

Excerpt from **THE FINAL NIGHT** by Buthaina al Nasiri

The Return of the Prisoner

Above all else, the house he returned to was not his house, the woman not his wife, and the children not his sons.

The car took him to a two-story house painted white and surrounded by a spacious garden in a quarter on the city outskirts he had never been to before.

Inside was a thin woman. The veins in her neck twitched nervously and her forehead wrinkled into a frown that the smile she greeted him with did not succeed in removing. She rushed toward him when he first placed his foot inside the house, then it was as though something had curbed her exuberance so that she came to a stop and extended her hand.

As for the children, they sat pinned with embarrassment to the couches in the living room, seemingly forced to keep silent and well-behaved, as though in the presence of a guest who would shortly be leaving. He knew three of them, though he now had to recall their names and to make sure who was who. As for the fourth, the youngest, he had not previously met him and did not even know his name, for he had left the mother when she was pregnant with him ten years ago.

They began to get acquainted through his general questions and their brief answers, and they ended up in a solemn silence that hung over their heads.

Unable to raise his eyes to her face, he asked the woman, "When did you buy the house?"

Even her voice had changed, had become harsher, as she said, "We didn't buy it already built. I put it up bit by bit. I sold the old one, borrowed from the bank, and supervised the workmen myself. It was a difficult time, what with the responsibility of bringing up four boys."

"You've done a great job," he told her, staring at the walls and ceiling.

"I paid off the final installment of the loan last year," she said.

"It never occurred to me that you'd be able to stand on your own two feet. The woman I remember used to rely on me for everything. I would think of you all when I was there and this feeling would torment me."

"It was a hard time—ten years is quite a while."

"It is."

"And the days change one."

"They do."

"Would you like to see over the house?" she asked eagerly.

"As you like."

The bedroom furniture was the one thing that had not changed, and he found it familiar. There was the wardrobe with the four doors and the wooden top carved with flowers and birds, and the dressing table with the square mirror which he was now standing in front of; the face he now saw in this mirror was not the one he had seen there ten years ago. He had grown thinner, the bones of his face had become more prominent, his hair had grown white, and his shoulders were bowed from the sorrows that had added years to his actual age.

When it was time to sleep, the bed was the same one that had united their dreams in past times and that he had always dreamed he would sleep in again, but the woman and the man were strangers. He was careful not to touch her body as he sank into his side of the comfortable bed and he felt her keeping herself at a distance. He stared at the ceiling lit by moonbeams coming through the window and his thoughts began floating off thousands of miles away, crossing the borders to the prison camp. He saw the faces of those of his comrades who were still alive; he imagined them spread out on the ground, sunk in a heavy sleep after the hardships of the waking day, fleeting smiles on their faces as they dreamed of returning home.

The iron gates clang suddenly and the guards yell roughly at them, "Get up!" They awake from their dreams to find themselves being herded with sticks into the camp courtyard. He crouches in the long file, his hands on top of his head. An officer whose face cannot be seen walks along between them. He talks in a monotonous tone. "Your country has let you down. You are here with us till you rot." The sun's rays grow more scorchingly hot. He feels cramp in his arms and legs, a dryness in his throat. He will not be able to bear it another second. He falls to the ground. The guards hurl themselves at him with their sticks; he is dragged along the ground by his hands until his arms are almost wrenched from their sockets. The door of a tomb-like cell is thrown open and he is pitched into it. The door is shut with a clang that rings in his brain. He raises his head to find that the ceiling allows him to sit only in a crouched position. He curls up in the dark, letting out a continuous moaning like a wounded animal.

He hears his name being repeated insistently. He opens his eyes wide in the darkness. Then, suddenly, a glaring light floods the place and he closes his eyelids in pain.

"Are you all right?"

"What happened?"

"You were moaning."

"I was dreaming."

He moves his dry tongue around in his mouth. "Can I have some water?"

The woman brings him a glass of water, which he gulps down, then he leans against the back of the bed. He no longer feels any desire to sleep.

"Can you imagine—when I was there I used to dream of the house each night, and now I'm here and in my own bed I dream of the camp? It seems the suffering isn't over yet."

"If you'd like to talk I'm listening."

"I wanted to ask you why you didn't send me a card or a letter all those years."

"We didn't know you were still alive."

"Why didn't you try to find out through the Red Cross, as everyone does?"

"I tried in the beginning and I was told that your name wasn't registered with them."

"If you'd made more of an effort," he said sharply, "you'd have known how to find me, but you all abandoned me."

"It's not for you to blame me," she replied, her voice raised.

"The circumstances were difficult and I had enough troubles of my own. Everybody regarded you as missing."

“It’s clear that my reappearance isn’t welcome, for here you are raising your voice at me, and the children don’t even know me. You didn’t have the time to talk to them about me. You were busy building houses. What was wrong with our old house?”

She got up from the bed, saying firmly, “I’m not going to answer you.”

She left the room, slamming the door after her.

