

## Khaled al-Berry, *An Oriental Dance*

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A good ten years separated the terror that struck the world as a result of the AIDS epidemic in the mid-eighties, and the dramatic eruption of everything that had remained suppressed during this period. Those ten years were filled with oceans that varied according to the bodies of those swimming them. This global shift might have been comprehensible to people with names like John and Jeremy, or Margaret and Bernadette. People like these enjoyed the kind of comfort and stability that allowed them to listen to the news and read the papers at regular intervals every morning and every evening, and to watch the world go around like a series of films with catchy titles: “Intifada” – “Desert Storm” – “People v. Simpson” – “Oil for Food” – and so on. Take someone like George W. Bush, for example: the path for salvation was clear; he came to his senses when the terror struck and was born again as a god-fearing Christian, and when the year 1997 arrived, this faith turned into a conviction.

Things were not at all like that for Hussein, Yasser and myself. We changed, in varying measures, just as the world changed during this period. But we didn't realise the change that had taken place, nor did it ever occur to any of us that anyone else in the world might realise it. We were just stage extras with walk-on roles in the “story-slash-film” – not readers or spectators who might follow the action, and not heroes, who might have drawn the attention. Even the “revolutionary” decisions each of us took in the year 1997 were in the order of triviality. In that year, Hussein made the discovery that wearing elastic underwear, for a somewhat higher price than he was used to, would relieve him of the discomfort he experienced when his member shifted to the side of the leg that had atrophied following an accident when he was still a child. Yasser, for his part, purchased thick thermal underwear and gave up wearing two pairs of briefs one over the other at the same time. Their decisions were hardly the result

of chance, of course; there were objectively valid reasons that drew their thoughts to such particulars. Yasser moved from Cairo to London to start work in a travel agency owned by a friend from his mother's side of the family. And in the same year, Hussein also moved to London to study for a PhD in international law. His theory was that studying international law would provide the ladder to political advancement for a self-made man like himself. It was a road not dared by many, but those who distinguished themselves in it became part of the intelligentsia who had the ear of those in high places, without needing to enter the labyrinths of internal politicking and to roll in their mire. His great role model in this was Dr Mufeed Shihab, an expert in international law and a rising star in the political world.

I, too, took a decision of my own regarding my "internal affairs." In '97, I passed my secondary exams and was admitted to the School for Tourist Guides, and my very first decision was to buy myself a new set of underwear. The boxer shorts I wore in our part of the country wouldn't do for al-Minya. One question troubled me alone: on the day I left Bani Murr for al-Minya, should I wear one of the new pairs of boxer shorts or one of the old ones? I had sworn not to wear a single one of the new boxer shorts while I was still in Bani Murr, and I was not about to break my oath. I wore an old pair of boxer shorts and I vowed to get rid of it the moment I arrived in al-Minya. But here I broke my oath, because I found myself in need of a kitchen cloth, and I washed the shorts and conscripted them for the purpose.

We were not the only ones in the world giving underwear some thought during that year. One might truthfully say that our decisions carried greater gravity than others, given that this layer of our clothing is often associated, perhaps due to its immediate proximity to certain intimate areas, with sexual imaginings. And sex is one of a very small number of things in life that teeters on the boundary between gravity and comedy, and at the same time on the boundary between gravity and melancholy. These things include friendship – particular kinds of friendship whose high hilarity does not conceal their power to draw blood, or whose hidden comedy we fail to discover because it happens to be hemmed in by melancholy circumstances from every side. Despite all efforts to consider the issue philosophically, sex remains the clearest example –

the epitome of enticement and the ultimate openness.

But the statement that our decisions were more serious than others is not entirely correct without qualification. Perhaps, with modesty and objectivity, we might describe them as having a deeper cosmic significance, in view of the way of thinking that led to these decisions. That is also closer to the truth than describing them as being more serious. For there are indications that the civilised world was thinking about its undergarments in the year 1997 with a seriousness that in no way conflicted with the levity conjoined to them, and with a business-like earnestness that did not conflict with the pleasure accompanying it. For example, when a fashion model for Gucci walks down the catwalk in that ultra-scant pair of knickers for the first time, we can't say this has not been a serious decision. For female underwear after the G-string would never be the same again. And we're talking money. We're talking new machines. New manufacturing units. New tastes in trousers and dresses and sanitary pads, to say nothing about porn movies. Seriousness is a function of the process of thinking that goes into a decision, horizontally so far as time is concerned – and this is a cosmic standard (or a planetary one, to be more precise, if we take it that days, hours and seconds are all the same on every part of Planet Earth but not on any other planets) – and vertically depending on the amount of skill, talent, and inspiration available, and this is a pill, a capsule, a free gift, with which the universe subverts all its own standards to give certain human superiority over others.

