



*EYAD BARGHUTHY*

## A FATEFUL MEAL

A SHORT STORY BY

TRANSLATED BY JOHN PEATE

“I’ll order us both red mullet and seafood salad,” said Dr Mufid to his daughter Samar and he signalled to the waiter who had brought them the menu a few minutes earlier. The waiter nodded as he set down some dishes at a table in the far corner. This was the first time they had sat down together like this, without the rest of the family, out of the house.

“No, I think I’ll have pasta with mushroom and béchamel,” Samar said, closing the menu and setting it down next to her silver knife.

“This is a fish restaurant.”

“Dad, I’m vegetarian.”

“Since when?”

“Since second year of uni. You forgot?”

“I thought that was just a phase. Do you still want to save the poor cows from us voracious humans then?”

“How could you forget I’m a vegetarian?”

The click of the waiter’s heels grew closer and his hint of a smile grew broader as he approached. Arriving at the table, he glanced quickly at both of them, then fixed his gaze on Dr Mufid.

“What can I get you, Doctor?” he asked politely.

“Red mullet please, well grilled, a portion of seafood salad . . . and a dish of pasta with béchamel and mushrooms, if you would.”

“What will you have to drink?”

“Lemonade . . . a jug,” replied Mufid.

“Water,” said Samar.

A fishing boat converted into a small tourist cruiser passed by and into the factory waste and the jumble of boats that fish the Acre coastline. In the fishing port, Arab dance music filled the air, and the passengers grouped together, heedless of the high tide, trying to dance and enjoy themselves in the hull of the boat. One points to a group of young lads on the dockside, glistening in their salty dampness. The passengers clap and chant: “Come on! Come on!” Suitably encouraged, one of the boys runs along the seawall, clambers onto the barrel of an ancient cannon and jumps spread-eagled into the searing air. He hovers then plunges, ramrod-straight, into the rocky coastal waves. The day-trippers whoop in amazement as their boat pulls away, disappearing beyond the ancient eastern walls, while the young boys jump in, one after the other.

“Did you used to jump off the dockside when you were young?”

“No, I wouldn’t take the chance. There’s been many a bone broken on those rocks. I prefer swimming in safer waters.”

She said nothing for a while, then ventured: “This is the first time we’ve ever sat down together on our own.”

“It’s not my fault. I haven’t heard a word from you for months. Did you even save my number on your mobile in the first place?”

“I’ve kept yours on mine ever since I bought you your first phone.”

“And I’ve kept you ever since you were born . . . Now, out with it.”

“Out with what?”

“I’m not stupid, Samar.”

She sighed. She had always known her father would never agree to her marrying Khalil, so she had kept the whole story to herself, hiding behind wraparound glasses and endless study in front of a fancy black computer and tomes of anatomy written in English. She’d told him she didn’t want any marriage candidates, whatever propaganda her mother might sling her way and even if they were sexier than Brad Pitt and richer than Bill Gates. But, after all the endurance and the endless exams, she was now getting the full treatment. Here was her father, sitting opposite her in a restaurant along the harbour wall and below the Carmel Heights, wanting a straight answer.

“What do you know?”

“Everything.”

“Not true.”

“Don’t think you’re wide-eyed in the land of the blind. I know you’re with a boy. Tell me who he is and why he hasn’t knocked on my front door, like a man? Our community has standards and customs. What are you waiting for, Samar? I’m not best pleased right now.” He held in his anger so his words wouldn’t turn into yelling.

“Look, let’s drop this – you won’t agree with me and we’ll just end up arguing. You want what’s best for me, to look after me, I know that. So, please spare me the lecture and trust me. Ah, but then again, you won’t ever agree to it.”

“Who is he? Speak up!”

The waiter’s heels clicked towards them again, so they had a brief truce. After the red mullet was set down in front of her father, Samar said: “Khalil. You know him?”

“Who’s his father?”

“Your neighbour in Old Acre. Saber.”

“Saber Saber?!”

“Yes, that’s right, Saber the druggie.”

The waiter waltzed his way over once more, placed a steaming bowl of pasta in front of Samar, a plate of seafood between them, as ordered, and then tore off back to the kitchen. They didn’t even hear the click of his heels this time. Dr Mufid curled his fingers into

a tense fist.

“You will be the death of me,” he said, shaking his head resolutely.

“This is exactly why I didn’t tell you anything before. I don’t want to fight with you. You’re my father and I want to make you happy. Do you think I’m so dumb that I’d want to waste my life messing around? I’m not some teenager, head over heels for a boy. I’m not being reckless. Khalil’s a brilliant, moral guy. He hates drugs more than anyone because they’ve destroyed his father and wrecked what little family he has. He hates that kind of irresponsible, wanton life, with its double-dealing. He’s a good guy, Dad, and he loves me.”

