

An Excerpt from LEAVES OF NARCISSUS by Somaya Ramadan

It Might Be

The instant before submission is the most difficult of moments. This might be the secret to its vital attractiveness—the irresistible finality of it. The edge of resistance, a breaking point, when your being has stretched itself to its utmost and your consciousness has spun itself thin, tensile, to the finest and most transparent thread. The chasm before you is featureless: absolutely new, wholly defiant to all powers of imagination. Is it something like this that people sense as they are led to the gallows?

It might be. Some sort of hope might linger, accompanying them all the way to the vanishing point, inside the abyss. The only difference is that those people are led against their will. It must be more merciful that way. It must be that despair yields them to death, and so everything ends there. Or do they go on hoping until the end has come? The difference is that the end does come.

The pill is barely inside my mouth when I spit it out. Here it is, they whisper, just a tiny disk, and then you'll sleep so soundly! That's all you're required to do. And they do require it: my friends, my family. The nearest relations are arranging a kind little conspiracy after which you will sleep so very soundly! Negotiations commence and I exhaust the conspirators. My senses are perfectly focused. I note the tiniest shift in timbre is my own deliberate choice, for music is wholly in the timbre. Before my very ears, they transform themselves from one tone to another—and they take on brighter, sharper outlines. Their eyes gleam and smolder. Their bodies fill the space more densely now, even though they are weakened by exhaustion. Their eyes are ringed by dark halos, as though outlined in kohl. All of them, my relations, have become angels—the messengers of lonely death. They mass themselves into a single front while I, on my own, resist. The chemistry of my whole body is primed, my mind is sharply awake, charged to the maximum by the electricity of clarity, consuming its neurons in flash after flash through the brain's interior corridors where the truth behind appearances materializes in sharp bright relief; and where memory, today, is crystalline: they cannot kill you for then they will become murderers. They mean only to be assured that you, at your own bidding, will enforce the verdict upon your very own person.

“A tiny pink pill, and then you'll sleep forever, and your suffering will end.”

Beginnings, being beginnings, change constantly, change every time. I do not know at what point the hubbub starts to take over my brain, my mind, my thoughts, my self. In this murky clamor, I cannot make out individual voices. Gradually the din extends its dominion, capturing the hours in which I normally sleep, annexing one hour and then the next until slumber and nothingness become synonymous. Malady and medicine, poison and antidote: like most things, they come in pairs and arrive simultaneously. Then I'm afraid.

Who goes into oblivion of her own volition? Sometimes I deceive them. I make them believe I've swallowed it. When they rejoice I am sad. For hearts soften in sorrow, and sympathetic tenderness replaces cagey readiness, and overwhelms the requisites of self-defense.

When my heart softens, they are transformed. The intense blackness that ringed their eyelids vanishes, and the tonalities of their voices change. The resonance of deception disappears from the word-scale and they all become angels: merciful, sympathetic, loving angels. What's

another name for the angel of death? Who is his counter-part? Or is the angel of death simply another image of mercy, and another way to name it? Still they remain, ranged in a single front, like the teeth of a comb, completely in accord, the way people with a certain directed inner knowledge agree upon one matter even if they disagree on all else.

No difference in opinion among the wise will cool this generous warmth that flows among them now. They have agreed in loving kindness and trustful affection. They do what they do for a reason I cannot grasp. All I am sure of is that their intentions are good and sound, and that individual, personal, lonely death—my death, mine—is attributable to a higher wisdom; a higher good more lasting than I can be, a good more enduring, perhaps, than all of humankind. It must be so. Or else, how could anyone have ever yielded to such a fate?

I swallow the minute pink pill. Slowly, infinitesimally, the pre-sentiments of death infiltrate and gradually begin to take over my body. A hard, suppressed shudder sweeps through me from the tips of my toes, culminating in an orgasm more intense and slower than anything I have ever experienced before, followed by another, and another. Wave after wave in the same tempo and the same steady strength. When the clutching and releasing finally die out and numbness engulfs my head, I'm so very sure that I have died, and so I give witness in a clear voice, just as they have taught me: that the kingdom of God is upon us, that there is no god but God . . . and the wise people clustered around me smile, contented in their grace. And I am peaceful at last, and submission prevails over all:

