

*Bread on Uncle Milad's Table*  
by Mohamed Alnaas  
[Excerpt translated by Diqqa.net]

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On that day, I received the strongest slap of my life, even stronger than Al-Madonna's slaps and his beatings. Pulling me towards him, my father told me that I needed to man up and stop spending so much time with my sisters: "be a guardian, or a dad, to them—nothing else." And he also ordered me to spend all day at the bakery, to study and do my homework there, and to only go home to sleep or eat or get the house chores done. In his eyes, I could read his shame over bringing a man like me into the world—as if it was all his fault. My father had tried to give me a brother, but Asmaa ruined his plans; she was meant to be a boy, but our family had a habit of bearing girls. My father was the middle child among six sisters and only one, much younger, brother. My mother told me that my grandfathers were the only sons born to my great grandfather, out of 15 daughters from two different wives. For that reason, my father was allergic to women's sweat. On the one hand, he wished I wouldn't have said what I said, but on the other, he blamed himself; the blood retreated from his rosy cheeks, which remain shrouded in skin baked by the oven's heat. Nothing broke the silence between us that morning but the ding announcing that my dough was ready to shape.

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That day, I had to make sense of our society's time-honored commandments, including that spontaneously divulging what you're thinking could pose a threat to yourself and to everyone around you. I had learned the wrong lesson; I learned to stay silent, because I simultaneously didn't want to betray my father's will that I renounce lies and deceit. I tried over and over to kick my habits, which I had acquired from my sisters since my childhood, but to no avail. One time, I hit my little sister when I discovered a text message from one of the boys she goes to school with on her phone, but hitting her made me tremble; it made me break out in a sweat over the shape of the beast hiding inside me. Life is difficult in our land. The missus once told me that women's lives in Libyan villages are dreadful. She told me stories about women she knows personally who had been beaten, raped, killed, or maimed by their brothers or husbands just for being women, and I am aware that this is in fact the case. I am not very cultured, and I am not an intellectual. I tried to change this about myself by reading Zainab's books, but I failed. My grasp of the lives women lead and the hardships they face only goes as far as my personal experiences, the insights I gained from growing up around my sisters, my own imagination, and perhaps from my preoccupation with minor details. I don't want to wear you down by listing the number of times I burst into tears just because I couldn't be a real man—the man my father wanted me to be—or the number of times I felt that something sinister, an evil spirit, or a devil, is living inside me, that a jinni inhabits me and strives to erase my masculinity. Besides, I could never understand why a man's interest in sanitary napkins would be considered shameful. I repeatedly complained to Allah in my prayers, and I implored him to point me in the direction of the truth.

In the days leading up to my second conversation with Al-Absi, I spent my time looking for a way out of the predicament, and I found the only solution that seemed right. I was living within a ring of fire; the only way out was to dive straight into it. It was my second suicide attempt. I went home that night fighting back tears that wanted to gush down in sheets. The whole trip home, I wanted to throw myself into Zainab's arms and rail at the world's cruelty. I walked in and switched the lights on to look for her, but she wasn't home. I tried to remember if she had mentioned anything about spending the night at her parents'. Doubt started circling me; what could she be doing? She is the closest person to me, and she knows I would never doubt her, and for that reason, she could easily betray me, and I would never know. I laid my body down on the bed, my clothes reeking of cigarette smoke and Boukha. I tried to sleep, but I couldn't find a way in. I tossed and turned every time thoughts materialized before my eyes like a nude woman intent on seducing me. I got up. I foraged the storage room for a rope. I was tossing things on the floor looking for it, when at last I found it. Its harsh texture almost gashed my palms. I took the rope to Ghazala's room, and carefully tied it to the chandelier. I held it in my hands and tugged at it firmly to make sure it wouldn't come loose. I once watched failed suicide attempts on TV, and the frailty of the rope was one of the key causes for failure. I climbed onto the plastic factory chair; I was shaking. I stood there for about half an hour, hesitant, and remembered what the sheikh had said during one of his Friday sermons; that those who commits suicide will not be allowed entry to heaven. I was afraid I was invisible to God. In a recurring dream, I am trying to speak to Him, but all He does is turn His back on me. I've always contemplated suicide, and for the most insignificant reasons. The first time I considered killing myself was during my military service, then when Zainab refused to speak to me for three days. I contemplated ending my life to shake off the idea of divorce. When at long last I decided

