

Excerpt from THE POLYMATH by Bensalem Himmich

Six months went by after my marriage to Umm al-Banin. The latter half of that year represented a turning point in my life and my understanding. I came to know my Lord in the beauty of His creation, male and female. More than ever before, I used to yell out, "Life, Our Lord did not create it for nothing." I rediscovered Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya's work, *Meadow for Lovers*, and delved into it with confidence. My only interest was making the lover happy and placing her between heart and rib.

So I'll say it: Even though I'm almost sixty years old, love and life are two facets of a single blood. Anyone without love is without life. This too: Love and prayer are like conjoined twins; if you don't cloister yourself with the one, you miss the other and lose out on God's favor and welcome.

Ideas like these had definitely occurred to me when I was with my first wife, but their impact and integrity were negatively affected by external distractions and the enticements of rank. Today, however, such thoughts have come to occupy center stage in all their glory.

So many matters and activities that I used previously to ignore or pass by I now find myself paying attention to: food, for example, drink, clothes, walks, and old buildings.

I now know the names of all the food and drink that Umm al-Banin prepares for me. They're all of excellent quality and, because they're beneficial and easily digested, they're much prized by me. When they're brought to me, all I can do is offer my thanks and admiration, since they clearly represent the best of this earth's fruits and a harbinger of those others in the Garden of Eden.

I have always been anxious to wear clothes that were fairly plain in both color and design. But when Umm al-Banin chooses them or sews them herself, the quality is measurably higher. What is more, she uses the nicest powders in scenting them.

We arrived home safely and found Sha'ban anxiously awaiting our return. Removing my cloak and shoes I collapsed on the bench. Umm al-Banin disappeared inside for a moment and came out with a bowl of warm water. She started rubbing my feet in the water, something she had done for me regularly ever since we were married; she paid particular attention to ankles and toes. I had told her previously that, whenever my late wife had been cooking, resting, or taking a cure, she had regaled me with her own spontaneous remarks. So now Umm al-Banin proceeded to do likewise, adding some categories of her own, whose secrets she had learned from women in Fez, including telling jokes—"yarns" as we used to call them.

I asked Sha'ban to prepare lunch for us. He was delighted and took his time over it. I made use of the opportunity to convince Umm al-Banin that she should leave some of the household chores to my aged servant. Then he would not get bored with sitting around with nothing to do; that would make him forget the idea that we did not need him any more. Tyrannical regimes are bad in politics, I told her, and they are just as bad in household management. She relented and supported my position, promising to slow down a bit and take advice, something al-Hakim, the builder of the mosque, had never done.

I had to take a nap, and did so in the bedroom before the time came for afternoon prayers. While I was dozing, a thought occurred to me about incipient old age, the first

signs of which I had glimpsed during our morning walk. On the basis of such early symptoms I came to the conclusion that it involved having one foot in the grave and the other in a state of patience; a gradual process of finding movement increasingly trying to the point of impossibility, all that accompanied by a distressing realization that it was actually happening. Death consisted simply in a confirmation of rigidity brought on by a lack of awareness of the body.

In order to keep pace with my wife and make her happy in intimate as well as public matters, I would need, as of today, to keep old age's clutches at bay and thwart all efforts launched by decrepitude and weakness to gain control of my body. I would have to follow the lead of old people who were fit and well, seeking aid and sustenance from Him who is Eternal and Alive. O God, I beseech You not to cover my head with too many gray hairs, nor to weaken whatever strength of mind and body I have left!

Somewhat resentfully, I got up and joined my wife on the roof veranda overlooking the Nile. She was sitting there modestly contemplating, all the while devouring a pomegranate and staring at her stomach. When she realized I had come up, she told me somewhat bashfully that she really wanted some pears and cake. I asked Sha'ban to go to the closest market and get some. Just then she started crying like a baby. I asked her if she wanted some more fruit or sweetmeats, but she hid her face in her hands and seemed surprised that I did not seem to realize why she was having these cravings. For a moment she hesitated, but then stuttered out her wonderful news: "I'm pregnant, Abd al-Rahman, pregnant!" I was so overjoyed that I almost started crying too; I had never seriously thought that this could happen.

"So you're pregnant, Umm al-Banin!" I said, hugging her to me.

"Have you made quite sure?"

"The signs are all there. I can tell and so can the midwife."

"*Pray to Me and I will answer you.* All praise and thanks to my Lord!"

The kind of joy that I could now see making my wife cry was something the like of which I had never witnessed before. I can offer it as a definition of life itself. Life requires of us that we be willing to accept it as it is and offer it tokens of generosity and happiness. Joy and energy must win the battle against gloom and restraint.

Sha'ban came back with the things he had been asked to get and a tray of coffee. I stood up and hugged him, whispering the good news in his ear along with instructions to help Umm al-Banin around the house. He was excited and offered me blessings, prayed that she would have a safe delivery, then withdrew. I started sipping my coffee, while my pregnant wife wiped the tears from her face now smudged with kohl and bits of cake.