Do you want another proof of the alternating elements of levity and seriousness that attached to questions of underwear in that same year? Here you have it. Linda Tripp took the decision to go public with the recordings of her telephone conversations with Monica Lewinsky in which the latter had confided to her that the American president in all his sublime dignity had let down his underpants for her inside the Oval Office. That was a piece of levity on the part of President Bill Clinton whose grave repercussions he had not anticipated. He hadn't known that behaviour of the sort would only increase George W. Bush's resolve to seize the necessary position so as to provide the world with the necessary direction. Just as we hadn't known that Bush's decision would return to haunt us and would have an impact on our lives. But that's fate for you. The fate of year 1997, which was also the year that saw the picture of a small blue pill

called Viagra plastered over the cover of Times magazine. The sound of its name alone did more to the imagination than a name like Naomi Campbell or that other ethereal German fashion model, Claudia Schiffer, about whom I never managed to comprehend the supposed fact that “she shits just like the rest of the world.”

What matters for our story is that it would be a piece of underwear that would be the centre of a conversation between the three of us while watching the 2002 World Cup game between Spain and South Korea. And that would be the moment when Hussein would deliver his historic utterance: “And what's a human being other than a couple of bits of underwear that come off at the same place and time?” Yasser would secretly laugh to himself. He didn't let us in on his thoughts, naturally, and if only he had done so; for he would at least have given us all the opportunity to laugh freely together, and let us feel that the matter is no secret nor does it need to be one. But as usual, he instead busied himself analysing the causes of comical effect in the joke. It's true that talk of “what if”s gives the devil a foot in the door, as the Prophet once said; but on this occasion, it might have precisely shut the door in his face.

*What if – that's all.*

I should start by telling you a few things about us – I won't go overboard, just a few basic facts everyone knows. I know the past is boring, but as you know, problems and the keys to their solutions normally don't get served on a silver platter. Have you ever heard of sick people going up to their psychiatrists to say: “Here you are, Doctor – *here's* where my problem lies”? Or have you ever heard of house-owners taking pity on an aspiring thief and sending their kid to them to say, “Mister, mister, mummy says hello and says here's the key to the house – we're off on a holiday and back again in three days”?

Never.

I may know how it all happened from beginning to end, but I won't let my special knowledge skip ahead of yours, I won't usurp your right to experience it in the order in which it unfolded, and I won't spoil the story. My reputation as a story-teller and your pleasure as listeners depend on it.

It's not just because Yasser is eight years older than me, but also because he was educated outside the country, that I had never seen him before despite the distant family connections between us. Dr Ahmed Sabri, his father, would visit the village from time to time, but he would never bring Yasser or his sister with him. He would leave them in Assiut with their mother, Dr Nisreen, to protect them from the gastrointestinal diseases they'd have to suffer in the countryside. Dr Ahmed's mother would visit the kids in Assiut every year in the special housing reserved for university professors. But Hussein was neither a family relation, nor even from the area of Upper Egypt. He grew up in a village in the al-Manufiya district in a spacious house owned by his father Hajj Sayyid 'Uways at whose entrance stood six pillars of middling height, three on either side – and that's what the house was famous for. Why so? Because each of them was topped by a falcon with blindfolded eyes. Hussein's father held those blindfolded falcons exceptionally dear and considered them a source of pride and a testament to the noble Bedouin stock he insisted on claiming for himself, even though he was a peasant dyed in the wool down to his great-great-grandfathers, and had never spent a single day in his life as a desert-dweller or a brigand. The truth of the matter was that he had once been in Kuwait staying with one of the elders of the Al-Anzi clan as a guest, in return for having hosted one of the members of the clan at his own house at an earlier time, and there he saw these falcons, their eyes bound by a thin leather band that was fastened behind their heads so they'd think the darkness had fallen and quiet down. The chief of the tribe used those falcons for hunting, but Hajj Sayyid 'Uways, who had never hunted anything in his life, other than cotton worms and some sand smelt from the village canal before God showed him His grace and he found work as a contractor, expressed his admiration for them. The chief refused to allow him to leave without taking six of the falcons with him as a gift, complete with accompanying bands. Surrounding the house is a decent-sized area of farming land that belongs to them, a not inconsiderable area even after half of it was sold

to finance Hussein's studies and the marriage of his brother Sayyid and his three sisters, particularly as his father had advanced in years and could no longer work as before. The land that was left over, it was unanimously agreed, would be given to his siblings from his father's second wife.

