorbell slices through the silence. Hassan. A glance at the clock. I can still catch the second half. I just have to make sure we keep the small talk to a minimum. Albert's words suddenly resurface. D'you think Hassan knew about it? Am I spending my money on them now? The bell goes again. I walk to the door and turn the knob. I'm blinded by the autumn light.

All I see is a dark silhouette. My heart beats faster. I grasp the door frame for support. It's not Hassan. I look at the bag on the stoop. I recognize it. I've got dozens of them in my cupboard. It's definitely from Hassan's shop. I hear her say something. Her voice sounds soft. Too soft. She sounds genuinely friendly and warm. I try to look her in the eye, but I can't, partly because of my own confusion and partly because she's pulled her cap so low.

She waits and I wait. I try to stall, just to be sure, but actually I am sure. Not only do my eyes see it, every fiber in my body feels it.

It's her.

I turn and walk to the kitchen. I wonder why I let this happen, but I do it anyway. I hear the door close behind me. She steps inside. The day has arrived. I've always dreaded bumping into her

in the neighborhood. But it's happening here, at home. The woman who took my wife from me is in my house.

---

p 231-233

## He & She

She's right on time. She smiles as soon as she sees me, and as I walk with her from the front door to the kitchen, she asks how I'm doing.

I shrug my shoulders, I don't really know.

Then she politely asks if she can start on the tea. She takes off her jacket and fills the kettle with water. The bag with the bunch of mint leaves is already lying on the counter.

I look at the clock. 22:34.

At 22:41 she sits down across from me and fills the glasses. First mine, then hers.

'It's good.'

'Really?'

'Have you been practicing?'

'No, not really, or yes, I've been making tea at home a lot the past few days.'

'It's better than the last time.'

'Thank you.'

'You seem surprised that I like it.'

'A bit. Maybe it's because I compare it with my mother's. Nothing beats Mama's tea.'

'What does she think of it?'

'Who, Mama?'

'Yes.'

'If she were still here, she'd say it wasn't good enough yet.'

'Then it's not good enough, I guess.'

'Yes.'

I take another sip. 'Is your mother dead?'

'Eight years ago. She had cancer.'

'Oh, right. Sorry to hear that.' I clear my throat. 'And your brother? Will he break the record?'

'He says he will. He's on his way.'

'I'm sure he'll do it. He's good.'

'How do you know? Have you seen him play?'

'I was early for the first string's match and saw him in action. At least, I assume it was him.'

'I didn't know you were a football fan.'

'I'm just curious to see who's going to break my record.'

'Your record?'

'Yes, mine. Forty-three goals. In 1965.'

'Really?'

'Can't an old man be an ex-champion?'

'Eh... of course. I mean: what a coincidence. My brother won't believe it when I tell him I've met you. That I know who you are.'

You don't know who I am, Soumia.

'Do you mind if I ask you something?'

'Depends.'

'If you see him sometime on the football field. Would you give him some encouragement? Say he's on the right track? I think it would mean a lot to him. He's going through a rough patch right now.'

'Oh?'

'You see, I'm his sister and that causes him trouble at school and at football. They call him a terrorist.'

I nod.

'That's really kind of you. By the way, I'm glad Home Care needs help again. I thought I wouldn't see you anymore.'

'Pour us another glass?'

'Sure.'

---