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☞ The Ostrich ☞

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‘**Y**OU LOOK LIKE SOMETHING fresh out of the Third World’, he said and I let myself feel hurt, glancing downwards so that he would not see the look in my eyes. I didn’t answer his taunting smile flippantly like he expected me to, didn’t say, ‘And where do *you* come from, or have you forgotten?’ I let him put his arm around me by way of greeting and gave him the trolley with my suitcases to push.

He must have seen me first, I thought, while I was scanning the faces of the people who were waiting at the terminal, he must have been watching me all the time. And I suddenly felt ashamed not only for myself but for everyone else who arrived with me on that aeroplane. Our shabby luggage, our stammering in front of the immigration officer, our clothes that seemed natural a few hours back, now crumpled and out of place.

So I didn’t tell him about the baby though I imagined I would tell him right away in the airport as soon as we met. Nor did I confess that at times I longed not to return, that in Khartoum I felt everything was real and our life in London a hibernation.

I had to remember to walk next to him not loiter behind. I was reluctant to leave the other passengers. A few hours ago we were a cohesive unit, smug and loud at Khartoum airport, the lucky few heading north. In the aeroplane we ate the same food, faced the same direction and acknowledged each other with nods and small smiles. Now we were to separate, dazzled by the bright lights of the terminal, made humble by the plush carpeted floors, chastened by the perfect announcements one after the other,

words we could understand, meanings we could not. From the vacuum of the terminal where all sound was absorbed we would disperse into the cloudy city and soon forget the pride with which we purchased our tickets and left our home. He dislikes it if I walk a few steps behind him, what would people think, he says, that we are backward, barbaric. He sneers at the Arab women in black *abayas* walking behind their men. Oppressed, that's what people would think of them. Here they respect women, treat them as equal, we must be the same he says. So I have to be careful not to fall behind him in step and must bear the weight of his arm around my shoulder, another gesture he had decided to imitate to prove that though we are Arabs and Africans we can be modern too.

We waited outside the terminal for the Air Bus to arrive. Only two months away and I had forgotten how wet this country could be. Already my painted toes stuck out of my soaked sandals, a mockery. He looked well, he told me his research was progressing, he had been to Bath for a conference where his supervisor read a paper. 'It had an acknowledgment of me at the bottom of the first page', he said, 'because I did the simulation work on the computer. In italics, the author thanks Majdy El-Shaykh and so on'.

Majdy will write his own papers one day, he will complete his Ph.D. and have Dr. before his name. His early doubts, his fears of failure are receding away. I should have felt proud. I supposed I would one day, but at the moment I felt tired and insincere. I strained to feel the baby move inside me but there was only silence.

'You are envied Sumra', my mother said, 'envied for living abroad where it is so much more comfortable than here. Don't complain, don't be ungrateful'. But when she saw the resentment on my face she softened and said, 'It will be easier when you have the baby. Something to fill your day, you will have no time to be homesick then'. Yet I imagined that I could just not come back, slip into my old life, month after month and he would forget me in time, send me my divorce paper as an afterthought, marry someone else perhaps. He would marry an English woman with yellow

hair and blue eyes. I catch him thinking that sometimes, if he had waited a little, not rushed into this marriage, he could have married a woman like the ones he admires on TV. We married so that he would not bring back a foreign wife with him like so many Sudanese students did or worse, marry her and never come back. Who wants to go back to the Sudan after tasting the good life of the West? With a Sudanese wife though he would surely come back. This is what his family told me, half in jest, half in earnest. So I was flattered with presents, a big wedding, a good-looking educated bridegroom and the chance to go abroad. No reason for me to refuse. But perhaps they cannot twist fate, perhaps I am not strong enough to hold him to his roots.

If I find a way to live here forever, he says, if only I could get a work permit. I can't imagine I could go back, back to the petrol queues, books in the library that are years old, computers that don't have electricity to work on or paper to print on. Teach dim-witted students who memorised their way into university, who never held a calculator in their hands before. And a salary, a monthly salary that is less than what an unemployed person gets here in a week, calculate it if you don't believe me.

He had answers to all the objections I raised. Morality, what morality do we have when our politicians are corrupt, when we buy arms to fuel a civil war instead of feeding the hungry? And don't talk of racism! We are more racist than the British, how have we Northerners always treated the Southern Sudanese?

