Mukhtar

by Mohammed Hasan Alwan

When my mother asked me to spend the summer in her brothers’ house in the south, I employed every sophistry of my sixteen years – an age when only a mother pays attention to your budding philosophy of life – to explain to her that life forces surge northward, that the south, from which she and my father came, was becoming obsolete, that Ibn Khaldun (who had inspired this claim) was a great man, that the money could be better spent on a vacation, and that her brothers were actually not that nice. I attempted to persuade her without abandoning the subdued tone of voice and timidity passed down generation to generation but eventually found myself disembarking from the plane in Abha, motivated only by filial obedience after Ibn Khaldun failed me when my mother discredited his northern chauvinism by pointing out that Nice and Cannes are in the south of France.

During this trip, however, I met Mukhtar, the cook who worked in my uncles’ house. In his room, which was attached to the chauffeurs’ rooms, he kept three musical instruments, which responded warmly to his touch, and an astonishing number of little figures he made from cotton padding and cloth. Each represented a Turkish shepherdess he had loved when he was young. He also heated perfumed oils with the flame of a candle to neutralize the stink of tobacco smoke from the chauffeurs’ nearby rooms. He kept his digs neat, and this was only fitting for an émigré artist, who had left Turkey many years earlier as he followed his fortunes farther and farther south till he finally settled inside Abha’s old citadel, in my uncles’ residence.

He had the biggest belly I had ever seen, and when he put his arms around his oud, its convex back seemed to press into his belly as if two spheres were squeezing into each other, and his short arms could scarcely reach the strings. Then he would play me the same merry tune with which he entertained the family’s children. He would smile at them, but his smiles would have been lost beneath his bushy mustache had they not appeared in his eyes to show us he was smiling. At first I kept my eyes trained on his right hand as I attempted to unlock rapidly the secret of his dexterity so that I could play like him, thinking that playing an instrument was nothing but a game that could be mastered with a little practice and instruction. Much later I realized that the first secret to playing the oud is that the left hand, which holds the thinner end of the lute, is by far more important than her sister.

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For the next holiday I asked my mother to allow me to visit Abha, not for Mukhtar’s sake or to be a dutiful son but because of a neighborhood siren, whose weakness wasn’t the infidelity Abu Firas complained of; hers was much worse; she was a hooker. A woman in her thirties – I don’t know exactly where her husband was – she lived alone in a house two streets away from the large mansion where my uncles resided. We met when I was walking back from the grocery store. She called to me from inside her cloak, and I ignored her because I thought she was a beggar. She, however, persisted in calling me. Since she didn’t look impoverished, I stopped to listen to her question: “Are you one of the Ibn al-Rashid?”

I replied warily, “No, but they’re my uncles, and I’m staying with them.”

Then she shot back apprehensively, “Would you like to sleep with me for only five hundred riyals?”

The blood froze in my neck vein, I felt the abdominal emptiness that typically accompanies shocks, and my virgin heart pounded insanely. At first I said nothing; then I hoarsely asked a question that made no sense in this context. I don’t know what I meant, but I inquired idiotically, “How?” I said that without knowing what I wanted explained. Was it how to sleep with her? Or how to have sex, which I had never experienced? Or even how this extraordinary encounter could have happened while I was just walking along the street? The important point is that she seized hold of my question cleverly and opened her cloak to show me her large bosom and then her face, which wasn’t at all scary – in fact it was pretty and almost childlike – to calm my adolescent terror. She yelled to me, “If you want, go get the five hundred. Then come and knock on the door in the normal way.”

In less than a week I had spent all the three thousand riyals my mother had given me for the vacation; I was forced to ask my grandparents and one of my young uncles for money. After that I sold my cellphone and asked my mother to send me more cash, alleging that my money had fallen down a drain. I spent all the funds my mother sent and returned to Riyadh at the end of the vacation after having slept with the woman fifteen times. All I could recall was her unpleasant acrid smell, my extremely defective pleasures, and a large quantity of visual images of her body – from every angle – that I later made good use of in my bed. I consoled myself for losing access to her body by turning her into a golden tale no one could top. I recounted it to fifty friends at school and in our neighborhood and also to relatives. I had telescoped at least a full year of gradual masculine maturation into one summer holiday.

During my second vacation I came armed with a full six thousand riyals along with many negotiating phrases, which I had lain awake concocting, to lower the price for a session to two hundred riyals, to extend its length to at least a full hour, to stipulate that we bathe together after each coupling, and for her to be totally naked from the moment I arrived until I
left, to allow my eyes to store up enough images for subsequent nights I would spend alone in my bed. During this vacation, Mukhtar the cook also learned my beautiful secret and began to plan for me to enjoy night visits to her house in place of those tense daytime trysts. He would wait for my return and open the door, which my grandfather went to pains to lock every night himself.

That vacation ended with the following changes. I had a greater love for the south, where my heart and body had matured, and Abha had become the city of love, the female breast, springtime, rain – synonymous with fertility and deluges – and the city of the woman whose name I do not care to remember. She had started to desire me and so offered me coquetry, submission, and dalliance that split my heart in two even though she was twice my age. She began to crave me and would occasionally offer me sex for free or for twice as long. I started spending much more time in Mukhtar’s room, because he was the only person who would listen to the entire story without interruption and who would make very positive comments that encouraged my burgeoning manhood. He convinced me that what I was doing was very valuable in enhancing my experience of life and that I was fortunate that it had been easy for me in this city. Then he began to teach me to play the lute.

