

The First Night

MILIA'S EYELASHES drew apart over eyes still curtained in drowsiness. She would just close them again, she decided; she would pick up the trail of her dream. She saw a small white candle giving off a wan light that trembled and flickered through the fog. His fist closed tightly around the candle, Mansour walked ahead directly in front of the taxi, the wind buffeting his long overcoat, but she could not make out her husband's features clearly. She reached for the glass of water that she kept habitually on the bedside table but found no glass there. She was thirsty. The dryness diffused along her tongue and broke against the roof of her mouth and down her throat. She dragged her left arm out from beneath her head on the pillow to arrest the numbness creeping from her upper arm toward her neck. She turned over in bed, and over again, and then lay finally still on her back. She put out her hand for the glass of water and found no table there. She shuddered, jerked upright, and suddenly found herself sitting against a wooden headboard. Where had it gone, that familiar white wall against which she propped her head? She could always sense the peeling white paint cracking and splintering beneath her long hair, even commingling with it as she rested her head on the wall. She pressed her arms to her chest, just touching the warm skin of her breasts. Suddenly she was afraid and the coldness of it

slunk into her thighs. She placed a hand there to press away the trembling in her legs. Her palm brushed against naked skin, glided upward as far as the top of her thighs went, and she felt blood collecting there. Gone cold, the blood had formed a solid mass at the lowest curve of her belly.

This is marriage, she said, her voice almost a whisper, and closed her eyes again.

Milia's memory preserved the scene at Dahr el-Baydar as though it were a shadow play etched black and solid on the wall. Her husband, Mr. Mansour Hourani, holds a small candle before him as he steps forward in front of the car, still wearing his black wedding suit though a long olive-green overcoat covers it. The young woman in her white bridal finery sits on the backseat, swathed in darkness, staring at the driver's bald head glinting with dandruff. Once they are in Nazareth, she decides, she will tell her husband how his image has been imprinted permanently on her eyes – today, on this evening – as a black wraith fading and disintegrating, appearing and disappearing ahead of the car whose headlights cannot cut through the viscous fog blanketing the heights of Dahr el-Baydar on this snow-mantled night.

At three o'clock, on the afternoon of Saturday the twelfth of January, in the year 1946, Mansour and Milia were married in the Church of the Blessed Archangel Mikhail, their union blessed by Father Boulos Saba. Following the service, the bridal pair stood before the church door surrounded by Milia's family tendering their congratulations. The tears collected in Milia's eyes so heavily that she could not make out even a single well-wisher, as familiar to her as they all were. Her tears overwhelmed her, spurting out as if intending flight before landing heavily on her pale cheeks. Mansour, the thin line of his lips wholly captured and partly transformed by a broad smile that revealed his small lustrous teeth, was oblivious to his bride's weeping until he heard her mother scolding her. Shame on you, dear – Milia, stop it! *Ayb*. For shame – are we burying someone, girl? It's a wedding, after all.

And when all of the guests had gone, carrying away the little silver boxes filled with sweets; and when no one was left in the churchyard apart from members of the family, the mother went to her daughter. She pulled the younger woman to her chest and, their bodies quivering, mother and daughter wept together. Then the mother pushed her daughter away. Even if you *are* breaking my heart, dearest, leave us to do the crying. *You* must show how happy you are! Come, now, we want to see it on your face! The bride smiled, choking back her tears, while the mother went on crying before releasing the joyful trill – *yuyuyuyuu!* – of her celebratory *zagbruda* into the air.

Milia's brothers clustered around the newlyweds. It was Musa who particularly caught the bride's attention, though. The pupils of his eyes seemed to cringe and recede inside their sockets. She sensed danger but could not define where it was coming from. She raised her arm, unconsciously almost, as if to shield her husband's face from her brother's stare.

Milia opened her eyes and saw nothing but the darkness of the night. She made up her mind to keep going. She would follow this odd dream of hers, for even in the face of her fear it reassured her. Finally the dream-spaces had come back to inhabit her nights.