The bus came at last and we sat upstairs while the green countryside around Heathrow drifted past. The green leaves in Khartoum are a different green, sharper, drier, arrogant in the midst of the desert heat. I know this bus, I know this route: it is as familiar as a film one sees several times. Two years in London and when I come back after two months in Khartoum I feel like I am starting all over again. Two months wiped out two years, and I am a stranger once again.

'Did you meet anyone on the plane that you knew?' Majdy asked. One always does travelling to and from Khartoum, a small city with many familiar faces. I lied and said no. I lied and did not

tell him that on the first part of the journey from Khartoum to Cairo, I met the Ostrich.

I never could train myself to remember his real name. I always thought of him as the Ostrich and maybe I even called him that to his face, although I have no memory of his response. More likely I told my friends and was probably disappointed that they didn't start using that name too.

He really did look like an ostrich with his thin protruding neck and his long dangling arms. He walked head craned forward, raised eyebrows, wide tentative steps. His hair was light in colour, sticking out in a large Afro that swayed when he moved, matted flat at the back of his head as if he was too lazy to reach that far with his comb. It was when we were in our second year at University that he descended upon our class, after we had sorted ourselves out into groups, after we had set labels on each other. He should have been in his fourth year, but he lost two years when a speeding car knocked him down. His body healed, but his eyes were permanently damaged and they remained large, bleary and unfocused. They placed him in a world which he alone inhabited, where everything was fuzzy and everyone saw him as unclearly as he saw them.

'Why were your bags so heavy?' Majdy was asking.

'Because of the grapefruit I got you, bags of peanuts and the white plaited cheese that you like'.

'So from the land of famine you bring me food'. Again the sarcasm, the mocking tone but I knew he was pleased. They were things that he liked, things he secretly missed.

'It is not as bad as they make it out to be on TV here, or not in Khartoum anyway. Normal, I suppose, weddings, funerals, but still a feeling of depression. Everything is so expensive, the whole concept of money has changed. And everyone wants to leave. Every family I visited had someone abroad. In the Gulf, in Egypt, in America. Remember your neighbours Ali and Samir?'

'The ones with the white Mercedes'.

'Mercedes or not they're away too. Ali in Bahrain and Samir in Norway. Imagine Norway where he had to learn the language, and his sister and her husband are busy filling in forms to immi-

grate to Australia'. I laughed. It was like a scramble.

'That's what I keep telling you. There's no future back there and if people who were much better off than we were are not coping, how can we ever cope if we go back? I am doing the right thing, sticking it out here in any way that I can'.

The Ostrich had a brother who worked in the Gulf. He sent him a watch which could beep. I remember the Ostrich bringing it up to his nose twisting his face sideways so that he could peer at the time. It was a novelty for most of us, the first digital watch that we ever saw. The alarm would go off at the end of the lecture, a reminder to the teacher to end the class. We would giggle then, us girls sitting in the front row. We always had the front rows. We would reserve the seats in advance, throwing our copybooks on the desk, throwing extra copybooks for our friends. There were two hundred of us in one class and we would sit on the painful wooden seats. Numb behinds, arms brushing arms, knees against knees. And I remember the girls who would come in late, their footsteps loud in the hushed room, walking up a few steps and slipping in beside their friends. The Ostrich always floated in late and sat at the back where the blackboard was out of focus and he could not take down any notes, where he poked pencils in his hair, his ears, his nose and waited for his watch to go beep. It never occurred to us to offer him a seat in front.

He never inspired the self-conscious concern reserved for the handicapped. We did not compete to offer him help. I remember him once telling me that I looked nice in blue; I had laughed and asked him how he could tell or that he would say the same thing to a donkey given the chance. I was cruel to him. Sometimes I looked into his eyes and they were beautiful, amber and clear and mysterious like a new-born child's. Welcoming, like nests of whirling honey. Sometimes I felt sickened by their blariness, repulsed by the long eye lashes caked with sleep.