Mufid clenched his silver knife, removed the fish skin skilfully in one go and fiercely squeezed lemon over it. He didn’t want to dash his daughter’s hopes. She had transformed his life from the very first, the very prospect of her turning him into a man and, later, a father. He started taking life more seriously and curbed his dissolute ways the first night he stayed up rocking her in his arms until after the dawn call to prayer.

When Samar had turned two, he had decided to close his clinic in Old Acre and specialise in the more lucrative business of cosmetic surgery. He had truly been, till then, the doctor closest to the locals’ hearts. He felt like he was one of them and they felt the same way. He treated poor families, listened to wives complain about their husbands and kids and conjured up single sentence solutions for them. He helped wean many off drugs, though failed with many others. When one of the neighbours stole from his clinic’s supplies for a hit, he became, at last, certain that his remedy would not work on the locals. They were incurable; his very own city was in ruins. Mufid bought a high street practice, an apartment in a brand new tower block overlooking Old Acre from afar – its minarets and walls, its fortress prison and its castles’ tumbledown brickwork – and quit the scene.

He had once believed himself so faithful to that city, that he would try – with his scientific knowledge, his public lectures and his clinical work – to turn back the tide of drugs, to save its people, as Ahmad Pasha Al-Jazzar had saved them from Napoleon two centuries before. He despaired at the young addicts hunched in dark corners in some ancient alley or other, begging from him in the depths of their stupefaction. They would assail him with what sounded bizarrely like philosophy, but was nothing more than the

runaway ramblings of the unconscious.

Mufid had soon discovered that his medical theories were of no use. He couldn't save the "most beautiful of ancient cities and the most ancient of beautiful cities" from this occupation on his own. Dressed in his white coat, he held up his hands in surrender. He made his retreat, blaming them all for it. He blamed the Israeli police happy to see old Arab Acre tear itself apart. He blamed the lawless greed of the dealers, always after quick and easy money, heedless of their inevitable ends in prison or the grave. He blamed that simple stupidity which made the mind dim and the body master. He blamed the sea for the smugglers' boats, and the moon for beautifying its nights of fateful trickery. And he retreated. He saw himself as Don Quixote in a doctor's garb, sword bent and prescriptions torn on crude blades, a nightmare of arrows buried deep in the faithful horse beneath him. Addiction had burrowed its way in like a worm, money had twisted its way in like a serpent and authority ran amok like a wolf pack. In the face of a bestiary, his own will was a tiny insect, an ant.

Dr Mufid threw his knife down on the table and scooped a fresh little chunk of well-grilled fish with a crust of bread, dipped it in the small bowl of tahina and devoured it whole.

"Best way – with your hands – simple. I never understand why people eat fish like steak," said Samar, trying to aid the conversation and disperse the heavy cloud of tension. Samar wound the long spaghetti around her fork and fished out a couple of mushrooms. She was ready for it now. In fact, it seemed to her now that her endless prevarication had actually been precise preparation for the heavy scene to come.

"When Khalil found out I was your daughter, he was overjoyed. He couldn't believe it, he thought it must be God's will. He remembers you really well and says you changed his life. He told me you visited their home when he was in fourth form at school. You tried to get his dad off drugs. You saw his certificate, his grades and kissed and encouraged him. You told him nothing in the world would stand in the way of his dreams, if he studied hard and steered clear of trouble. He heard you tell his mother you wanted to cure his father's addiction at its very roots, and that you could because you knew the reasons behind it, you understood what he really needed. You swore that you would not forget her. Khalil thought about you

before every exam and test he ever took. He doesn't understand why you hold such a sacred place in his memory, but his love for you is equal to his anger for his dad. I ask just one thing, Dad."

"What?"

"Meet him. Listen to him. Talk to him."

Samar was sure her father would love Khalil if he met him and got over his father's addiction. He had no idea just how alike he and Khalil were. She wouldn't even mention how strong and handsome he was, his kind-hearted nature rivalling his strapping muscular frame that was the pride of the Arab Acre coastline, its rippling waves breaking over the gaze of the young girls. She wouldn't mention the coincidence that had brought them together, the nervousness of their first phone conversation, the little sparrows of love which came to nest and laid their eggs in their entwined hearts. She was sure his kind-hearted and decent character would please her father. Khalil would become his companion at matches, and his favoured sports pundit and political analyst around the hearth. Though he annoyed her sometimes with his endless talking, his stubbornness and intransigence, she was certain that his politeness and quick-wittedness would receive a warm welcome in her father's heart. Khalil would talk to him about his basketball training for young boys and his honours listing with the Arab teams<sup>1</sup>. He would recount his belief that when times are corrupt man cannot reform, and therefore one must focus on the next generation. He believed that whoever respects his body never destroys it, so concentrated on sport. He would not mention his "Khalil the dunk" nickname, given to him because he would always shout "dunk" on court when he wanted his students to score without touching the hoop. But he would talk to her father about his work with the housing rights committee for young people and his anger at those who offered only empty slogans and political failure. "We own property in this city and we're a third of the population," he would say, with sincerity defiant of oppression.