In her dreams Milia had seen herself a small girl of seven, her skin tawny and her hair short and curly. The little girl scampered and darted among the grown-ups, spying everything there was to see. And when Milia got up in the morning she would tell things exactly as she pleased. But the reactions were always unpleasant: everyone stared at her, startled and dismayed, for these dreams of hers were like prophecies that somehow always come to fruition. But here and now, in this unfamiliar bed tucked inside of a murky blackness that thickened to press hard against her eyes, she dreamed of herself, a woman of twenty-four, her naked body lying full length across a bed not her own, her head on an unfamiliar pillow.

Milia opened her eyes to arrange her dream properly before going back to sleep. She saw nothing but a pair of eyes open upon the darkness.

She opened her eyes. She saw her own eyes, open. She was afraid.

The man leaned against the trunk of the lilac tree. He told her about the sky-blue glow that tinted the whiteness of her eyes and gave them a heavenly look. Her pale-white skin and her long neck, he said, had brought him here, not to mention her honey-toned eyes and the chestnut color of her hair streaming down her shoulders. All the way from his distant city her image had carried him. Here, to marry her. And he said he loved her. Where had he said these things? And why, awakening from this dream, did she find the dream still there, and why did it leave her seeing nothing but a pair of eyes open upon the darkness?

Milia decided to get out of bed and fetch a glass of water. She saw her own white nakedness reflected in the twin mirrors of her eyes. She closed her eyes again and made up her mind to ask the man who slept on this bed beside her, his back turned, to come back inside the car because she was worried for his safety. She closed her eyes and saw herself slipping: she was drifting into the white vapor outside. She forgot her thirst at the sight of a woman naked and prone, before her a windshield fogged over with human breath and a man walking in front of the car carrying the trembling flame of a candle as if he would pierce the solid fog in his black wedding suit and his olive-green overcoat.

Silence; a naked woman; a vehicle creeping almost imperceptibly through the dreary fog; a driver hunched close over the steering wheel trying to see the road through a windshield splotted with white; and a man walking before the car draped in white fog and clutching a white candle.

The candle went out or at least it looked that way to her. The man came to a stop, standing in the middle of the road, opening his overcoat as if trying to shelter the candle inside so that he might ignite its flame again. He

crooked his back and leaned into the wind; the flaps of his coat flew upward, but the man himself remained motionless, there, outside on the road. The driver's breathing accelerated, coming faster and louder. Every so often he opened the car window, sticking his head out and shouting into the wind, but she could not make out any of his words.

Milia was cold. A sharp pain lanced her belly. She tried to cover herself, wrapping her body as fully as she could in the brown overcoat and pressing her crossed arms to her chest. She could hear her teeth chattering as she enfolded herself in the coat and the darkness. The candle was useless, she thought. She made up her mind to get out of the car. If the headlights weren't able to slice through the fog, she wanted to say to that man, what could a candle possibly do? She would tell him to come back to the car, except she did not dare to leave the car, naked and cold as she was.

Who had put the bed in the car? Why was she naked? After all, when getting ready for bed she always put on her long blue nightgown that covered her body and legs all the way to her ankles. She did not even undo her bra. What had made her resolve never to remove it was the sight, long ago, of her grandmother's elongated, pendulous breasts. She thought of that image of Grandmama as an alarming warning that her own adult breasts might well droop all the way to her belly, and so she had decided to brace them at all times, even when sleeping. But now it appeared she had on neither a nightgown nor a bra. The driver's breathing had grown even louder as he pressed his chest heavily against the steering wheel, his eyes plastered to the windshield. Milia was afraid. The man whom she glimpsed through the fog was moving farther away, almost as though he were flying. His overcoat ballooned with the wind and he looked a lone figure beating his wings against the wind high above the precipitous wadi.

In the dream Milia saw herself a pale-white figure. She did not fully understand where this pallor had come from. The body she inhabited during

the day was not hers but rather a reflection from other people's eyes. Her mother had desired a light-skinned daughter with a full figure and so Milia's body had grown lighter in color as it filled out, purely for her mother's sake. At night, though, her body was entirely her own. She was seven years old; her skin was brown and her body lean. Her eyes were big and wide and took over the whole of her face; her hair was black and curly and her nose so small and slender it seemed barely sketched in beneath the long thin sweep of eyebrow. She wore shorts and ran barefoot. Her eyes borrowed a pair of green irises to replace the light brown ones that people saw by day. Those irises floated in a white expanse shot through with a blue so evanescent it was barely perceptible to the eye.