I had forgotten how small the flat was, how thin the walls were. Student accommodation. The cleanliness comes as a surprise, this clean land free of dust and insects. Everywhere carpet and everything compact like boxes inside boxes, the houses stuck

together defensively. September and it is already winter, already cold. The window, how many hours did I spend looking out of this window? For two years I looked out at strangers, unable to make stories about them, unable to tell who was rich who was poor, who mended pipes and who healed the ill. And sometimes (this was particularly disturbing) not even knowing who was a man and who was a woman. Strangers I must respect, strangers who were better than me. This is what Majdy says. Every one of them is better than us. See the man who is collecting the rubbish, he is not ravaged by malaria, anaemia, bilharzia, he can read the newspaper, write a letter, he has a television in his house and his children go to a school where they get taught from glossy books. And if they are clever, if they show a talent in music or science they will be encouraged and they might be important people one day. I look at the man who collects the rubbish and I am ashamed that he picks bags with our filth in them. When I pass him on the road I avert my eyes.

And now that I am back, the room rises up to strangle me. The window beckons and it is already dark outside. I was wrong to return. All the laughter and confidence has been left behind. What am I doing here? A stranger suddenly appearing on the stage, a stranger with no part to play, no lines to read. Majdy points out the graffiti for me, look, 'Black Bastards' on the wall of the mosque, 'Paki go home' on the newsagent's door, do you know what it means, who wrote it? I breed a new fear of not knowing, never knowing who these enemies are. How would I recognize them while they can so easily recognize me. The woman who sells me stamps (she is old, I must respect her age and not think such thoughts), the librarian who could not spell my name while the queue behind me grew (I will be reading her books for free), or the bus driver I angered by not giving him the correct change (it is my fault, I must obey the sign on the door). Which one of them in the secrecy of their heart agrees with what is written on the walls?

There are others, Majdy's new friends, so and so is good he says, friendly. He invites them here, men with kind eyes and women who like the food I cook. But I must be wary, there are things I mustn't say when they are here. I mentioned polygamy

once saying we shouldn't condemn something that Allah had permitted, remarking that Majdy's father had a second wife. When they left he slapped me and fool that I was I didn't understand what I had done wrong. Why, why I asked and he slapped me more. It is worse when you don't understand, he said, at least have a feeling that you have said something wrong. They can forgive you for your ugly colour, your thick lips and rough hair, but you must think modern thoughts, be like them in the inside if you can't be from the outside. And what stuck in my mind after the stinging ebbed away, after the apologetic caresses, what clung to me and burned me time and time again, were his comments about how I looked. I would stand in front of the mirror and Allah forgive me, hate the face I was born with.

You look beautiful in blue the Ostrich said and when I was cruel he said, but I can be a judge of voices can I not? I didn't ask him what he thought of my voice, I walked away. There were others whose admiration I sought. It must have been in the evening that I was wearing blue. It was white *tobes* in the morning, coloured ones for the evening. The evening lectures were special, leisurely, there was time after lunch to shower, to have a nap. To walk from the hostels in groups and pairs, past the young boy selling peanuts, past the closed post-office, past the *neem* trees with the broken benches underneath. Jangly earrings, teeth snapping chewing gum and kohl in our eyes. The *tobes* slipping off our carefully combed hair, lifting our hands putting them back on again. Tightening the material, holding it under our left arm. I miss these gestures already left behind. (Majdy says: If you cover your hair they'll think I was forcing you to do that. They won't believe it is what you want.) So I must walk unclothed feeling the material on my hair, on my arms, tilting my head a little so that it would not fall, lifting my hands to adjust an imaginary *tobe*.

The sunset prayers were a break in the middle of these evening lectures. One communist lecturer keen to assert his atheism ignored the rustling of the notebooks, the shuffling of restless feet, the screech of the Ostrich's alarm. Only when someone called out, 'A break for the prayers!', did he stop teaching. I will always see the grass, patches of dry yellow, the rugs of palm-fibre