He would talk about the cafés filled with hopeless, unemployed youth and about his contempt for the police, who let the drug and gun dealers run riot in broad daylight. He would talk to her father about his love for his mother and sisters and the little house next to the railway station which he had bought himself and renovated with his own hands. Khalil and her father would be sure to recite the

*fatiha* together, right from the first time they met.

As Samar filled a large wine glass with water from her jug, in which the ice cubes had yet to melt, her mobile rang out “*Ayshalak Ahlaa Sneen*”<sup>2</sup> and the words “My Khalil” flashed across the screen. The phone vibrated, like it was dancing to a different rhythm and, despite its diminutive size, shook the table. She rejected the call. Now was not the time.

Mufid looked at the strange blue light of the screen and noticed the repeated pulse of the name. He grabbed the jug of lemonade roughly and a mix of mint leaves and juice tumbled into his glass, lemon slices bobbing to the top. He drank.

He and Saber had been friends since childhood. Their fathers had had a special friendship. They had both fled the village of Samaria for Acre after the '48 Nakba. Mufid's father had got himself one of the shops offered to refugees and had opened a grocery, while Saber's father had worked as a building labourer on the new Jewish settlements.

They had played together down by the brown, rundown alleys whose renovation was forbidden. He remembered one time when they had played hide and seek with the other neighbourhood kids. When it was his turn to be “it”, he had leaned against the wall, covered his eyes with his left hand and counted to ten. He had then set off after his friends to catch them before they beat him to his house. He caught all of them except Saber, who had run off, just disappeared. They had all been very worried and Mufid insisted that all the neighbourhood boys should go in search of him. They found him at the harbour, filling his basket with the little sardines sent over from Gaza. Dinner was at his house that night.

Saber was goodhearted, like all the locals the drug dealers managed to cast their spell over. He had encountered them at a desperate time, when he was laid off after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in '82. He was invited to a party for the élite, where everything was free. Crystal meth was the latest thing. It seemed to turn him from some discarded wage slave into the king of the world. It was his introduction to the abyss. He ended up feeling his way along limestone walls, his first thought each morning was how to score. He stole his wife's jewellery, and the furniture, took his kids and ran off to a far-away apartment and a pit of despair. Saber became the dealers' plaything, with prison a yearly residency. Even this could not wean him

off the stuff and he fell into one dark pit after another. He wound up sitting on the roadside, his gaunt brown face craning down into the never-ending void. When Saber had tumbled into these depths of dependency, Mufid was the only one to seek him out. He was lost even to himself. Mufid discovered the catastrophic downfall of a childhood friend and was both enraged at his weakness and full of pity – for him and for his family, for the children trying to survive the storm, deprived of their steadfast and courageous mother.

Samar returned to her knife and fork, leaving her glass alone, which had made her sweat with the sudden chill of the water. Mufid threw his crust of bread to one side as the phone rang out “*Ayshalak*” once again. Once more Elissa had no time to finish her tune.

“Why don’t you answer it?” Dr Mufid asked.

“Because I’m sitting here with you,” his daughter answered.

“So, put it on silent.”

“I want to be able to hear it. I don’t like it on silent.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to accept him.”

“He doesn’t bother me. I’ve known him since he was a kid.”

“He’s a man now.”

“For God’s sake, what do you want, Samar? Put me out of my misery!”

“A happy, decent life. I want Khalil.”

Khalil’s name danced on the screen and Elissa insisted on singing her promises again. Samar picked it up, pressed green and answered in a calm, modest manner. Khalil’s voice was strained and sorrowful. His tearful tone made it evident he had been crying. He told her his father had just died in hospital from an overdose.

A fateful meal.

“Wajba Masiriyya” (A Fateful Meal) is from the author’s latest short story collection *Bayna al-Buyut* (*Between the Houses*), published by Dar Malaamih (Cairo–Beirut), 2011.

1 ‘Arab teams’ in Israel means the Palestinian Arab teams.

2 “I’ll live the sweetest years for you”. “Ayshalak” was a 2002 hit for Lebanese pop singer Elissa