

Yalo did not understand what was happening.

The young man stood before the interrogator and closed his eyes. He always closed his eyes when he faced danger, when he was alone, and when his mother . . . On that day too, the morning of Thursday, December 22, 1993, he closed his eyes involuntarily.

Yalo did not understand why everything was white.

He saw the white interrogator, sitting behind a white table, the sun refracting on the glass window behind him, and his face bathed in reflected light. All Yalo saw were halos of light and a woman walking through the city streets, tripping on her shadow.

Yalo closed his eyes for a moment, or so he thought. This young man with his knitted eyebrows and long tan face, his slender height, closed his eyes for a moment before reopening them. But here, in the Jounieh police station, he closed his eyes and saw crossed lines around two lips that moved as if whispering. He looked at his handcuffed wrists and felt that the sun that obscured the face of the interrogator struck him in the eyes, so he closed them.

The young man stood before the interrogator at ten o'clock that cold morning and saw the sun refracted on the window, shining on the white head of the man whose mouth opened with questions. Yalo closed his eyes.

Yalo did not understand what the interrogator was shouting about.

He heard a voice shouting at him, "Open your eyes, man!" He opened them and light entered, into their depths like flaming skewers. He discovered that he had had his eyes closed for a long time, that he had spent half his life in the dark, and he saw himself as a blind man sees the night.

Yalo did not understand why she had come, but when he saw her he dropped onto the chair.

When he entered the room, the nameless girl was not there. He entered stumbling because he was blinded by the sun refracted on the glass. He stood in the whiteness, his hands cuffed and his body shivering with sweat. He was not afraid, even though the interrogator would write in his report that the suspect was trembling with fear. But Yalo was not; he was shivering with sweat. Sweat dripped from every part of him, and his clothes were spotted with the odd-smelling moisture emerging from his pores. Yalo felt naked under his long black coat, and smelled the odor of another person. He discovered that he did not know this man called Daniel, also known as Yalo.

The girl with no name arrived. Perhaps she had already been in the interrogation room, but he had not seen her when he came in. He saw her and dropped onto the chair, feeling that his legs had betrayed him. A slight dizziness came over him, and since he was unable to open his eyes, he closed them.

"Open your eyes, buddy!" shouted the interrogator. So he opened them, and saw an apparition that resembled the girl with no name. She said that she had no name. But Yalo knew everything. While she was dozing, her body delicate and naked, he opened her black leather bag and wrote down her name, address, telephone number, and everything else.

Yalo did not understand why she said she had no name.

Her breathing was uneven and the breeze around her face seemed to

suffocate her. She was unable to speak, but she was able to say this: “I don’t have a name.” Yalo bowed his head and took her.

There in the cottage, below the Villa Gardenia owned by Monsieur Michel Salloum, there, when he asked for her name, she said in a voice filled with gaps, lacking the air that was closing her lungs, “I don’t have a name. Please, no names.” “Fine,” he said. “My name is Yalo. Don’t forget my name.”

Yet she stood here, her name beside her. When the interrogator asked for her name, she didn’t hesitate before answering, “Shirin Raad.” She did not tell the interrogator, “Please, no names.” She did not stretch out her hand as she had done there in the cottage where Yalo had slept with her after she had stretched out her incense-scented arms. He had taken her palms and put them over his eyes, then started to kiss her white forearms, inhaling the fragrance of incense and musk. He inhaled the fragrance of her black hair and buried his face in it, intoxicated. He told her that he was drunk on incense, and she smiled as if a mask had vanished from her face. Yalo saw her smile through the shadows the candlelight threw against the wall. It was her first smile on that night of fear.

What was Shirin doing here?

When he opened his eyes after the interrogator’s shouts, he saw himself in Ballouna. He told her, “Come,” and she walked behind him. They walked from the pine forest below the Church of St. Nicholas and climbed the hill to the villa. The girl fell to the ground, or so it seemed to Yalo, so he turned to raise her, grasped her hand, and they walked on. When she fell a second time, he bent over her again, to carry her, but she shrank from him and stood up. She grasped the trunk of a pine tree and froze where she stood, panting heavily. He offered her his hand. She took it and walked beside him. He listened to the sound of her breathing and her panting fear.