laid out. They curl at the edges and when I bend to put my forehead on the ground I can smell the grass underneath. Now that we have a break we must hurry, for it is as if the birds have heard the *azan* and started to pray before us. I can hear the crescendo of their praises, see the branches bow down low to receive them as they dart to the tree. Feel their urgency, they know how quickly the sun slips away and then it will be too late. We wash from a corner tap taking turns. The Ostrich squats and puts his whole head under the tap, shakes it backwards and drops of water balance on top of his hair. I borrow a mug from the canteen and I am proud, a little vain that I can wash my hands, face, arms and feet with only one mug. Sandals discarded, we line up and the boy from the canteen joins us, his torn clothes stained with tea. Another lecturer, not finding room on the mat, spreads his handkerchief on the grass. If I was not praying I would stand with my feet crunching the gravel stones and watch the straight lines, the men in front, the colourful *tobes* behind. I would know that I was part of this harmony, that I needed no permission to belong. Here in London the birds pray discreetly and I pray alone. A printed booklet, not a *muezzin*, tell me the times. Here in London Majdy does not pray. This country, he says, bit by bit chips away at your faith.

There were unwashed dishes in the sink, fragile broken egg shells for me to crumple in my hands before I threw them away, dirty socks on the floor, on Majdy's desk empty mugs of tea, the twisted cores of apples. I started to tidy up, he switched on the TV. Computer print-outs lay in piles on the floor. Many evenings before I went to Khartoum, he would work on the desk banging numbers on his calculator, grinding his bare feet on the carpet while I sat and cut the perforated edges of the sheets, strings of paper with holes. I played with them in my hands, twisting them into shapes, making bracelets and rings like a child. And these were the happy moments of our marriage, when the world outside was forgotten, when his concentration in his work was so intense that he would whistle the tunes of Sudanese songs we knew long ago.

Two months have yielded plenty of computer printouts. When I tidied up, when I unpacked, when he rose from the television and settled at his desk with a mug of tea, a feast awaited me. A feast of the sounds of paper separating from paper, holes settling upon holes, chains of entwined crispness. Now I could sit on the floor with the paper in front of me, lean my back on Majdy's chair and unroll my memories, conjure them up and spread them out. The Ostrich sitting on the bumper of a car parked inside the University, a number of us around him standing against its windows. Notebooks in our arms, those thin notebooks with a spiral wire holding the pages, a drawing of the University on the front cover. What was the weather like? Hot, very hot we can smell each other's sweat. Or one of those bright winter days when the sun softens its blows and a breeze whispers around the trees. Dust on the car, inside it, dust clinging to the Ostrich's hair, dust climbing between our toes. The shadows of the tree dance around the Ostrich, elusive patches of playful shade. What did we speak of in those days, when everything seemed possible and we were naive, believing the University an end not a means? 'Some Emir in the Gulf bought a horse in England for ten million pounds. Imagine ten million in hard currency. How many hospitals could this money have built, schools, roads. Shoes for me, says the Ostrich stretching his feet, his sandals torn, his toes coarse and gnarled, feet that could withstand burning tiles... Wish for a coup, the first thing they'll do is close the University, or better still a reason for a strike a month or so before the exams. Postponement and no Fiscal Policy... What has that man been going on about all year? Swear I saw last year's paper and couldn't even tell which parts of the lecture notes the answers came from'.

Cinnamon tea, sweet in chipped glasses. Roasted watermelon seeds, the salt dissolving in our mouths, the empty shells falling around like leaves. The Ostrich, a forgotten shell on his lower lip, slides down from the car's bumper, raises his arms, head back and turns himself around in circles. Under his arms there are twin patches of wetness, his weak eyes brave the midday sun. Laughter bubbles inside him letting loose the shell from his lip. 'The fan', he says, laughing more, bending forward and slapping his hands to-

gether. 'The fan in the common room fell down from the ceiling. You should have seen it. It went whizzing around the room like a top'. We exclaim, we ask questions, no one was hurt, hardly anyone was in the room at the time. He found it funny but I remember my thrill at the rebellious fan unleashed from its orbit, destructive, chaotic. Perhaps this is the essence of my country, what I miss most. Those everyday miracles, the poise between normality and chaos. The awe, the breathtaking gratitude for simple things. A place where people say Allah alone is eternal. And the Ostrich laughed at the fallen fan because he was part of that essence, inseparable from it, as if he were its manifestation.