Little Milia is in love with the nighttime through whose narrow lanes she scampers. She lies down on her bed and opens her eyes so that the night comes drawn in dark pencil around her eyelids. When the darkness becomes total she closes her eyes and walks into her dreams. When morning comes she has not swept those dreams from her eyes. She leaves them there, circles sketched in invisible ink so that she can bring them back whenever she wishes. She closes her eyes: this is all she has to do for the voices to dwindle to nothing and the lights to blot out. And then she can go to that place where she sees everything and discovers all the secrets that are there to find.

Milia did not let on to anyone that she was keeping her dreams hidden away, concealed in a deep reservoir beneath the darkness. In the murky blackness she would dig, carving a place to lay down her dreams. She would go to her hollowed-out dreampit whenever she wanted those dreams. There she could extract the dreams she sought and dream them all over again.

This dream, though, comes from no place: in the dreampit this Milia does not exist. Milia of the night is not Milia of the day. Where do the images of daylight come from, then? How are they made? Is it because she has gotten married? Is this what marriage is?

Milia is finding it hard to swallow or to breathe, and she shivers incessantly from the cold. The nighttime is a deep well and she crouches at the very bottom. The driver moans as if with pain and his breathing grows louder and heavier, seeming almost to cuff her lightly on the neck. She tries to ask the driver – whose bald head is all she can see – what the matter with him is, but her voice has dissolved. She tries to raise her head from the pillow but her head has grown too heavy. Suddenly the driver leaves the car. He has disappeared and Mansour has disappeared and the naked woman is alone in bed. The fog swallows her and the snow falls all around. She tries to pick up her left foot, stiff with the cold, but cannot. She has the sensation of falling out of bed. A terrible pain hits her between the thighs, a knife stabs her, and there's blood.

She screams. She means to scream that the driver is violating her. But her voice is gone and her mouth has filled up with cotton.

Alone in the gloom and the cold, Milia decided to open her eyes and pull herself from this particular dream. She saw a white face framed by a pair of white wings. She put her right hand out to it and feathers clung to her fingertips. She cried out, asking the face to save her, but the face did not hear her voice. What she meant to say, what she wanted to say, was that she yearned to go home. That she no longer wanted marriage. But in the end she did not say it. The winged face circled above the car, above the wadi, above the two men. The face floated away, feather-wings dropping from it like the snowflakes falling in front of the pale glow from the car's headlights.

She did not want to spend their honeymoon in Shtoura, Milia said. Snow was falling over the high plains of Dahr el-Baydar and it was very cold. There was no need for the Hotel Massabki, she said, no need for any honey right now. We can stay in Beirut for a couple of days with my family, she said, and then we can go directly to Nazareth.

It was December, after all, said her mother. Kanun, a month when no one

could imagine honeymooning *there*. Think again, she said. Change your plans. Come summertime, have all the honey you want.

Sister Milana said it would be better if they did not go to Shtoura in this cold weather; but there was no real danger in going, she supposed. It's a foolish little adventure, she huffed. Much better to postpone it.

But Mansour insisted. *Ma bsir!* he exclaimed. This could not be, he ruled; the journey was not to be postponed. He wanted the honeymoon in Shtoura. Marriage and the honey of it could truly happen only at the Hotel Massabki.

Musa knitted his eyebrows but he told his sister that it was not an issue, really. There was no argument. The man wants Shtoura, so be it, he said. Go with him.

Still wearing her long white bridal gown, Milia climbed into the American-make car and settled herself beside Mansour on the backseat. The shrill joyful *yuuuyuuuus* of the women wishing her well deafened her to her mother's voice. Leaning into the car's open window, her mother was murmuring words of goodbye and whispering women's advice. Musa stepped up to the car and tossed two coats at them: his dark olive-green overcoat and his mother's brown coat. He looked long into Milia's eyes before turning to Mansour.

Congratulations, bridegroom, he said, and walked away.

The car moved through a silence broken only by the fierce onslaught of a Beirut rainstorm, the water coming down in ropes. Milia shut her eyes but reopened them as she felt Mansour's lips kissing her neck. She pushed his mouth away – Later, not now! – and fell back into her sleepy reverie. The car slowed down around the winding mountain roads that would take them to Shtoura. She slept with her head leaning against the car door, opening her eyes only at the sound of Mansour's voice ordering the driver to go on. The car had halted, swathed in a white fog that completely enveloped

everything around them. She closed her eyes but Mansour's voice was so loud that they opened again.

