

THE TORTOISE

Omm Kasim was the mother of three sons. Kasim, her eldest, who should have married first, then Bashar, then Faiz. But they were now all back-to-front. What little was left of Omm Kasim's pride in her sons, and her few remaining hopes for herself, vanished when Faiz married the slut. Faiz's wife was a nightmare creature, everything wrong and in reverse. She was anything but a willing bride who'd help around the house and raise children whom Omm Kasim could cherish and who would love her in return.

Omm Kasim now knew that every evening for the rest of her life she would sit in front of the television, while Kasim, Bashar, and Faiz and the slut slumped on

the two long divans, smoking, arguing, switching channels and demanding that she get them tea and snacks. Abu Kasim would be there too, but at least he got his own supper tray from the kitchen.

Every evening too, at about nine o'clock, poor hunched Zahra would knock timidly at the front door, then creep unnoticed to her place at the end of the divan farthest from the television. Omm Kasim used to take great comfort in being the mother of sons. And she used to pity Zahra, knowing that if Zahra never came again, the others would not even think to ask why. But since the arrival of the slut, Omm Kasim wasn't so sure whose life was worse. The terrible thing about sons, she thought, is that they are with you for the rest of your life.

Omm Kasim cast back to see if there were any chances she'd missed, but she found none. Her sister in Lebanon was preoccupied with her own family, and her brothers hadn't spoken to her in all the thirty years she'd been married to Abu Kasim. There were a few cousins who kept in touch, but only to guarantee themselves a bed when they came to Damascus. Omm Kasim knew they didn't see their visits as part of a reciprocal agreement.

Then she thought forward: the odds were that Kasim and Bashar would take sluttish wives, just as Faiz had done. After all, what other kind of woman would want to marry them? And, since none of them would ever find the money to buy a house of their own, Abu Kasim, ever proud to be the honest shopkeeper and reliable father, would support them all—and their children. And he'd continue to talk about Arab customs and families which stayed together. She sighed. Abu Kasim had been dashing when she'd eloped with him and stuffed a pillow under her skirt so the judge would marry them, but Abu Kasim's courage had crept away, leaving him ineffectual and consumed with worry for their sons.

Each lunchtime, when Kasim returned from the night shift driving the taxi, Abu Kasim would quip, "Work well, eat well, eh?" Each lunchtime, Kasim would reply with a silent snarl.

Or, sometimes, Abu Kasim would try praise: "It's good Kasim has a real job. Now you boys—Bashar, Faiz—need to follow his example. We all must watch out. You know what they say: that when the government puts its hands on things, people get lazy."

He meant well, Omm Kasim knew that, but he never noticed the murderous scowls on the faces of their two younger sons. Omm Kasim sank round-shouldered into her chair. "Others would be broken, would be slaves by now. But we Syrians are resilient." Abu Kasim said this too often these days and each time Omm Kasim wanted to cry. It was as close as her husband would get to admitting that their three precious sons had become sad, helpless men.

Omm Kasim turned back to the television, knowing no one had noticed her attention straying in the first place.

The next day Omm Kasim found the usual morning-after debris waiting for her when she switched on the single dangling bulb in the tiny kitchen. Pots and pans, plates, glasses, melon rinds, grease and tea leaves all swam in the dark gray concrete sink. She made coffee for each of them as they appeared, sleep-swollen, sour and foul-mouthed. When she finally managed to clear the small wooden counter and the second ring of the stove, she began preparing lunch. She hardly cared that she was still in her nightdress.

She retrieved the leftovers from the stink of the ancient fridge, then chopped vegetables and put the potatoes on to boil. Each lunchtime she tried to serve them something different: fried eggplant, courgettes in yogurt, and sometimes even special dishes like *mallubeh bi tajaj*, though Kasim of course ate only hamburgers and chips.

Kasim returned at noon. "Where have you put my papers?" he shouted as he stomped down the long hallway to the table in the open court at the center of the house. Omm Kasim scurried to collect the papers from the chair where he'd strewn them the day before. They were for some course in Cyprus. What he really wanted, Omm

Kasim knew, was to do black market work and a part-time degree.

The cutlery, cold leftovers, and a fresh salad were already on the table. Kasim pushed them aside and spread out the application forms, clearly resenting the scraps of his life they asked him to reveal. Then, after a few moments, he bellowed, "Where's my food?" He didn't bother to look up until she handed him the hamburger wrapped in two flat rounds of bread. "Watch out. Don't you dare spill anything here."