The night in Bani Murr is as black as coal, and the sky thick with stars. Every so often a shooting star will race past to take out one of the jinn that try to eavesdrop on the chatter of the skies and pass on the stories they've heard about what's happened and what the sky folk have in store for earthlings. We passed the days of our childhood and our youth watching the battle of the stories unfold, even during the nights of winter, next to a crackling fire. We too would eavesdrop on the stories of grown-ups, just as we'd spin out our own stories. "And is there anyone who really believes that Bakhita's son Rizq has a mare that shits candy? Let's just have a bit of fun." That's what I said to my cousin Osama, my uncle Atef's son, when he dismissed my stories disbelievingly. "Like, what? Does the plane that sprays the crops make a stopover at the roof of your house to refuel, you big fibber?" Over a piaster's worth of sunflower seeds I heard the story of Abu Ghanem's daughter, who flooded the whole world with her blood when Taha's son had sex with her, so that he had to spend three hours mopping her dry with a rag, going into the house to rinse it out and then out again.

All stories are permitted except stories about my father, and this is something everybody knows, especially after that one time I went ballistic on Osama and burned him with the flaming firewood "just like God burns the sprites that pass on what's been said."

My father had left the country before I was born, but he hadn't come back with everyone else when the war broke out between Iran and Iraq. Even Abu Deeb's son – that's Mr Deeb himself, by the way – came back. He lived in the same apartment with my father on a side street in the Karada quarter in Baghdad. He reassured my mother that her husband was fit as a fiddle and that he was making a lot of money and as usual not putting enough aside. But what truly put her mind to rest was the highly respectable sum which Abu Deeb's son handed over to her. And which he then turned up to demand back when his kids started school in 1984, saying the money had been a loan out of his own pocket and that Muhammaddin had promised to pay him back when he returned the

next year but four years had gone by without any sign of Muhammadein or his money. Even his letters had stopped coming. It was my uncle 'Atef who paid the money back to Abu Deeb's son. My grandmother would beseech God in her prayers to lighten her burden. "May God avenge me against you, Muhammadein, you left us begging at every doorway." This last prayer she uttered after Dr Ahmed Sabri's mother slipped some money into her hand on the night of the Eid, and when Dr Sabri passed away she regretted having accepted it, "That's dirty money, it's just not right", but of course she made no effort to return it, for "God is merciful and forgiving."

After Abu Deeb's son came back, the only thing that remained of my father was his inimitable flair for becoming the fountain of endless stories: Don't you worry, Umm Ibrahim, "The intelligence service is saving up the money and will send it all in one go when the war lets up so the Iranians don't get their hands on it in the post." The writing's on the wall, Umm Ibrahim, "Muhammadein is working the line between Iraq and Turkey on a gasoline tank truck and getting paid in shares. He'll be owning an oil well any day now." "Your man was always destined for great things, Umm Ibrahim, they say al-Shadhili asked for him by name to liberate the port of Faw, and Saddam himself decorated him for bravery." The person who said that was no one less than Mr Abul Hamd, who bought the newspaper every day while he was working in Assiut. Even on Fridays he'd pay one of the minibus drivers to bring one back for him. And it was this story in particular that engraved itself in my mother's mind, because a relative of hers happened to marry a man to whom she had no family ties, who came from the village of Qaw Eessa in the governorate of Sohag. And even though the village was nearly an hour away from our village the woman was happy, and that meant that things augured well for Qaw or Faw and that their people were a good sort. But my mother was no longer happy when she heard, "They say Muhammadein married the daughter of an army general and is living in a palace."

But among all the different stories, there was one story in particular that left the fullest impression behind. It was the reason why I'd spend my days glued to the banks of the canal. I would sit there with a stick, some thread and a bit of peeled reed, a fishing hook and some worms, and I would pass the time fishing.