to wrap the rope around my neck, I wet myself. The urine involuntarily streamed down my jeans. They were my favorite pair, and so I wanted to die in them. But now there they were—wet, and my thighs warm. I grew disgusted by my own urine, then I lifted my leg off the chair to avoid soaking the rug. I remembered I had washed it last week, and swept it just this morning, and I really didn't want it to get dirty so soon. I started thinking I must change my jeans. I would have to shower again. The problem was that the shampoo was running out, so I would need to go out to the store to buy a new bottle. The alcohol was still playing tricks on my brain. The smell of my urine made me dizzy. I rushed down from the chair to avoid dripping any urine on the rug. But I forgot that the rope was still slung around my neck. I hung from the sky, trying to unfasten the rope pulled taut around my neck. I thrust my feet and my body towards the floor, desperate to exit the situation. I didn't want to kill myself this way. I had imagined a dramatic scene, inspired by those Egyptian movies. After running out of options, the hero would stand there feeling oppressed, convinced that he had let down God, and himself, and so he decides to give himself up to the noose. The melodramatic score exacerbating the scene's gravity, he surrenders to the rope. You see nothing but his legs, flailing, until they stop moving. This was the scene I had in mind before my attempt, but what ended up happening brought a bitter taste my throat, and all I thought then was that I didn't want Zainab to find me reeking of urine, and that I didn't want her to have to go through the agony of scrubbing the rug. I tried to free myself from the rope, to no avail. Then suddenly, I heard the sound the ceiling cracking; the chandelier collapsed, hitting me on the head. I felt dizzy. Spared, I spent what was left of the night laying on the rug. The next morning, I still felt dizzy, and the chandelier was still perched on top of my head.

When I woke up, my father's voice resounded in my head: "stupid boy." I spent the whole day trying to fix what I could. I called Zainab's parents. Her mother told me over the phone that Zainab was unwell, and that she had passed out at work out of stress. I was worried about her, and I realized how selfish I had been—all this time, my wife has been ill at her parents' house and I wasn't there for her; in fact, I even wanted to end my life without consulting her first.

That day, I was haunted by Al-Absi's words. He had never before dared to say something like that to me, ever. I had heard him more than once, talking about me just as I was leaving the shack. And sometimes, in my presence, he would make fun of men who don't control their wives. One night, just as I stepped out of the shack, I realized I had left my house keys where I was sitting. It was a dark autumn night. I returned to the sound of his friends' laughter soaring all over the place. I put my ear to the steal wall and heard him tell embarrassing stories about me, one of which happened during our childhood, and which I had forgotten all about. My uncle's family was gathered at our house. Al-Absi told me that he had heard of this new game called "bride and groom" which is best played with two boys and two girls. After we built houses out of the scattered pieces of furniture in the living room, he decided to play "bride and groom" with my sister Asmaa. He asked me to play his sister's husband, travelling in a faraway place, so I went to the bathroom to play the role of the absent husband, and just at that moment, he snuck away with my sister beneath the make-shift house, and I saw him, with my two eyes, touching her private parts. "What are you doing?" I asked him. "We're playing," he said. When I wanted to do the same thing with his sister—my wife—he told me that I now had to act out divorcing his sister, in the aftermath of a domestic dispute. As I stood outside the shack, I heard him savor

every word of the story, and this happened over and over—every time a different story. I would stand there crying on the threshold of the shack as I listened to him speak. On that night, like every other night, I dragged my shame behind me like a child trying to drag a toy he fashioned from wood and metal out of this bleak world and cried—and then a day, a week, or a month later, I would forget everything that happened. The missus told me that my relationship with Al-Absi was unhealthy, and that I must give up my attachment to him, since he was never a real friend to me, and that I must look for friends who resemble me. But I couldn't let myself leave him, especially that he was often sweet to me; when he went on a trip to the beach, or to the desert, or on those wild nights on his father's farm, he always brought me along. True, I would cook and clean on those trips, and sometimes I would even buy him cigarettes, but his company would wipe away life's struggles. I enjoyed his jokes and fantastical stories, his acting skills, his joie de vivre, the nicknames he came up with, his imitations, which everyone found hilarious, his turns of phrase, which came out of nowhere, and his almanac of folktales and horror stories. At night, we would huddle around and listen to the music of Nass El-Ghiwane, Ahmed Fakroun and Al-Mezdawi, or we watched a movie, while drinking the best Boukha menta, or grape juice aged in Tripoli, on the country's protracted coast.

In the morning, facing the mirror and studying the crease the rope had left around my neck, I drowned in my thoughts and replayed my life's reel; my father's slap, and his insistence two years later that I enlist in the military, my marriage to Zainab, and the events that had disturbed the waters of our marriage over the past few years. My face went ashen, as if the blood had been siphoned from it.

- What will I do now? The only escape left is death.

I told my reflection, foraging for an answer in the dejected face staring back at me. I sighed. Was there a way to regain my masculinity? And how will I manage it? There are only two options: it's either I retrieve my masculinity, or I end my life. There is no point in going on with this nonsense, in defying life, society, and everyone around me. A voice inside me was saying that I had never received proper practical training on how to be a man. All I got were my father's words, and his attempts to shove me into military service. The military had a negative impact on my mindset, since its standards of masculinity diverged from society's. Masculinity does not arise from killing rabbits with your bare hands and eating them raw, or from spending hours under the sun. Look at Al-Absi, the gold standard for masculinity; he went his whole life without enlisting in the military. Al-Absi, I suddenly thought. Could he be the one to teach me how to be a man?