"I'm doing my best; I do it for you."

Omm Kasim looked at her son's bearlike shoulders, flabby, covered with wiry black hairs, and his puffy, unshaven face. She wondered if other mothers were also repelled by their children.

By this time, Bashar and Faiz and the slut had also come to the table. Bashar picked at his food, then moaned about a headache and demanded a tray in his room. He'd never been completely right since his road accident five years ago. But there wasn't that much wrong with him either, beyond soul-deep sloth.

Faiz and the slut had already started on the stew when Abu Kasim returned from the shop. He was carrying a watermelon, pleased with his contribution to the meal. To annoy his father, Faiz reached over to fondle the slut and they joked about the onions in the stew and how they'd fart all through the siesta. Then, unfortunately for Omm Kasim, Faiz glanced up and saw her hovering near the kitchen door. "We've told you not to use so many onions. Don't you ever learn?"

"I put in only one onion this time," Omm Kasim replied. "We said no onions," hissed the slut, and Abu Kasim, for lack of will, nodded his pained agreement.

Omm Kasim clutched the knife that she was using to carve the watermelon and her voice rose and then broke, "Tomorrow our new bride will cook lunch." But Faiz and the slut only snorted. Omm Kasim knew they knew that she would always be there to cook for them.

The only unexpected part of lunch was the knock at the door before they'd finished the melon. Anwar, who always beamed his hellos, looked in from the street, grinning. "Ah, I knew my mother-in-law loved me," he said, using the conventional joke to invite himself to the meal.

Omm Kasim guessed that Anwar only dropped in because of her cooking but, given Kasim's pride in his popularity, neither Anwar, nor anyone else, would ever say as much. Kasim and Anwar had been at high school together.

Anwar repaired TVs. He was from Houran and Omm Kasim couldn't resist asking him, "Which is worse, no sugar or no tea?" It was a rationing joke that no sweet-toothed Hourani could have missed, but Anwar answered good-heartedly, "No sugar, of course," and Omm Kasim suddenly felt like a more valuable person. When Anwar was there the others had to keep their sniggers to themselves and they soon got bored. Omm Kasim watched as one after the other they went for their afternoon naps. Or, in the case of Faiz and the slut, their afternoon fuck. She was pleased for the chance to share a pot of mint tea with Anwar.

Omm Kasim tried not to disturb Abu Kasim when she finally lay down on her side of the double bed, but he woke anyway and she watched her husband through half-closed eyes as he trundled across the bedroom. He looked old as he smoothed his silver hair round the bald patch. His pudgy belly looked absurd swaddled in a white cotton vest tucked tightly into his underpants. A ripping fart roared out from the toilet next to the kitchen. Serves him right, she thought, for condoning the vicious jokes about the stew.

He shits and is afraid of being hungry, Omm Kasim remembered the old saying and the dart of malice changed something and made her feel more comfortable with her own soft, white body.

That evening everything seemed the same. But when Zahra slipped in, Omm Kasim had a hard look at the old

woman. No, not that old, she corrected herself, only a little older than me and she wondered if, like Zahra, she too was so faded she was almost invisible.

Zahra's dull green dress made her bosom look like a stuffed marrow, as if she'd nursed an army of kids. But Zahra had no one—no children, no husband, nothing. Omm Kasim remembered her own horror when Zahra had explained how, just after her husband died, some of his relatives had moved in to help her out and then, after only a few weeks, they offered to help her further by buying her share of the house. Poor Zahra, Omm Kasim thought, she never even got as far as anger when later they'd heard how the relatives had built a small hotel on the land near Merjay Square where Zahra's house had been. That was why Zahra had moved from the center of Damascus to Shamsiyyah, though Omm Kasim found she could no longer remember what tenuous connection now made them Zahra's closest kin.

During a commercial, Kasim flicked the television over to the Egyptian soap opera and Omm Kasim noticed Zahra straighten up to watch. She too clearly enjoyed the drama of Dr. Rauf and Poppy's marriage and when Kasim flipped back to the American film with its tiresome subtitles, Zahra sagged back on the cushions.

"Turn it back to Dr. Rauf," Omm Kasim said, "that's what we want to watch." It was the first time anyone had included Zahra in one of the nightly quarrels. Of course, Kasim refused and as Omm Kasim shrugged, she felt aggrieved for Zahra as well as herself.

Early the next evening, after the siesta, when Abu Kasim had returned to his shop and the rest of them had left for their stroll, Omm Kasim put on her heavy stockings, her street coat, and scarf and made a visit to Zahra's tiny house, which was tucked into the hillside just around the corner.

