

Excerpt from RAMA AND THE DRAGON by Edwar al-Kharraf

Water drops fall from the long, rusty wound in the stone of the centuries-old statue. The murmuring water flows cheerfully, without quivering, under the light poured from a strong, high-pitched, firmly radiant lamp. The iron surrounding the fountain is low, circular, presenting an island in a street gushing with two streams of shiny cars—one in each direction—hurrying with their noisy, exploding, fluctuating emissions.

The new friends, Mikhail and Rama, having come out of the cinema, are overlooking the statue from behind a broad windowpane inside a large modern restaurant practically without customers. Their comfortable seats were mounted with ribbed, black plastic resembling leather, Formica armrests dappled with splendid cunning to imitate wood. The hollow, round aluminum, resembling commonplace silver, emits hushed echoes whenever a leg accidentally grazes it.

They have been to the cinema. Her warm and subdued whispering— unfolding vague images that possess distinctly erotic features—draws the side of her face, radiant with captivating appeal, near to his eyes. He glances at her as if she were part of the film itself, his arm in his short-sleeve shirt touching her soft, bare arm whose fullness increases as she presses it on the rough woolly armrest cover. Between them stands a kind of physical affection, a warm, undeclared sensual understanding.

After the disappearance of the last traffic wave over the crosswalks used by the nocturnal crowds and the dispersal of the last show viewers gathered in their intimate circles, the lit city became theirs, as if its empty, clean, wide streets were welcoming avenues into the mind for a gentle night wind that promised unlimited good things. Having left the restaurant they passed an endless series of dazzling ponds of light, gravely empty and quiet, choosing to amble toward islands of still shades with tree leaves fluttering harmoniously.

He said to her: I have known streets of many cities in almost all hours of day and night. There is nothing more beautiful than empty streets at night with the city lamps lighting them in a practically useless way. Public lights fall on buildings and on the black asphalt—vast, shiny, free—which can be crossed and walked on without penalty. Despite the heaving danger and the unknown, the city seems as if healed forever of hidden evil and violence, from the wrangles of a herd of mechanical and electrical armors gushing without stopping. How beautiful is this city!

Just before their walk, they had ordered hamburgers and beer; she said she liked beer. They ate with an appetite for everything. She spoke spontaneously and heatedly about her fear of death, though not her own. She said that death was horrible and unimaginable. He said: no one ever believes inside himself that he will die. Death is simply an abstraction, something that happens to others, and does not happen to me at all. It is the only thing that no one knows, for I think that even at the very unimaginable moment of loss of consciousness, no one knows, no one believes that he will die, nor would he know the meaning of death even if he knew and believed that it would happen. For a person remains convinced, intuitively certain, that he will live, until he crosses the boundaries. And he is right, for even in crossing he lives. After that no consciousness, nothing. Yes, death is the only thing that can never be known, neither before nor after. What is known about it are things related to it, associated with it, that precede it or surround it, but not the reality itself. Death—simply—does not exist.

She said in a bout of strange passion that this was exactly what she had been thinking about all the time without saying it, for no one would believe it or be convinced by it. She said: The frightening thing is the death of a loved person. And she asked: How can someone live if his truly beloved person dies? She said: This is the death that a person feels and knows intimately through a loss that cannot be made up for at all. This is the diffused suffering, gratuitous, filling the corners of earth and heaven. And she asked: Why? Why? The flowers of such suffering are so thorny.

Her eyes watered. She was swept by terrible fear, provoked, maintained by the fact that her loved ones were still living, that they had not died. She said that she was ready to die for the sake of those she truly loved. She said that she prayed, never knowing whether she was a believer or not, but nevertheless pleading vaguely and daily to a divine power to protect and keep alive those whom she loved.

He said to her: As if you were talking with my voice, expressing what I sense without having given it a form or definition!

Their happiness in this rare, enabling articulation was complete and untarnished. They celebrated in the refreshing, faint glow of the beer mugs, in the light meal, and in the warmth of the sensuous closeness in the cool night air blowing from the open window, open onto the wet statue and fountain—gushing in geometrically intricate trajectories: its drizzle radiating on the husky, muscular male body in a challenging position, entrenching his exploding legs in the earth, two tree trunks of undecaying stone.

He saw on her bare arm, as if embroidered on her skin, the trace of the cinema armrest with its rough woolly cover. She said to him: I always need human warmth, human relations, I cannot stand for any substitute. I can't live in a furnished apartment, day in, day out by myself, cooking on Fridays for the week, washing my pantyhose on Saturdays, going to the hairdresser on Sundays. I am not this kind. I want to meet people, talk and live with them, get out in the world and encounter new types of men. This is why you find me looking for inspection trips in my job, so that I can embark to any place without hesitation.