I bear witness that I have done all that was within my power. That I have resisted with all the will I possessed, that I clung fiercely up to that ultimate moment, even as I saw my mind hovering, circling away, and that I did not despair. If I remained without understanding, it was not because I spared any effort, but rather because good is vaster than my grasp, as is evil. And you, Lord, you who vanish and reappear like a trickster, conning me with your exquisite beauty: I see you, then I don't see you; and I seize fiercely on your manifestations: the trees and the mountains, flowers and humanity. When I do not live you as a harsh beauty in my very bones, a life filled to overflowing, replete in every cell; when the hideous cement-block buildings obscure you from my range of vision, and the abominable voices of microphones take over your melodies in my ears, and I no longer see the sky for the smoke that spills from garbage fires: it is then that I hold mulishly to faith in people, the children of your tears, the very lips of your laughter, and the steely, tender gleam of your kind cruel eyes. It is then that I can sympathize with my own plight, faced as I am with passing illusory judgment.

In that instant I am a little girl—no, I am all little ones in a single little girl's body. As I prepare myself for death, a little body, this one or that, or all of them in one, become one with me, inseparable; and I am faced with an awesome, fearful process. I must free them one from the other, and all from the inner spaces of my body and spirit. My self, upon which that voracious, duplicate, multiple devil feeds: she is me and she is not me. I command her as though I were an exorcist knowledgeable in the talismans and amulets that free suffering bodies from evil spirits. Under my breath, under the threat of immense danger, every cell in my body quivers; I must kill her and preserve my own soul.

Souls depart from bodies the way a streamer of silk is first scratched and then rent as it moves along a surface of splintered glass. How can I allow her to pass and endure her death rattles, and not die along with her? It is a terrible risk, but they encourage me.

Now their faces are etched in the features of benevolent conspirators.

A harsh, hard, cruel benevolence, for they, too, know that she might kill me and live, she might. Or, that we might die together. I summon all of my courage and I accept the terror of

this peril; I set down my very life as a wager, death or survival. There is no one here to protect me, no friend, today; only a world that has lost all preferences and alliances, that stands witnessing us—witnessing me, witnessing her—as we struggle. Her: she might be this one of the pair, or perhaps she’s the other one. She might transform herself in the familiar ways she does, to dupe me by becoming both at once. Killer or killed, I command her:

Di—ana!

Die—I—ana!

Or, am I saying:

Die Amna

A Lesson In Reckoning Summons

She loses her temper, loses it completely. Her small, angular face reddens so spectacularly that I can see the soft dark hairs rimming her stern mouth. Beneath those tightly set lips run a pair of arcs, permanently etched lines of prolonged anger and bitterness in a marble face. Miss Diana, Greek spinster, teaches sums and algebra to the hapless daughters of the bourgeoisie. She is always garbed in mourning, and often she loses her temper.

“You’re stupid,” she snaps, in English.

Her hand shoots out to clutch a dangling lock of hair atop the small forehead, closing her fingers around it. Her fist yanks the head down sharply onto the glass of the dining table. The Czech crystal is shaved and rounded at the edges, perfectly meeting the solid cedarwood, carved out of a single trunk: a hard, solid block. Miss Diana’s cheeks collapse inward and the whiteness of her skin all but reveals her very jawbones, carved as they are to precision. Contrasting with her ivory pallor, her short hair appears blacker and glossier than it really is. She has a nervous disposition and she is quick to anger. And she is passionate about numbers.

I raised my hand to touch my hair. I didn’t feel the slightest pain. My head had simply withdrawn, absented itself, gone to sleep. Denial is the only way to rescue pride. For a little person of hardly ten years to keep herself from crying, in such a scenario, is a spontaneous reaction, though perhaps not seemingly a natural one. The girl is not certain of the nature of her sin. And the accusation is difficult to parry, for she truly does not understand how to reckon these sums. But to all appearances, her face does not reveal the depth of internal confusion brought on by the shock of a skull’s collision with the crystal that protects the dining table. No indeed, for that face displays complete unconcern. This blank demeanor was the only line of defense open to her, the sole permissible form that rebellion could take, the only manner in which to preserve precious self-esteem. Cut the ties and banish the world. And when her father enters smiling, exhibiting his customary optimism, Miss Diana pours out her complaint.

“Your daughter claims not to understand. I know perfectly well that if she really wanted to understand, she would. Your daughter has a head of stone.”

The smile disappears from her father’s face, and she can sense the anger rising, filling the space between them. So he, too, holds her responsible for failing to understand. If he didn’t, wouldn’t his voice rise to protest what this fretful, neurotic woman has said?