He could not go any farther on this road because he could not see it, the driver said. Mansour opened the car door and jumped out into the road. He walked two steps forward until he was directly in front of the car. He twisted around and beckoned to the driver to follow him. He walked a few steps, looking as though he were slipping across ice. When the car did not budge he retraced his steps, pulled Musa's olive-green coat from the backseat and put it on, and told the driver he would walk ahead. All the driver and the car had to do was to follow.

He's gone, Milia said. Gone, for she could not see him at all right then, nor for several seconds after. The cold air struck her face and the snowflakes falling over the interminable fog were coming thickly, spreading across the landscape. Milia lost her husband. Then she saw him through the front windshield, the likeness of a wraith scaling the frosty seething air.

Excuse me, bride, said the driver. But the bridegroom is mad, what can I do?

Milia's body was shivering with the cold and her fear and she did not answer.

Tell me, what am I to do? persisted the driver.

Follow him, said Milia, her voice choked and low.

Khuta! So the bride's a lunatic, too! *Yā Allah* what have I gotten myself into! grumbled the driver. He pressed his foot on the gas and the car began to skate across the ice.

She saw Mansour walking forward, carrying a snuffed-out candle in his right hand. Bent close behind the front windshield the driver drove haltingly behind the olive-green coat that ballooned out as the turbulent outside air found its way underneath.

The driver jerked his head to the rear and Milia could see the black centers

of his eyes. They looked like coals, but cold ones, the glow burnt out. His eyes stung her and his raspy voice frightened her. She asked him to keep his eyes on the road and to keep a strong hold on the steering wheel because the car was skidding. But he kept his gaze on her, muttering incoherently as the car continued its slow slide.

Shu amm bit'uul! she shouted. What are you saying, there?

Does anyone go honeymooning in Shtoura at this time of year? Your husband has no brains! groused the driver, his voice reaching her slowly in wisps of sound. Milia stared into the darkness before her and discovered that what she had believed to be eyes were two holes notched into the driver's bald pate, hollows coated with a stinking oily substance. The dark pink tinge that Milia's discomfiture had brought to her cheeks receded. Once again the extreme cold assaulted her bones and her teeth chattered. She pressed her lips together and closed her eyes.

Milia had not understood what the driver said, but she would recall the interminable sound of his mutterings and his grinding oaths. He opened the car door time after time in order to see outside, and each time she could hear the falling snow like a whispering voice as the cold wind from outside hit her face – a bride in her finery, huddled apprehensively in a corner of the backseat.

Milia decided to come out of this dream and speak to the man whom another dream had chosen as her husband. She opened her eyes and rubbed her cheeks with her palms – and found herself in the car. Mansour was not beside her. He was out there, walking in the distance, walking away from her amidst the fierce high winds as the driver kept the black pinpoint of his eyes fixed on her face.

God preserve you, don't you go to sleep now, he snarled.

Milia stared at him, her eyes open to their widest. Seeing those reddened pupils moving in the back of his head, she let out a sudden cry. O Virgin,

Mother of Light, save your servants, O Mother of God! And then immediately she was asleep once again.

Milia did not see what happened nor did she hear the driver exclaim, It's a miracle! She did not notice how her husband turned aside to stand calmly on the verge of the road waiting for the car to draw even with him. For as Milia's cry sliced the air, the clouds outside dissolved and clear skies returned; beams of light carved holes in the fog and the snow stopped falling. The driver braked, and as he waited for Mansour to return to the car, he twisted around to stare into the face of the woman who had worked this extraordinary event with her voice. But Milia had her eyes closed, her hovering dreams forming circles around her eyelids. She was a marvel! the driver told her, and her body twitched. She massaged her eyes and smiled, and Mansour opened the car door and got in next to the driver.

What awful cold! exclaimed Mansour.

And me – how'll I get back to Beirut? asked the driver, as the car careened downward toward the Beqaa Valley.

There was only fog at the top of Dahr el-Baydar, said Mansour. And it's gone now, and everything's going to be fine.

And me, where'll I sleep? asked the driver.