He said without complaint, without disapproval: As for me, I am a loner. I can—and at times I love to—stay in my room for a week without seeing streetlights.

She said thoughtfully: Yes, that is possible for you. You can be cut off from people.

He said: No, no. I need people badly, especially those I love, even if at a distance. The most important thing is that they are there. Being cut off, like monks are, troubles me and gives me insomnia.

One day, he said to himself: Was her interest in me in the beginning simply to pick up a new type of man? A new naive type that seemed uncontaminated, simply for the hobby of her collection? How does she best get to know new types of men? Is this an accusation of cheapness I'm launching?

He said to himself: Why does the traditional reaction of an Eastern man, of a southern Egyptian, persist in you? Isn't it an outdated and medieval sensibility, no matter what philosophical and contemporary views and positions—existentialism, Marxism—are involved?

It never occurred to him to answer the question, which, in the final analysis, constituted a process: admission of the fact, then the doubting of it, then the admission of it again: an endless cycle.

He said to her: The need for human warmth triggers your many friendships?

She leaned toward him, in the fervor of an opening up between two new friends. The pressure of her breasts on the bra beneath the light blouse was evident. She pushed her face close to his unintentionally, relaxing her bosom on the Formica table next to the empty beer mug on whose lip a slight white foam was attached, and, on the other side the shiny metal box from which white paper napkins come out, also the small ceramic hamburger plate with its brown color and traces of dark red, dry ketchup.

I don't know how to maintain relations with women, she said. There's nothing in common between us. I can't, I really can't, enter into a conversation about fashion, recipes, types of make-up, problems with servants, or gossiping about others. I don't know how to put on half a ton of powders and creams every day, tarnishing or beautifying my face with them. As you can see, I don't use lipstick. There is something masculine in me. They say I am a policeman, an old guard.

He laughed and said: You are sheer femininity.

She said: May God bless you for the compliment.

He said: No, I mean what I said.

After dinner, when having coffee, she said to him: I have an appointment with a Sudanese friend, an exile visiting this country. He phoned me this afternoon and invited me to an unofficial diplomatic soirée. These invitations usually bore me, but I couldn't refuse. I haven't seen him for a while, and he is a dear friend, an elderly gentleman. I ask you for a favor. Kindly take me in a taxi to the Clock Square. You are not so busy, are you? This request humbles me, but I have to say I don't dare take a taxi alone at night.

He said: Is that all? Your wish is my command, my lady, from the bottom of my eyes. I shall apologize and delay my appointment for half an hour.

She said: O my God! You have an appointment? Then no need.

He said: No, no! It is very simple. I'll take you.

No sooner had the taxi moved away with them—in the intimate, private darkness typical of narrow spaces, while he was gazing at the city, with its people and lights disappearing soundlessly behind the windowpane as the engine roared softly with its hushed, internal, mechanical power—than he had stretched his hand to hers at the same time her hand was moving toward his. The fingers touched, clasped firmly. He felt blood rising to his face for the first time in their friendship. Her voice quivered as she called on him pleading and anxious: Mikhail! He said: Rama, what is happening to us? She said: Mikhail, Mikhail, I don't know. This was their first and last mutual confession, then a charged silence fell upon them, pregnant with all possibilities.

She tried to pay for the taxi, but he refused, laughing. The driver hesitated for a moment in front of the two different hands, each extending a large sum. Then as a matter of male solidarity the driver quickly took his money. She said to him: Go back in the same taxi, so you can make it to your appointment. He said: No, I will walk you to your destination and enjoy the air. She said: But your appointment? He said: I have time.

He stepped down, they walked together. She clung to his arm with new familiarity and spontaneity. She said: I'll phone you when I get back. I'll talk to you; at least wish you good night. He pressed her hand as he parted from her and stood watching as she

entered a residential building full of quiet windows. He walked aimlessly, a bit distraught as various scenarios filled his head. Under his feet the streets felt like waves. He was plowing their waters, sailing with spread sails pushed by abundant and prosperous wind.

He said to himself: No, she will probably forget or else it will be too late. She will not call tonight. Tomorrow, she will talk and I will hear her story.

It was one in the morning when he went to bed. Exhausted, his senses were yet alert. A lightness and joy fluttered within him. He had not known such feelings for a long time, and as yet they were vague, without content.

Suddenly, in the profound and enclosed silence the telephone rang loudly. He stretched his hand—alarmed, anxious, not fully awake—as if knowing it was she. The light, he discovered, had been left on and shone brightly. With an unimaginable effort he responded with an awkward but alert voice: Hello!

Her voice came to him, unsteady, low, and womanish: Hello, Mikhail! Have I awakened you? He said: Not at all. I was waiting for your telephone call. How was your evening? She said: Horrible. Let's not talk about it. I miss you. He said: I miss you too. He looked at his watch. It was after 2:30. She said: Mikhail, I need you. I can't sleep and I want to talk to you. He said: Now? She said: Yes, now of course. I am in an unbearable state of anxiety and I propose we talk.