When they reached the cottage, he left her at the door, entered and lit

a candle, tried to arrange his rumpled clothing and accessories, yet abandoned this quickly, realizing it would take too much time. When he went back to her, he found her resting her head on the leaf of the open door, making crying sounds.

“Don’t be afraid,” he told her. “Come. You’ll sleep here, I’ll make you a bed on the floor, don’t be afraid.”

She went in hesitantly and stood in the middle of the room, as if looking for a chair to sit on. Yalo jumped up and removed his pants from the chair and threw them on the bed, but instead of sitting down she remained standing and confused.

“Do you want tea?” he asked her.

Instead of answering, she reached out pleadingly. Yalo took her outstretched hands, but when he saw the fear forming concentric circles in the depths of her little eyes, he drew back. He said he was afraid, he would say that he felt fear, but at that moment he did not know, he did not feel afraid before writing the word. He said it and felt it, then wrote it. Today, when he remembered her little eyes in the trembling candlelight, when he saw how the pupils of her eyes shrank into concentric circles, he felt fear, and said that he was afraid of her eyes.

When he drew back, he saw her coming toward him. Her hands were suspended in the air as if she were appealing to him for help. He came close to her and took her palms and placed them over his eyes, and she became quiet. He held her hands and felt their trembling, as if the lines of fear that throbbled within each of them had become like the arteries that circulate tension throughout the body. He placed her palms over his eyes, and saw the darkness, and felt how her body calmed down and quieted, and gave off the scent of incense.

“What’s that sweet smell?” asked Yalo, drawing back. He sat on the chair and covered his face with his hands as though exhausted, and remained

there unmoving. The candlelight flickered in the piney breeze rising from the forest. The girl with no name stood beside him to regain the breeze fear had stolen from her when she saw the black phantom approaching, from the car stopped at the corner of the dense pine forest, below the Orthodox Church.

Why was she wearing her short skirt that showed her thighs?

She sat in front of the interrogator in her short red skirt and crossed her legs, and spoke as if she had swallowed all the air in the interrogation room.

Yalo had told her not to wear short skirts. “What is that supposed to be, huh?” But she did not answer. She looked down at her knees, which is where he was also looking, and her lips moved in the hint of a smile, and she shook her head. They went out together in the morning and he stopped a taxi for Beirut for her, then went back to his cottage.

But now she sat, wearing that same red skirt, or one like it, her legs crossed, speaking without any stammer or hesitation, as she had done there.

They were in the car like two shadows. From the top of his lookout hill, Yalo could see only the man’s gray hair. Yalo aimed the beam of his flashlight at the car just as the shots were fired. He felt, as he dodged among the pine trees, carrying the Russian Kalashnikov, and the flashlight, that he was going hunting. The cars were traps for prey like him. He was like a sparrow hunter, he knew the seasons, and enjoyed them. This is what he tried to explain to the interrogator. He said that the point for a hunter like him was not robbery or women, but pleasure. The pleasure of hunting, the love stolen inside the cars with sealed windows, and the pleasure of the first moment, the moment the light fell on the two faces, or on the hand reaching for the thighs, or on the head bent to the breasts free of the folds of clothing.

The beam that Yalo aimed hit its target directly. Yalo was not playing

with the light, it immediately hit the right spot. Had the beam not hit its target, he would have considered his adventure a failure; he would have retraced his steps or hid in wait for the car to pass, withdrawing quietly, dragging his failure behind him.

The first shot, or nothing; that was his hunting philosophy. For him the best thing was the gray hair that shone in the light. The best moments were men's heads covered with white hair as they bent over a forearm or a thigh. The beam penetrated the old gray hair, lit it up, and froze it in place. The light entered the bending white and drew a complete circle around it. The beam lifted up from the gray hair and moved to the other side, drawing eyes, and there were the woman's eyes, dilated with a mixture of fear and desire.