And on the first Wednesday of May in 1991 – I remember it well because it was the first time Labour day was celebrated and pensions were disbursed after the war in Kuwait – I caught two big fish and ran all the way home to give my grandmother a generous disbursement of my own. “Congratulations Ibrahim! Congratulations Ibrahim!” would be on everyone's lips as they met me on my way to the house running with the two fish in hand and the fishing hook under my right arm. I could never have anticipated what was lying in wait for me, even when I saw people standing at the doorway in droves and throwing their arms around a man standing next to my uncle 'Atef. “Congratulations Ibrahim for your father's return.” I was at a loss what to do. All I could think of was that we wouldn't be needing the fish now and it's a shame they should die, so I ran back to the canal and threw them back into the water. Then I returned to the house. There were two pairs of moustaches in it now. One which the effect of time had streaked with white hairs, and the other as green as grass scattered on a bare road. The first told its story; he hadn't been in Iraq rolling in the lap of luxury, but in prison. And hadn't it been for cosmic providence, which harkens to the cry of the downtrodden, he would never have seen the light of day. The war with Iran had thrown him into prison, and the war with Kuwait had brought him home. As for me, I was pining for water, the origin of every living thing, and for my own story. I was biding my time until a woman from the jinn would lay eyes on me, fall in love with me, and pull me into her world. Which was exactly the way it happened with Tal'at al-'Agban, the best swimmer in Bani Murr, who now lives with a woman from the jinn who's 500 years old but fresh and pretty like a girl of twenty in our human world, and whose father is the king of the jinn in Assiut. Every so often Tal'at al-'Agban walks across the surface of the canal, and shows himself to his friends Fathi and Yunes and Abdul Nabi, decked out in the finest silk and trailing the scent of musk. He walks with his wife in a halo of light, with four or five servants following in attendance. Tal'at's mother refused to believe the story until she saw him with her own eyes on a moonless night. He looked straight at her and laughed, and all the worries she'd been giving herself about him flew away, and she died only three days later. When I met Margaret, I thought my story had finally come true, but I hadn't known then what I now know. And had I known, I would neither have waited nor hoped.

Had it not been for the Kuwait war, my father might never have come home. But in the house of Dr Ahmed Sabri, it was as if the war never happened. Two or three months after Saddam invaded Kuwait, Dr Sabri passed away, and their whole life turned on its head. They had no sense of what was happening in the world around them. Even when the big war took place and they toppled Saddam from power, the family had other things on its mind. His wife Dr Nisreen moved with her daughter Samiyya to a house in Cairo to be near her brothers, on the understanding that Yasser would join them after the academic year was over. But a strange thing happened while Yasser was alone in the flat. Marianne came to visit him – not, it hardly needs saying, in the style of “Welcome to our home, an honour to have you” with a bag of oranges and a platter of sweets – far from it: she came to visit him and wasting no time on civilities, made him a declaration of her undying love. In the exact same way in which, wasting no time on civilities, she had disappeared from his life years before. And as usual, city people won't be at peace unless their tomorrow turns out to be exactly the way they'd drawn it up the day before, down to the last detail. Yasser decided at once to run for his life, and he left that apartment – the nest of love and its female apostle, the apartment in which he had grown up – in order to find “love in God” among male apostles, and to find the peace of mind of one armoured with a determination to drive all boredom underground. These last two sentences are the way he would phrase it to himself when he'd shut his eyes and draw up a different tomorrow. Or, as he would also phrase it, he had decided to “turn the pages of meaning in the book of the secrets of meaning”, if we may imagine a little book called: “By Our Means (colon) You Discover What Your Life Means (exclamation mark).”

And having drawn up his new tomorrow in this manner, he moved with implacable resolve to new housing, a modest housing in keeping with a new Yasser. Everything in the new housing took on a new meaning, “known without having to be made known, for what is known cannot be made known as the gnostics have said” – this is what his father, God rest his soul, used to say. He

went through the door of the new building. He walked down the corridor that led away from the entrance, where a patch of Assiut's sun – even in March looking as if it had arrived refracted by a cosmic convex lens – was distorting the colour of a piece of yellow carton that had been tossed carelessly on the first steps of the stairway. The sun seared Yasser's hand when he touched the black metal railing leading down to the basement area where he was to live. He counted out the steps to the bottom before taking his two large suitcases down. Twenty-two steps exactly, no more and no less. He took the first suitcase into grip and proceeded down step by step, from the heat of the sun which was giving odours the tolling sound of xylophone strokes, to a humidity heavy like a flaccid drum. His footsteps became like a cold iron on a watersoaked garment. Then he doubled back on his tracks – the drum, the xylophone, the second suitcase, the xylophone, the drum.