I weave paper ribbons with holes, chains, the edges of each sheet are sharp. Grapefruit juice, no one buys for themselves alone, always sharing, competing in generosity (our downfall Majdy says, the downfall of a whole people, a primitive tribal mentality and so inefficient). Pink grapefruit juice, frothy at the top, jagged pieces of ice struck out of large slabs with particles of sand frozen inside. 'Am Ali, the man who makes the juice, has to hold down the cover of the mixer. He can make only two glasses at a time, when the electricity is cut he can make none. Aubergine sandwiches, the baked plant crushed to a pulp, red hot with pepper, the bread in thin loaves. Bread is rationed now. I stood in a queue for bread every morning in the two months I was back in Khartoum.

Coming across the Ostrich in the library, his nose literally in a large book. Not for him Cost-Benefit Analysis, Rostow's take-off, Pareto's curves. He would be reading poetry from old musty books that perhaps no one looked at except him. He once looked up at me as I passed, his eyes weird and bulging from the strain he was putting them through. He quoted the Andalusian poet Ibn Zaydun,

*Yes, I have remembered you with longing, at al-Zahra,
when the horizon was bright and the face of the earth gave
pleasure,
and the breeze was soft in the late afternoon,
as if it had pity on me.*

I smiled at him then, wondering if he could see my smile, knowing he was memorizing the poem.

The Ostrich picked his nose on prime time television. What he dislodged he rolled leisurely between his thumb and forefinger like a grain of rice, a seed. Held it up, peered at it closely, narrowing his eyes and then flicked it away. We hooted with laughter at his face as we girls crowded around the black and white TV set, cross-legged on the floor, on each other's laps on wobbling metal chairs, Vaseline glistening on our arms and rollers in our hair. It was a game show, a poetry competition with the flamboyant title, 'Knights in the Arena'. When a competitor recites a verse, his opponent must recite one that starts with the last letter of the last word in that verse. The skill was in memory and the ability to throw verses at your opponent which end with the same letter, depleting his particular stock.

The Ostrich excelled. Leaning back on his chair, his fingers in his nose and in his ears, oblivious to the cameras, to the hundreds who were watching, he gave us the poetry of the pre-Islamic Arabs, their pride in the strength of their tribe. Lovers weeping at the remains of the camp fires from which their beloved had gone away, the Sufi poems of self-annihilation and longing to join the Almighty.

Alienated in his own hazy world, the Ostrich was free. And when he won the prize of fifty pounds (a good amount in those days) and a trophy, he took as many of us as he could to a restaurant by the Nile, where we ate kebabs and watched the moon's reflection flutter in the running water below.

It was late, footsteps no longer sounded in the corridor outside, the heating had gone off and it was cold. I went to get my shawl from the bedroom, it was folded in the cupboard just as I had left it weeks ago. I wrapped it around me and sat cross-legged again on the floor. In the final exams the Ostrich sat next to me in the hall. *Number three*, he whispered, *Number three*, his head on top of his paper, his eyes strangely oscillating. I saw the invigilator look up towards him, towards us. I had helped him before: lending him my notes, nagging him for days to bring them

back only to discover he had passed them on to someone else, and in the exams where we always seemed to sit next to each other, whispering a few helpful words here and there whenever I got the chance. That last time though, I peeled my hand off my paper and saw that the ink had been smudged, the paper made thin by my sweat. (Typical inefficiency, Majdy would say, simply false pride, he should have been specially examined, someone reading out the questions to him, noting down his answers.) Shut up, I whispered back, shut up, and when the invigilator walked past I stopped him and complained about the Ostrich. They moved him away, he protested, his eyes darting wildly out of control as if he could not hold them still. He swore, they were harsh, insistent. And his chair remained overturned next to me until the end of the exam. Why, my friends asked me, why tell on him like that? I graduated, he did not, and for years I did not see him until I met him today on the aeroplane.

But it was not today any more, it was yesterday, for the watch on my wrist showed 2 AM; midnight London time. I moved the hands slowly, pushing time back. Majdy had a glazed look from too much concentration, shiny dark grooves under his eyes. He picked the pile of printouts from the floor, bald of their edges and began to tidy them up, sort them out into piles. Some he will not want at all, I will use them to line up drawers and give them to the daughter of the Malaysian couple who live on the ground floor. She likes to draw on them.