I was afraid to fly, said Mansour, but by God I flew. He swiveled his head to see his wife, a bundle in a brown overcoat that quivered on her body.

The bride–, said the driver.

What about the bride?

She screamed *O Virgin, help me!* and the fog disappeared. She screamed and the snow stopped. The bride made a miracle.

Milia–, said Mansour, and began immediately to sneeze. A fit of shivering swept through him and his teeth began to chatter. Groans erupted from his chest and belly and entrails.

Rub your hands together, said the driver.

Mansour sneezed and moaned as if fighting off an implacable wave of dizziness. His body trembled and shuddered uncontrollably.

It's nothing, said the driver. And anyway you have to get through it. You're the one who wanted to keep going, so just pull yourself together.

Mansour tried to pull himself together, but his reserves deserted him. Tremblings bombarded the muscles of his chest and arms and thighs, and a choking feeling welled up in his throat leaving him barely able to breathe. The driver bellowed at Milia to attend to her husband because his face had gone blue and he could no longer speak.

Milia shifted position, put out her hand and stroked Mansour's hair. Relax, my dear, we'll be at the hotel soon now and we'll warm up there.

The man began to calm down and his breathing grew more regular. He managed to tell his wife not to worry. Don't be afraid, I'm strong, I'm better now, he said, and began to sneeze. When he asked for a handkerchief the driver handed him one but Mansour pulled his own hand back. His wife held out hers. It was the tatted white lawn handkerchief she had inherited from her grandmother, preserving it in her hope chest all this time in anticipation of her wedding day. He bent his head over it and sneezed into it, clearing his throat and spitting out phlegm.

Milia did not know how they reached the hotel, but finally and suddenly they were there. She remembered only the fog, the high winds and snow besieging them on the heights of Dahr el-Baydar. She remembered how she had seen her husband climb out of the car and walk forward, and how the fog had swallowed him whole. She remembered how the driver had pleaded with him when they reached the approach to the village of Sofar, swearing he could not go as far as Shtoura in this snow and ice. Mansour had insisted on continuing the trip whatever the consequences. She remembered the driver appealing to her but when she tried to speak Mansour's eyes bored into her lips and she pressed them together instead. She had a vision of his

moustache thick and black and trembling over his upper lip, imagined a red tarbush on his head, and loved him.

There amidst the winds laying siege to the car and the driver's pleading voice insisting he could not go on came the love Milia had awaited for such a long time. Love tumbled into her heart and she felt a stab of pain inside her rib cage as though her heart itself had plummeted. She could hardly keep back a cry of fear but she did not dare make a sound. She kept silent and told herself it was love. In the beginning she had felt no affection, no emotion at all toward this man whom she had seen standing beneath the palm tree in the garden next door. She would stare out the window and see him there, standing absolutely motionless, looking straight at her as he tried to conjure a smile from her lips. He was always smiling and he never lowered his eyes, never took his gaze off her except when she disappeared from sight, bashful and uneasy, her cheeks washed in red.

What does this stranger want? her mother asked her.

Milia knew nothing about the man and she was not disposed to fall in love with him. His hair always glistened as if bathed in oil, and his whitened temples suggested he was already some distance down life's road. She did not see in him the portrait of a long-awaited and much-anticipated lover but rather the image of a father searching for his lost daughter. And when she said yes, she did not tell anyone the true reasons why she was accepting him as her husband.

She told her brother Musa that she had assented because the prospective groom resembled him. She told her mother that she had grown tired of waiting and wanted to get married. She told Sister Milana that she was leaving home to escape the stifling atmosphere that had enveloped the house after her brother Salim had moved to Aleppo and her mother's illnesses had proliferated.

When she spoke to him for the first time she told him he was an old man.

Me?

She pointed a finger at the graying on his temples.

I started going gray when I was twenty! he responded. Do you know what gray hair means? It means we are lions. Among the animals, the only one who goes gray is the lion.

He told her he was thirty-seven. And that he would get married before the age of forty. The first age of prophecy has passed me by, he said. I was not married in time. I'm not going to let the second one slip by. If I do, it's all over for me.

Milia didn't understand what he meant but she smiled. Emboldened, the man said he loved her and wanted her, and then he asked her if she loved him.

How can I love you when I don't even know you?