The crystal on the dining table has splintered. As is the wont of glass no matter how smoothly polished or thick, the crack first appears modest, restricted to a narrow area, simple and small. Quickly, though, it thrusts forward, like a stream of water painfully negotiating its

own course across the ground, and then—faster and faster—it branches out into many tiny ravines until it overspreads a remarkable breadth of crystalline surface.

“Do you see?” she snaps, getting ready to leave, putting her pens and the ruler and gum eraser methodically in her briefcase, in a manner that cannot but display her well-ordered character: tidy, practical and swift; all signs of the intellectually gifted according to the culture of this little house.

“Now have you seen? Her head is harder to budge than the crystal.”

Nothing cuts diamonds but diamonds; only iron can file down iron, but glass breaks when hit by stone. No one took any interest in repairing the cracked glass on the dining room table. Its web of splinters long remained, visible to everyone, irrefutable evidence of the sort of brain that inhabited that head. A mind incapable of simple calculations, when solving mathematical problems is prime evidence of the mind’s flare, swiftness, and clarity. All of the other things—the stories, novels, films and plays, history and poetry and drawing and photography—are mere diversions, enjoyable pastimes for those who know their sums. But that is allowable only after they have finished with the important matters of the world, the serious things. These “diversions” are my sole place of sanctuary, a place where one can make a world for oneself in which the glass on dining room tables does not crack or splinter.

But even when cushioned away in my sanctuary, I remained aware that from glass they might craft great, isolating bells by which to distinguish those who know sums from those who do not. Reckoning, then, is the great and hallowed criterion. So, I taught myself the only reckoning possible at the time. Reckoning is the Day of Reckoning, as in our religion lessons. On the Day of Reckoning, people must walk along a single hair’s breadth without losing their balance, and in the end those who have been good fall into Paradise while the ones who have been evil topple into the Fire. I became determined neither to fall one way, nor to topple the other. And every day became a Day of Reckoning. But of course they were not aware that I understood then, that decimals and fractions do not afflict glass and crystal. What shatters glass and crystal are rocks and stones. They did not realize that I had begun to care for the boulder that filled me, such that I would sleep and sense the weight of my brain on the pillow. I would run my fingers carefully over my face, probing its features, knowing that as I slept it would change into the face of a statue carved from stone: a Medusa. Upon awakening, I would be instantly afraid for my eye to fall upon them. And so I no longer looked anyone in the eye. I thought they would not notice. Until I learned that all along they’d thought I was so shy I could not look anyone in the eye. How they came to that conclusion they never told me.

The other half of the time an anticipatory thrill fills my whole being. Something extremely exciting is about to happen, I’m sure of it! Whole days pass and nothing happens. Nothing—only this constant state of expectation mingled with agitation. The days are ordinary. I awake as late as seven thirty since school is only a few steps away. I brush my teeth and comb my hair and knot my tie and shove my feet quickly into my soft, black shoes. Sandwiches and tea are waiting for me on a table in the kitchen. I swallow my breakfast and kiss her rapidly, Nana Amna; and my mother is somewhere in the background. When I open the door Amna appears and stands with me until the elevator arrives. I don’t hear a sound from my mother, but Amna is clear and forceful.

“Bye bye! Bye now, go on, good riddance!”

The days are ordinary, so why then does my heart beat so? Something very exciting is about to happen. And then—nothing. Only undivided attention, precision, care in all things, no more than that, ever, and no less. I walk to school. The curb of the pavement has enchanted me.

It promises the excellence that comes after sufficient practice. It is a single unending pavement, that leads in a grand half circle, from the entrance of our building to the school. Just one sidewalk, and at the end you always find the school and Amm Uthman, the enormous Nubian doorman. I reach school, walking on the edge, carefully balancing my steps. In school I write my lessons with utmost care, in a precise hand. I do not permit myself to use an eraser. At the end of every class period the teacher scolds me for being slow, and doesn't offer any praise for the clean look of my work or the orderliness of the page, nor does she seem to notice the lack of mistakes. The antidote for that terror that wells up suddenly, and seizes my being, is vigilant caution and an eye to the minutest detail. This fear that overwhelms me is, I'm certain, a fear of error; and possibilities for error are limitless. They are utterly without limit. And no one notices, no one remembers. Except me.