Omm Kasim lifted the brass door knocker, a small, elegant Ottoman lady's hand, and let it fall back gently. Zahra greeted Omm Kasim fearfully, anticipating bad

news. When Omm Kasim said simply, "I'm always so busy. I should have visited earlier," a bemused Zahra ushered her through a narrow hall to a tiny front room. In her turn she mumbled the expected greetings almost as if she'd forgotten what they should be. She pointed Omm Kasim toward the divan which stood along the wall and sat down herself on one of the wooden chairs which flanked the table in front of the window. They were silent until Omm Kasim said, "I like flowers too," nodding toward the sad begonias which shared Zahra's view of the street.

Zahra started, remembering what should happen next. "Would you like coffee?" she asked, leaving Omm Kasim to contemplate the dull prints of Mecca and the tourist board calendar on the yellowed wall. On a shelf in the corner there was a Bakelite radio. Zahra had switched it off before she'd opened the door.

Zahra returned with a small round tray. Omm Kasim's coffee was so sweet that she wondered what might be left of Zahra's sugar ration. Zahra took an ornate, old-fashioned box from the shelf and offered Omm Kasim *malabas*, sugared almonds which were gray and cracked; they might have been leftovers from Zahra's own wedding.

Omm Kasim and Zahra struggled round the conventions of a visit. How could Omm Kasim ask, 'How is your family?' when Zahra's only answer would be, 'What family? You're all I've got.' And if Zahra asked her the same question, what could she reply except, 'Do you mean Faiz and the slut?'

But Zahra surprised Omm Kasim: "I have a little garden," she said. She led Omm Kasim down the hallway past a dark cupboard of a kitchen and an even smaller bathroom, then up narrow stairs. The glazed door at the top opened onto a small square of earth bounded on either side by the much larger neighboring houses and by the pale yellow stone of the hillside at the back. In the garden there was a chair and some trays of *malukhiyya*, whose leaves had dried dark green in the sun. There were also a

few hollyhocks and a small rounded fig tree growing out of the stone.

“There is a lot to do for winter,” Omm Kasim commented, nodding at the *malukhiyya*.

Having visited Zahra made it easier for Omm Kasim to leave the house the next morning. After making their coffee, Omm Kasim allowed the debris to swim in the sink and changed into her street dress. She'd decided to shop in Sikke for the first time in years. At least, she told herself, the green beans would be a few lira cheaper than the *fasuuuuuuliyaah* of the raucous street seller.

At first she was overwhelmed by the energy of the women who bustled along the high street. Then she remembered that she too could elbow her way to the front of the shops and insist on the good tomatoes which were kept hidden under the counter. As Omm Kasim trudged back up the hill, the weight of her shopping was lightened by the thought that she must have saved five, perhaps even ten, lira by venturing out. By the time she had slipped back into the house and put the coins in the little purse she kept under her side of the mattress, she was very pleased with herself indeed.

In the weeks that followed, Omm Kasim often walked down to the high street past the giant eucalyptus and the canaries which chorused from the balcony of the house on the corner opposite. But what she really enjoyed was stashing ten lira under the mattress after each expedition. No one at home noticed her new routine, or if they did, they didn't care.

Once after she'd returned from shopping, she tried to slip out again to see Zahra. But Kasim had rushed to the door and shouted, “Come back! It's nearly lunchtime.” Omm Kasim had no choice but to submit to his bellow and of course the neighbors had watched as she returned to the house, crumpled and humiliated. After that, she learned to stop at Zahra's before she set off shopping and Zahra, who'd never quite managed to get down to the high street shops before, began to come with her.

Some time later Omm Kasim tried another strategy. She put on her street dress and coat after the siesta. She was prepared when Kasim challenged her. She shrilled in a voice that would sear eardrums and cleave the gossips' tongues in two, "Zahra is ill and I'm going to visit her." Thereafter, had Kasim been more observant, he might have wondered about Zahra's strange illness, which so often struck her down in the early evening, but allowed her up in time for television at Abu Kasim's.

Over the next weeks Omm Kasim made cuttings from the lemon geraniums which grew on the balcony, and took them to Zahra's. She also bought some bruised plums and took some sugar with her when she visited. Together they had made a few jars of plum jam which stayed with Zahra and added a rich spot of color to her kitchen. Zahra too contributed what she could and one day, heaven knows how, she produced several kilos of new pistachios which they husked in the little garden, their hands reddening with the work. "These are good for the brain," Zahra said. "Good for thinking," and they both understood what she meant.