But look at me – I love you without knowing you. I feel you, who you are, from inside, and that's enough. Do you have a feeling about me?

She nodded, not to say yes but because she didn't know; but Mansour took her nod as a quiet *yes*.

So, it's a possibility? he asked.

She looked into the distance and closed her eyes.

Milia did not understand what Mansour meant by the two ages of prophecy until they were in the Hotel Massabki in Shtoura. On the second night after their wedding, he moved closer to her. He wanted her.

No, she said. I'm tired. She rolled onto her side, turning her back, and slept. He left her to float downward, submerged in her deep breathing. Then he snuck toward her from behind and began to fondle her. He turned her over and then he was on top of her and had her. In the night Milia felt drenched and sensed the wetness of the sheet beneath her and she began to shake with cold. She wanted to get up and go into the bathroom but she felt her knees turn to jelly. She closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep.

Wake up, wake up! This is no moment for sleeping.

She opened her eyes. She rested her head against the back of the bed. His torso was bare, a cigarette was between his lips and his eyes shone.

Look – how pretty you are! Look at yourself in the mirror. Love makes a woman beautiful.

She shut her eyes and heard him talking about the prophetic ages that so concerned him. The Messiah's age had missed him, he said. But he would not let the same thing happen with Muhammad's age.

Though Milia still had no idea of what he meant, she did not ask. She felt a burning sensation low in her body and she wanted something to drink. But with her nightgown so damp she was too embarrassed to get out of bed.

The Messiah was crucified when he was thirty-three years old. Muhammad's prophethood appeared when he turned forty. Men have to become men at one of those two ages, Mansour said. If a man misses both, then everything will pass him by. I've passed the first age already. But I haven't reached the second age yet, and now I've found you.

The driver was right, Milia whispered. You are mad.

In the car had come love. Milia closed her eyes and searched for the tarbush that her uncle Mitri had worn so that she could put it on Mansour's head. She found it in the hollow that held her dreams. She saw Mansour draping her uncle's white silk *qumbaz* across his shoulders, tipping a red tarbush forward on his head, and chasing after her with a slender reed cane. The cane brushed Milia's brown feet and the man wearing the *qumbaz* shouted at her to eat her *arus el-labneh*. Milia in her short pants leapt and danced under the blows of the cane, fire inflaming her feet. The cane receded and the girl sat on the ground, swallowing her sandwich of labneh and olive oil, tasting the white onion and green mint.

Milia eats but the sandwich lasts and lasts. She turns to her uncle Mitri and invites him to share her food. The man comes nearer and devours the

sandwich in one bite. Milia snatches the cane from the man's grasp and runs, and he hurries after her. Milia is in a garden of lush greenery, springing over hollows filled with water. The man's voice pleads with her to stop and give him back the cane. She falls to the ground. Above her, the uncle breathes heavily. She opens her eyes. The uncle fades from view, the tarbush vanishes, and she finds herself in the car encased in the white shroud of fog.

The uncle has disappeared but he has left behind him the play of a smile on the woman's lips and a red tarbush tilting forward on the head of a man she has decided to love. He has left a woman lying on the backseat of an American-make taxi. Milia gives herself up to this woman as she allows herself to sink into a shadowy dream from which she does not awaken until they reach the Hotel Massabki. Nor does she see Mansour's darkly blue face – the blueness brought on by the cold blending into his dark skin color – until they are at the hotel, just before midnight. Mansour shakes her by her upper arm and she hears a voice. *Yallah*, we're here!

Milia comes to as if emerging from a coma. *Shu . . . wayn?* What's . . . where are we? It takes her a moment to remember that she is a bride arriving for her honeymoon. The car door opens and Mansour stands there waiting for her, hoisting the suitcase. He points to the hotel entrance and she walks beside him, then turns back and sees the bald head of the driver, who droops over the steering wheel, his hands slack, as though he is sleeping.

And the chauffeur? she asks.

We'll see about him later, said Mansour, and led her to a high wooden door. He knocked for some time before someone appearing to be the hotel owner opened the door. George Massabki was in white pajamas covered partially by a brown abaya. Khawaja George's small eyes peered at them, marks of astonishment reshaping his face as if it was completely beyond him to believe that this strange pair had landed here at his door, and at this hour of the night, for the purpose of savoring the honey of marriage.