He waved his hand as he stepped into the room as if clearing the air before him in order to walk. Aside from a cotton mattress lying on the floor on his right, and a table and a chair on his left, there was nothing else in the room. A sense of peace heavy with contentment passed through him. He opened the window. And there are windows, like the basement windows that look out to street level, from which the only thing one can see are the feet of passers-by. He stood in the diagonal shower of faint light in which those swimming fine motes were tracing out patterns in the air. It's probably dust, thinks the average person. Perhaps the characters of a letter dispersed into the air, thinks the person with a lively imagination. Perhaps the contours of what has happened and what is to come, thinks the anxious soul. Perhaps the spirit of his father. He drew a long breath which he wished he might not have to release. He set the suitcase down against the wall concealed by the door and then let his gaze roam over the walls of the room. He knew what he'd do with them. He'd hammer nails here and there to hang his clothes, but before that he'd need to paper them over with some newspapers to protect the clothes from the blue lime paint with which the walls were finished. The rooms of his new companions were all exactly like his. He stacked the second suitcase next to the first and then pulled up the chair and sat down. He took another deep breath, different in savour from the one he'd just drawn, because now he was no longer on his way here, but had already arrived. Would he be able to go on with his life from here? He meant to say: as far as

those other things were concerned. Those humdrum worldly things which take up our time without good reason. How would he deal with them? He could rely on takeaway for food, on roast chicken from Samar's restaurant, on cheese baguettes, or on bean patty sandwiches and broad beans with turnips, pickled carrots and lots of salad which he'd wash a second time before eating, adding a bit of salt, and of course, not to forget, his vitamin pill every day. But where would he wash his clothes? Where would he hang them out to dry? And where would he iron them? How would he heat water to wash himself? He had no choice but to postpone the answers to a later date. To try things out and see for himself. The rest of the young men coming from the countryside who lived in the rooms around him – one of whom, incidentally, was Kemal al-Sunni, one of our own from Bani Murr – could do it. If his father had lived here in the days of his youth, he might have been able to do it, but Yasser had received no training. He would try to train himself gradually until he made it work. There were other things he could do – like read.

Besides academic books, his father would rarely read much else. He had always insisted that the other knowledge came from God, and one acquired it through reflection, meditation and spiritual communion, not through books. He'd been a remarkable man, his father had. He used to say that every time a son kissed his mother's hand, a positive energy was transmitted to him and all anger and conceit was drained away from him. His personal interpretation of the Prophet's saying when asked which people were most worthy of gracious conduct, in which he first mentioned one's mother three times and then one's father just once, was that kissing a mother's hand was a duty that should be carried out three times a day, morning, noon, and evening, and that kissing a father's hand was a duty just once a day, to be carried out other things being equal and if circumstances allowed. In spite of that, he had never kissed his mother's hand, and it was rather she that would bend down to put his hand to her lips every time he appeared before her, no matter how long or how short his absence had been. So for example, if he disappeared into the bathroom and re-emerged a minute later, his hand would have to be kissed, there were no two ways about it. He wouldn't resist. Not out of self-importance, but out of respect for her. He wouldn't go to the mosque or pray at home. At times he'd go to the Friday prayer, other times he wouldn't. But the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings

would always be on his lips. He would tell Yasser stories at bedtime while running his fingers through his hair and he'd tell him he was reading the words of the stories off his head where he could see them traced out. "Everything one cares to know is written between the hairs of people's heads. If you want to know what someone's really like, get a hold of his head and take a good look in his hair." And he would advise him if there was anything he was unsure about, to let himself sleep on it, because when people sleep, they leave their whims and fancies, their fears and their greed behind them. In his view, telling fortunes by reading coffee cups was a big swindle; he was no fan of coffee generally speaking, and if he happened to drink a cup he'd hasten to wash it out to keep it from falling into the hands of Umm Rida, the woman who cleaned their house every Friday, and who'd read the present, the past and the future in anything she could get her hands on, even in the pips of dates. But throughout the entire day, there was hardly a time when you'd find him without a cup of tea in his hand. When he died, Yasser felt that all the tea in the world had suddenly passed out of existence without prior notice, and that people would be queueing on the streets to get their hands on a single cup of tea and would no longer be able to. For the only man who could do whatever he felt like was now gone, never to return. And the only man who'd drink tea day and night but who wouldn't bat a single eyelid if all the tea in existence disappeared from the world, had disappeared on a day like any other, as if he'd dissolved into into a glass of diaphanous steaming water. Yasser got used to the bitter taste of tea in his mouth, after coming close to throwing it up the first time around. That made him happy, because he was following in his father's footsteps, if only in the way he sipped his tea, and it made him happy because it gave him reason to hope that a human being could get used to anything.

Yasser glanced into the bottom of the glass where the dregs of tea had turned to green. His first week in his new accommodation had been yet another debacle. He wouldn't let things come to that pass. He would give himself another week. Every human being deserved a second chance. Whatever they may or may not have done. He deserved a second chance. God gave everyone a second chance.