Having had the matter slip out of his hand, he said: Do you know what the time is? It's 2:30. She said: What does it matter what time it is? I am resorting to you. He said: I don't know. There are certain things we have to take into consideration: we are Egyptians, after all. We'll talk as you wish, surely, but tomorrow morning. He did not comprehend what was going on. He was frightened. She said: All I want is to talk together, talk, t-a-l-k, like two mature, rational persons, one to the other. One person who needs the other. I need you. That's all. Her voice was shaking—drinking more than she should have? Sweat oozed from all the pores of his body. His face blazed. He fell silent, didn't say a thing.

She said: All right, I understand. You are right. No doubt. I am mistaken. Her voice began to crack. No resistance could stop its breakdown. She said: Please forgive me—as the tears gathered, amplified, exploded over the phone—I apologize, I didn't mean—the words got lost, buried in her unbearable crying bout, in the pain and sense of rejection and loss, in the night and in the loneliness without hope of comfort. Sweat continued dripping from him without stint, without resistance. He said: Don't cry. Please, please, Rama, don't cry. She said intermittently: I am not crying, I am not crying. He said: I will be with you in minutes. Please, I am coming. She could not get her tears to cease flowing, as she said with a tired, surrendered, thankful, and grateful voice: No, no reason to bother yourself. I understand. I am better now. He said: No, that's enough, Rama. I'll come right away. I want to come. I wanted to come all along. She said, while the last hushed sighs were making her voice present in his own room as her femininity enveloped and embraced him in its soft, captivating tone: I'll wait for you.

He changed his night flannels, as they had become moist with sweat. In few moments, which he took to be hours, he dressed. When he went out, he was confounded again. First, he went down to the dark lobby: in his agitation he thought the appointment was there. He was surprised by sleeping chairs, extinguished lights, a detained nocturnal emptiness. He went back perplexed and self-questioning.

He entered her room. But after she opened the door in a hurry, she did not close it herself. Instead, she said to him: Close the door behind you, Mikhail. A single wall window was their only sky, their only light. Agitated, his eyes were slightly blinded in the darkness. She said to him: No, don't turn on the light. I don't want light now. I cannot stand it.

The bathroom was lit behind the glass of the closed door. The light was stealing in like trickling water.

She said to him: Come! Sit next to me on the bed.

She was under the white sheet while preparing a place for him on the edge of the bed with her hands. He sensed the bronze color of her bare arms in the faint darkness. The church dome in the window frame seemed to him heavy and flattened.

In her face, the anxiety of the tearful storm lingered. Her cheeks and eyelids seemed round, slightly puffed, adding to her appeal. She said: We will talk now. Nothing but talk.

This was followed by a belated tearful sigh. He leaned over and kissed her under the eyes. He patted her cheeks and eyelids with his hands in a silent, comforting gesture. She raised her arms and slid his glasses away from his eyes in a deliberate, slow gesture, putting them down next to keys and a cigarette pack under the shade of the turned-off table lamp.

She said: Come, let's talk. If we analyze the problem objectively and logically we will...

He put his hand on her lips and said: No, no, Rama. No need for logical, objective analysis or for a non-logical, non-objective analysis.

She said: From the dialectical angle, we can look at the issue from the point of view of ...

Smiling lightly and affectionately, he said: I don't want to discuss the issue from any point of view.

Her lips held on to his: the appeal of the lightly fragrant wine breath of her mouth was immediate and sudden. Their first kiss was sudden, unexpected. His lips came to know the freshness of the open, slow-moving, and clinging mouth. In her mouth was a light sugary taste the sweetness of a mature fruit plucked from a mother tree.

He leaned to take her between his arms, and he felt on his chest the weight of her naked breasts under the light nylon, white gown. The music of the spheres was grandly mellow, and heavens resounded with glorious, lofty melodies. The juxtaposition of chests was a fulfillment, a realization of a deep primordial demand that could not be questioned. His arm behind her shoulder held the magnificence of that which he did not know the world could contain.

She said to him: Come next to me.

His move was quick, without thought.

She said to him: Put your hand on my breast.

He felt the virginity of her blooming bosom, its strange innocence while she looked at him with gentle ecstatic eyes. No present, no future, and no past. The moment that does not end is everything. There was no discovery, nor the rush into new recognition. Their knowledge of each other was as old as time: entrenched, having its own principle as if eternal. This determined voracity, this burning desire, this distilled

eroticism devoid of the weakness of humane affection. The boat of craving rose with them above deep waves with quiet surface amid the reed stalks. His hands knew their way to the wet and rich jungles as he sailed in no time between the two full and soft legs that he could not see: his face was buried between her breasts.