The light came closer. The phantom emerged after turning on the flashlight and playing it over the car. In the first moments of the hunt, Yalo focused the light, making it sharp and narrow as a ray. After the eyes were frozen, he enlarged the beam and flashed it around as he approached the closed window and rapped it with the muzzle of his rifle. The window opened and revealed terror. The phantom's head drew close to the man's window, but he did not allow the woman's eyes to escape his own alert hawk eyes, wide open in the dark. He penetrated the dark and flashed the beam of light, and the shadows rose. He approached within the shadows, and rapped the window with the muzzle of his rifle, and ordered it open. He looked into the woman's eyes and contemplated how wide they were, with the pupils shrunk to nothing. Then he withdrew quietly with his booty: a wristwatch, a ring, a gold chain, a necklace, and a few dollars, nothing more. Of course. Once he had asked a man to remove his necktie because he felt that fear was choking the man through the necktie that hung over his opened belt, like a noose. Once he had asked a woman to give him her yellow shawl, for no reason at all. But he wanted nothing more; more came to him with no strain

or effort. Yalo was not looking for anything more, but he did take it when it showed up, because he had learned from his torment in the city known as Paris never to refuse grace.

Things were different with Shirin, however.

Why did she say he had raped her in the forest?

“I did not –” Yalo said, but heard the interrogator’s shout:

“You confessed, you dog! And now you say no. You know what happens to liars!”

Yalo was not lying, however. It was true that he had agreed that what he had done could be called rape, but . . . it was not a question of that night. Shirin had not leveled any charge against him having to do with that night, only with the days that came after.

Things had been different there with her. Yalo had not known the right words to use to tell her that the smell of incense her arms gave off that night had surrounded him like white clouds and then penetrated his very spinal column.

When he told her that he loved her from his spinal column – this was three months after the forest – she laughed so hard that tears ran down her face, and she kept having to blow her nose. At first he thought she was crying, and he bent over the table loaded with appetizers at the Albert Restaurant in Achrafieh, then he saw that she was laughing.

“I’m laughing at *you*,” she said. “You’re an idiot, all appearance and nothing more. What is this third-rate crap?”

And she started to speak English, telling him, “Finished, you must understand, everything is finished.”

He said that he did not understand English, so she spoke to him in French.

“*C’est fini, Monsieur Yalo.*”

“What’s *fini*?” he asked.

“Us,” she said.

“So you want to *finish* me?” he asked.

“Please, Monsieur Yalo, I can’t go on like this, please leave me alone and go, let’s understand each other, tell me what you want and it’s yours.”

She opened her bag and brought out a handful of dollars.

Why had she told the interrogator that he had slapped her because she refused to eat?

No, he had not slapped her because she refused to eat sparrows, as she had alleged to the interrogator.

“Who would eat music?” she said when she saw the plate of fried sparrows swimming in a broth of lemon and garlic.

“I don’t eat sparrows – it’s wrong!”

Yalo prepared a morsel of a small sparrow wrapped in bread and dipped in sauce, and brought it near her mouth.

“*Non, non*, please!”

But the hand that brought the bread-wrapped sparrow stayed there, outstretched, then began to approach her mouth and hover around it, before brushing it against the closed lips. The girl gave in, she opened her mouth, accepted the morsel, and began to chew, yet the muscles of her mouth contracted in repulsion.

She swallowed the sparrow and then stopped eating and talking.

Yalo kept drinking arak and gazing at her face. Her face was as small as a small white moon hung over her long neck. He wanted to tell her all about the moon. He wanted to tell her how he had discovered the moon and the stars and the Milky Way, which looked like a swath of milk in the sky, there in Ballouna, below the villa to which Parisian fate had guided him, but he was afraid she would laugh at him.

“So it seems like you don’t speak Arabic or think much of Abd al-Halim Hafiz.”



He told her that, or something like that, but she said nothing in reply. The little white moon rested still on the long neck, then tears streamed from her eyes. She grasped a paper tissue, wiped her tears, and blew her nose. But the tears did not stop. He started to tell her stories about the “Brown Nightingale,” about Suad Hosny and Shadia, and the song “Jab-bar” he loved so much.