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During my third vacation the woman wasn’t there, and I had no pretext for asking about her or for investigating her absence. I consoled myself for this lost enjoyment by the thought that I had saved for some better pleasure the thousands of riyals I had brought with me. I had now become a young man who knew enough about women never to be bereft of them, especially now that I actually was nineteen and would soon be allowed to travel abroad – like my young uncles, who were no longer shy about telling me what could be found in Beirut, London, and Cairo by way of accumulated pleasures, asserting that women there were not at all argumentative. After I actually wrested a pledge from my grandfather that I could take my first trip abroad, I consoled myself with that promise and spent the remainder of my time with Mukhtar and his resonant oud.

Even though I had begun to play quite well, because I had continued my training in Riyadh throughout the winter, Mukhtar always criticized my preference for the high, monotonous strings, saying that this was attributable to the influence of the Arab performance tradition, which prefers melancholy, slow tempos, and the sentimental. He told me that the oud isn’t a mournful instrument and that the lower part of the lute is the most beautiful. At first I tended to ignore his philosophy, because I only wanted to learn technique from him, but he insisted on injecting me with thirty years of his memories of the lute, pasture lands, and beautiful Turkey.
“People originally sang to ward off sorrow; it’s perverse for us to make ‘song’ synonymous with ‘sorrow’.” So I endured long lessons with Mukhtar as I drilled on the low, thinner strings by themselves. Mukhtar put a mute on the two top strings to keep them from vibrating and forced me to perform an entire *maqam* using only the three remaining strings. I discovered then that my dexterity increased exponentially.

Mukhtar told me, “It’s true that the thick high strings might help you elicit some tears from your listeners, but the three low strings will allow you to rally an entire party! You need to be able to produce both the beat and the melody with a single instrument so you’ll never need silly percussionists. This convex object with five strings possesses more secrets than you can discover in one lifetime. This oud, all by itself, has allowed me to survive without a father or mother, a wife, children, or a homeland. When my lute is with me, I’m happy and merry; I live a full life every day without any anxiety.”

I imagined that at least fourteen girls would circle me on my anticipated trip. Other young men would arouse no interest because they don’t play the oud. I could see myself setting the strings of their bodies on fire in a fevered dance. I would directly control the motion of one hip or the other. It’s astonishing that we should control women’s bodies, which normally control us! This oud would no doubt perform miracles. It would be an important ally for me both in the emotional near future and in my heart’s trajectory to old age.

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I returned from London empty-handed; no women had responded to my glances, pretentious words, or my attempts to devise fresh pickup lines. I had thought that by being very dapper and wearing a diamond-encrusted watch, which a maternal uncle had loaned me, I would merely need to pick out a sunny table in a coffeehouse and leave all the subsequent moves to a dreamy girl who would throw herself at me. This didn’t happen, nor did I find the circumstances propitious for playing the oud anywhere, except alone in my hotel room, even though I brought two lutes with me with an eye to the unprecedented Arab surge in London during the summer of 2004. There was absolutely no evidence to show that women were easy; they never viewed me as anything more than a bump in the London sidewalk. I tried out all the different outfits in my suitcase, used up a whole container of hair gel and all three bottles of cologne, but had sex with no one in London, and no one listened to me play, except an old guy who cleaned rooms.

When I returned to Riyadh, I might just as well have been returning from a hideous wasteland rather than from a beautiful city. I was hostile and negative about everything around me and spewed invectives at everything. I concocted four different stories to restore my pride among my companions. There was, for example, a Kuwaiti princess who fell for
me on Oxford Street. I fled with her from all the Arab eyes to distant areas on the outskirts of London and its suburbs, where we had an insane (if fictitious) time. Another tale concerned a Lebanese woman living in London; in my bronze visage and Arab virility she discovered relief from the sexual frigidity of the English. The third story was about a Moroccan girl I stole with clever dexterity from a rich old Sa'udi who almost exploded with rage. The fourth tale was about a British girl who worked in the sweets shop of the hotel.

Whether my mates believed me or not didn’t matter; after the summer holiday, Riyadh is always awash with lies. No one felt my intense anxiety vis-à-vis my imploded dreams of being a Don Juan. These crashed from my heart onto the hard ground of Riyadh. I brooded that I was destined to pay for sex the rest of my life or to marry and limit myself to one woman before I had sampled enough other females. Stories, tales, talk wasn’t enough to satisfy me, and this is what would sadden me for the rest of my life.

I returned once more to the thick, high strings while singing mawwals under my breath. I experienced bouts of depression that made days at the university seem like the empty nests of birds that never arrive. My mother started to notice my nervousness, recklessness, and sharp treatment of my relatives. I refused outright to attend any social events and informed her in a fit of self-justification that I couldn't stand this country – its policies are wrong and violate human rights – and that I would complete my education abroad. I put pressure on her widow’s heart, which was consumed by love for her only son. She agreed to let me travel abroad but demanded that I ask my grandfather too, because she didn’t have enough money to pay for me to study abroad.

When I was in this condition, the worst thing that could have happened was for me to journey to Abha and fail to find any excuses that would convince my grandfather. So I quit him in a less than civil fashion and headed to Mukhtar’s room. The moment I got there, I found a Yemeni man I didn’t know. One of the chauffeurs introduced him to me as the new cook!

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