'I was afraid you would not come back', Majdy suddenly said. And I wondered if this was the right time so late at night to talk of such things, things that would drive the sleep from our eyes. When I looked at him, he seemed tired and weak and this made him look more beautiful than he had looked at the airport. I remembered the stories his sisters told me about how he was when he first came here. Despairing of ever passing his exams, ever catching up with the work. And now he was nearly through. Me, the rescue package his family sent him, has achieved its purpose. 'I work better when you are next to me', he was saying, 'It is easier to keep awake. When I saw you in the airport today, you brought back many memories to me. Of people I love and I have

left behind, of what I once was years ago. I envy you, you find that funny don't you, but it's true, I envy you because you are displaced yet intact, unchanged while I question everything and I am not sure of anything any more'.

And it was only then, late that night, when he came and sat near me on the floor that I told him about our baby.

That night I dreamt of the Ostrich's bride. She was, like she had told me in the aeroplane, at University with me. In the dream we were in one of the University's lecture rooms, the fans circling above our head. I made a chain from the perforated edges of the computer paper and gave it to her. She put her feet through it, wearing it like an ankle bracelet and I was anxious that the paper might tear but she laughed at my fears.

It was the Ostrich who recognized me first in the aeroplane, 'Sumra', he said, and when I looked blankly at him, my hand luggage in front of me, trying to find the way to my seat, 'Don't you remember me Sumra?' His hair was cut short, his eyes behind dark spectacles and I could tell that he was newly married. From the henna intricately designed on his bride's palms and on her feet up to her ankles, from the gold bracelets on her arms, the shimmering material of her new *tobe*, I could tell they were on their honeymoon. We exchanged news the way people do when they have not met for a long time. Is this happiness then, the sudden rush of recognition, the warmth, the shy laughter? Swapping news of others that we mutually knew. Could I have ever believed that the word happiness can be cramped in a few minutes, a few unexpected minutes in the narrow aisle of an aeroplane?

'My brother set up a video shop in Medani which I run', the Ostrich said and we both laughed again as if it was something funny, as if we shared a private joke. 'Hindi films are popular', he rambled in his Ostrich way, 'Nobody understands the language but they keep borrowing out the films'.

I remember you from University, she interrupted us, I was in my first year when you were in your last. You don't remember, do you? Her confident smile, her almost flirty manner. I disliked her, disliked her pushy manners, disliked her for making him hide his

eyes and cut his hair. And it was uncomfortable trying to remember her face, vaguely familiar though it was, trying to suppress a hurt vanity at the reminder of the disparity in our ages.

Jealousy is more unwelcome than grief. It took me unaware. Tripped me and I fell into a pool of thoughts that were unreasonable, that should never have been mine. Would she sit on his lap and clean his eyelashes with her manicured hands. Would he write her notes in his large handwriting, the grotesque letters uncontrolled by the lines he couldn't see. When I was a child there was an old swing in our backyard. I resented its cumbersome chains and its wooden seat which left splinters in my hand. Only when other children came to visit, only when I saw their legs swing high, heard their confident laughter, did I fight for a chance to play on my swing.

In my seat with the hum of the aircraft in my ears I fought alone my morning sickness and watched the clouds out of the window swirl around. She passed me twice, leaving behind a faint smell of sandalwood, a tinkle of her bracelets, a raised eyebrow, an attractive smile. When the aeroplane landed in Cairo, they came to say good-bye. No addresses exchanged, no promises made. New passengers boarded and took their place, an Egyptian lady and her daughter who kept writing in a small notebook. And when the aeroplane took off again, I left the Ostrich and Africa behind me as I had done once before.

I walked the High Street and looked at the shops. Shelves stacked with food, rows and rows of soft drinks, even the sugar in different types. For these things we had left our home, for these things I was envied. I walked down rows and rows of detergents, of toilet rolls, of frozen meats, of insect repellents. People hurried past, time the only thing not in abundance here. I got in the way of others, fiddled with my change at the check-out counter, blocked their way as I tried to read the headlines of newspapers I did not wish to buy. My reflection caught me unaware in the pharmacy's window. Younger than I imagined myself to be, wide startled eyes watery from the cold. And then a realization, warm like a mother's embrace, soft like the afternoon breeze in Ibn

Zaydun's poem. I remembered why the Ostrich's bride had seemed familiar. She was like a younger version of myself.