Then, later, Omm Kasim stole one of the slut's old magazines which lay gathering dust under the divan. Some women Omm Kasim had overheard talking at the butcher's had said the best bit was the doctor's advice page.

"Just listen to this," Omm Kasim said, selecting one of the letters.

Zahra listened with horror and then suddenly let go and began to laugh, and went on laughing until tears streamed down her wrinkles to her chin. "My husband had that problem," she said. "And I never knew what to do. He used to shout at me when it happened, as if it were my fault. The bastard." Omm Kasim had never heard Zahra swear before.

"A pity you didn't write to Dr. Adil about his problem," Omm Kasim giggled. Then she paused, "And maybe I ought to write to him too. I'd like to write: 'Dear Dr. Adil, My husband's fat belly causes him all kinds of difficulties when he wants a fuck.'" Then she paused and added,

“And I’d finish my letter the same way that woman did. What does it say there? Oh, yes: ‘Please, Dr. Adil, tell me what can I do to help? Signed, A Faithful Wife.’”

Then, Zahra began an imaginary letter of her own, “Dear Dr. Adil, What is a good wife to do when her husband gets old, and his breath smells . . .”

“and his armpits stink,” Omm Kasim interrupted,

“and his feet smell,” Zahra continued,

“and when he makes love like a tortoise with grunts and squeaks?”

When they finally stopped laughing, Omm Kasim said, “But it’s not his lovemaking that bothers me. What is much worse is that he’s lost his nerve. They shout at him and then he lets them shout at me.” Then she paused, “He’s really no better than a limp penis.”

“Worse perhaps,” Zahra said. “Mine had a limp penis, but at least he was a man of character.”

After that famous afternoon, Omm Kasim really put her mind to saving money. She was proud that she’d discovered two different ways of doing it.

First, she began to shop at the Friday Market near the shrine of Ibn Arabi at Mouhiaddin. She hadn’t bothered to go that far since the time when she’d heard some boys whispering that the saint’s feet stuck out of his tomb and she’d wanted to see for herself. They didn’t, of course, and she’d been angry at the peasants and the bawling of their donkeys and the puddles of dirty water in the streets where the stall holders had tried to settle the dust. This time she cared only that the vegetables were a little cheaper and she could find prickly pear fruits for less than a lira each.

The first time she returned home, hunched and sweaty, with her fingers deeply ribbed by the plastic handles of her shopping bags, Kasim had shouted, “You foolish woman, the house is filthy. I order you to stay home and clean it.”

She’d stopped arguing with Kasim, but she dared not be too silent or it would provoke him further, so she

screamed back, "Have some respect for me. I've been shopping for your lunch."

The following Friday she slipped past his corpulent, snoring body on the divan in the hall and stopped at Zahra's first. From then on they went together and carried things back and stored some of them at Zahra's. Zahra enjoyed the Friday Market, and loved the cheese sold by the Bedouin women who stood tall and tattooed between the canopied stalls.

One Friday, Omm Kasim watched when Zahra approached a grubby child playing with a small tortoise next to a pile of melons. Zahra bargained with the child and bought the creature for an extravagant four lira and put it in one of her plastic bags. Once home, she climbed the narrow stairs and placed the tortoise in the center of her little garden.

"It will bring good luck," she said.

Omm Kasim nodded and smiled at Zahra. Then she grinned, "We should call it Abu Kasim," and Zahra agreed with a hoot of laughter. "And from now on," Omm Kasim said, "please call me Samira, it is my own real name."

Omm Kasim's second plan for saving money was inspired by the chicken joke that Zahra, of all people, had told her. "Omm Kasim, have you heard what happened to the peasant who wanted to sell his chickens at the Friday Market? No? Well, at the first roadblock, one of the guards asked, 'What's in your truck?' And when the peasant answered, 'Chickens,' the guard demanded to know what the chickens ate. The poor peasant was terrified and answered, 'Why the best food, of course.' But it was the wrong answer, and the guard shouted, 'You can't give them the best food when so many people are hungry,' and he beat the peasant and confiscated all his chickens.

"Of course, what did he expect?" Omm Kasim asked dismissively. She was nonplused when Zahra said, "Shush and listen."