He looked about him like someone who had been locked up, feeling that the walls were narrowing and the roof descending so that he was unable to raise his head. He curled up on the bed, filled with the sensation that he had not left his imprisonment and that everything around him was unreal. It was as though he were watching a never-ending nightmare: a vast house that almost encompassed him, children who were strangers to him, and a woman toward whom he could not extend even a finger.

With the morning light he crept out, careful not to make a sound. He went out to the garden. He shook the branch of a nearby tree and the dew was scattered over his face and clothes. Happening to turn to one side, he saw the youngest of his sons sitting on the steps leading to the house. He was holding his head in the palms of his hands, immersed in thought or sadness.

He seated himself beside him, and the boy looked as if he had been taken by surprise. He moved slightly away from the man, who asked him, “What are you doing here at this early hour?”

“I was thinking.”

“Shouldn’t you be going to school?”

“I don’t want to go to school today.”

“Then you don’t have to go. I too want to spend some time with you all so I can get to know you better.”

“But I don’t want to go for another reason.”

“It must be a really good reason. Can you tell me it?”

“Because of my friend.”

“What did he do?”

“He’s our neighbor too and he’s bound to know you’ve come back, and he’ll tell everybody in the school.”

“And what’s wrong with that? What’s that got to do with wanting to stay away?” The boy lowered his head and muttered, “Because they all believe you died a hero’s death ten years ago.”

This surprising news silenced him. After remaining quiet for a long time he asked, “Was it you who told them that? What’s wrong in being a prisoner-of-war?”

The boy kept silent.

“Would you prefer it if I were dead?”

The boy burst forth, talking loudly and fast, as though repeating some lesson he had learned by heart: “My friends say that heroes die defending their countries. But a prisoner is a coward who has surrendered so he can stay alive.”

He caught his breath, then said, “In real wars things aren’t always quite like that. Not every prisoner has surrendered because he is a coward. There may be some mistake in his commander’s plan, or the ammunition has run out, or perhaps the enemy’s numbers were greater than expected.”

The boy gave a shrug of his shoulders and said, “I wanted you to go on being a hero in the eyes of my friends. How can I show them my face after today?”

“You’d prefer I were dead?” He shook his head, not believing what his ears had heard. His feelings of bitterness and despair grew.

Here was the youngest of his sons wishing, perhaps deep down, that he had not come back, that he had stayed on as a prisoner, completely forgotten, lest his return should embarrass him in front of his friends. What was he to do? Should he seek out some war in which to fight until he was killed? Suddenly he got to his feet as though he had made up his mind about something and went up the steps to the kitchen door. His eyes met those of his wife, who had been standing in the doorway. He understood from the way she looked at him that she had been listening to the conversation, which only increased his sensation of shame and the feeling that he was not wanted in this house. He crossed the kitchen with resolute steps to the living room and from there went upstairs to the bedroom.

—He got up from beside his son and moved to the kitchen. His eyes met mine in a look that seemed to me to be full of reproach and blame. Then he made his way through the kitchen and went up the stairs to the bedroom. I said to myself, “Let’s leave him to calm down and get back to normal.” The children had gone to school, all except for the little one. After that I busied myself with preparing lunch and didn’t notice anything untoward. When the children returned we set the table and sat down as usual to eat. We didn’t miss him until my elder son said, “Where is he?”

He didn’t say “my father.” I asked him to go and call him. After a while he returned to say that no one was answering from behind the closed door. It was then that I felt really alarmed and the thought occurred to me—I don’t know why—that he had done something to himself, for ever since he had been back he hadn’t been normal. I rushed upstairs, followed by the children. I pushed open the door to find myself in an empty room.

“Where’s your father, children?”

“Perhaps he’s in the bathroom.”

One of them went to the bathroom but he wasn’t there.

“Where’s your father, children?” I repeated the question.

“The case he brought with him has disappeared,” said the oldest.

“Perhaps he went back to where he came from,” said the young one.

One of them rebuffed him with the words, “Shut up, you idiot!”

—He got up from beside me, shaking his head. My mother was standing by the kitchen door. She stood aside for him and he disappeared inside.

After some moments I went in after him. He was nowhere to be found. I went to my room and took out my magazines I had read time and again and began flipping through the pages, having nothing else to do. After a while I heard the sound of footsteps pacing up and down in the upstairs room, then they stopped for a time, so I imagined he’d sat down or gone to sleep on the bed. But some time later I heard something like the sound of footsteps creeping down the stairs.

I opened the door slightly and began following him with one eye as he descended the stairs carrying the small suitcase he’d brought with him yesterday. He hung about for a time near the kitchen, then slipped out of the back door. I walked behind him at a quick pace, keeping close to the wall. From an opening in the garden gate I saw him standing uncertainly in the middle of the road looking to right and left. Then, giving the suitcase a shake, as though arriving at a decision, he walked to the right in the direction of the main

road. I continued to follow him with my gaze as he moved away, that thin man with the graying hair and bowed back who had come to us yesterday evening and had spent the night in our house and who had talked to me for a while this morning. I continued to watch him until he had disappeared from sight.