He told her that he had come to love the poetry of Nizar Qabbani because of Abd al-Halim Hafiz, and that “A Message from Underwater,” in which a man is sinking in the water of passion, was the most beautiful poem he had ever heard in his life. And that he had not believed that Abd al-Halim did not write the lyrics to his own songs until he read about it in the newspaper.

“It’s impossible, Shirin, the words melt in his mouth like sugar, he spins the lyrics into fine threads, impossible that he didn’t write that poem, but later I believed it, and went and bought a book called *Drawing with Words*, but I didn’t understand a single word. Poetry doesn’t make sense unless it’s sung by someone like Abd al-Halim. You don’t like Abd al-Halim?”

The moon was silent, flinching with muscle contractions, and he saw the small eyes suspended on its round white surface.

Yalo had not noticed how small her eyes were before they had come to the Albert Restaurant. There in Ballouna he saw, and yet did not see, because the fragrance penetrated him and made him unable to see.

“Do you remember? I don’t know how you felt, but there, I felt like I was drowning in the smell of incense, I couldn’t see anything. Look at me close up so I can see the color of your eyes.”

Shirin had selected this restaurant and they drove there in her white Golf. He sat beside her but could not think of what to say. She had told him on the telephone to wait for her in Sassine Square in front of the Bashir

Gemayel memorial at one o'clock in the afternoon. He had stood there and waited in the rain, never budging from his spot. In vain he sought shelter from the torrents of rain under part of the memorial. He did not go to the Café Chaise nearby. He was afraid that she would not find him, afraid that she would not recognize him, afraid that he would not recognize her car. And when she arrived, he did not recognize her because he had been gazing at the passing cars without really seeing them. The car stopped beside him. She opened the door and motioned to him. He saw her and fell onto the leather seat, droplets dripping from his long black coat forming puddles on the floor.

“You’re still wearing that coat?” she asked.

He did not know what to say. He had worn it for her so that she would remember that night. But he was lying without even opening his mouth, because this was a coat he could not bear to be without. He wore it in Beirut, he wore it at the war barracks near Adlieh, he wore it in Paris, and he wore it in Ballouna, and he could not bear to take it off. He even hated summer for its sake. He never parted from this coat on his hunting trips in the forest. But he did not know what to say. The spinal column idea occurred to him, and he wanted to tell her about love that could unhinge vertebrae, but he said nothing. He waited in silence until they arrived at the Albert Restaurant, where she stopped the car and they got out. She went in ahead of him and found a private corner where they were seated. Before he had a chance to tell her that he had missed her, as he had planned to do after she had agreed to go out to the restaurant with him, the waiter appeared and she asked what he wanted to drink.

“Arak,” said Yalo.

“Arak,” said Shirin with a little hesitation. “Why not.”

Yalo began to order *mezze*. Shirin seemed oblivious to the different

dishes, or was not listening. Yalo was certain that her consent to have lunch with him would lead her, in the end, to his house in Ballouna or her house in Hazemiya.

When he had bathed at eleven o'clock that morning, as he worked the green shampoo into his hair, standing under the hot shower and closing his eyes, he saw Shirin. Water cascaded over him and his love poured out. He felt that everything was surging off his shoulders, his whole life was rushing by with the hot water, and he felt a strange elation. He pleased himself without knowing it, and everything flowed away as he finished. He came to her, leaving his sexual desire at home. He came to her naked, without desire. His desire had washed away and he came to her with love. Love alone, he said to himself, love for the sake of love, like Abd al-Halim. A love that he did not know how to express, but he would express it. From the first time he met Shirin, he had not stopped listening to the songs of Abd al-Halim. True, he had gone out on hunting parties but did so without any real desire. He had stopped seeing Madame Randa; he had slept with her only three times in six months, and each time she had put a pornographic movie in the VCR, for he never slept with her without a movie on.

Shirin said that she would meet him in Sassine Square. So Yalo parked Madame's car at a corner near the Lala Grill and walked toward Sassine Square.

When he had caught Shirin with the gray-haired man bent over her neck, he had thought she did not own a car. The man had sped off in his car and left her alone, shivering in the forest, and Yalo took her to his cottage because he had no other solution.

Why had she told the interrogator that he had ordered her to get out, and had asked the man to leave?

"She is lying, sir."