"So," Zahra continued, "the next time the peasant was quizzed at a roadblock, he had the cunning to an-

swer, 'My chickens survive on the poorest food.' But the guard shouted, 'You can't do that or you'll poison people,' and again he confiscated the chickens and this time he threw the peasant in jail."

"Ummm," said Omm Kasim, remembering the verve with which Anwar told jokes.

"By the third time," Zahra resumed, "the peasant had learned a thing or two. When the guard asked what the chickens ate, he replied, 'Oh, I just give them pocket money and they buy their own food.' This time," Zahra said with a flourish, "the guard was so impressed, he let the peasant pass and take his chickens to the Friday Market."

Omm Kasim laughed dutifully, then with delight. She was glad Zahra had started to tell jokes. Moreover, between rationing and the idea of pocket money, Omm Kasim devised her second savings plan.

If her family wanted *fatet magdus*—or chicken—they could eat in a restaurant or look for it on the black market. But from her, from now on, they would only get the bare essentials. But, of course, Omm Kasim defined the bare essentials very carefully so that they would not riot, or even notice what they were missing.

She continued to make their coffee for breakfast. That couldn't be altered. But lunch was different. On Fridays Bashar and Faiz and the slut always expected to eat *ful*, so why not have beans and bread other lunchtimes as well? Since Kasim wanted only hamburgers, why not add soft bread crumbs to the ground beef? One day she even tried *hummus* as a filler, but Kasim swore and said she'd bought bad meat. It was only some time later that she found she could make the meat go further by simply adding mashed potato.

Abu Kasim was more difficult to please. He believed food was as much as love. He liked lots of different dishes on the table and loved to comment scientifically about why beans and cracked wheat must be eaten together, and why tomato sauce should never be served with yogurt. But after her success with the hamburgers, she realized that she could add rice or bulgur to virtually

anything to make it last day after day. Then, some time later, Omm Kasim's savings plan had another, unexpected effect. She found, without really noticing it happen, that she had learned to cut the vegetables into bigger, and yet bigger, pieces. And one day she astonished herself by vowing that she would never, ever, again take the trouble to chop parsley for *tabouli*.

Over the following months, the lunch menus became more and more sparse. But they were so used to shouting at her, they didn't seem to notice that they now had more to shout about.

Then one day Omm Kasim exchanged the coins in her purse for bills. But as she grew richer, she grew more worried. She knew Kasim and Bashar often looked in her handbag and stole coins for themselves. She also knew that the slut sometimes went through her things, though whether from boredom or malice, she didn't know. She decided it would be better to leave the money with Zahra.

"Ah, my mother-in-law loves me." It was winter when Anwar next popped his head round the front door and invited himself to lunch. After the meal, when the rest of them, disgruntled by his good humor, had taken themselves off, Omm Kasim invited him to share a pot of tea.

"Anwar, I need your help," she said urgently. "One of our neighbors has no one at all. She comes to us every night to watch television and we're not even kin. I have made a vow—but you must never tell anyone—that I will help her."

Anwar was abashed by Omm Kasim, the unexpected saint.

"I've put some money aside, enough I think for a small television. Could you see if you can find one, a cheap one, secondhand?"

"Of course. I'll see what I can find." As she'd hoped, he was so clearly astonished by her request that he couldn't refuse.

"Oh, thank you. God bless you. Now come. Quietly. I'll show you her house. And if—when?" she looked at him

expectantly, "when you find the right set, could you take it straight there and get it working?"

Zahra was dumbstruck when several weeks later Anwar and a black-and-white television arrived at her front door. Then, when Omm Kasim arrived—Zahra had never had two visitors in the little house at the same time—the three of them shared Hourani jokes and glasses of sweet mint tea, while Anwar sorted out the wires at the back of the set, adjusted the antenna and, with evident pleasure, tuned in the picture.

"It should be fine," he said, looking at the two beaming old women, "and if there are any problems you must tell me and I'll come and sort things out."

The day's broadcasting began midafternoon. Omm Kasim and Zahra took up places side-by-side on the divan and were so enchanted by the sound and images which filled the room that it hardly mattered that they were watching the opening religious program and a turbaned sheik droning verses of the Koran.

And when the children's programs began, they laughed delightedly at the antics of Majid, the cartoon Pinocchio. Omm Kasim even put her hand to her nose and rather wondered if she should find a mirror. That evening, when Zahra failed to arrive at her usual time, Omm Kasim said quietly to Abu Kasim, "Zahra may be ill. I think I should go and see," and she slipped on her overcoat and scarf, and walked down to the tiny house with the blue light flickering from the window.