

Translation of “A White Rose” by Mona Elnamoury

Translation from Arabic by Abdel Wahab Khalifa
University of Leeds, United Kingdom

A White Rose (Warda bayḍa' - وردة بيضاء) is a short story by Mona Elnamoury, a Cairo based university lecturer, creative writer and literary translator. The story was recently published in the Egyptian literary journal *Al-Mashhad* and is set to appear in an anthology of Arabic short stories soon.

He looked at his wife's prone body on the bed, immobile. He looked at her glassy eyes fixed upon some indefinite point in space. He could perfectly recall everything that had happened since she had been bedridden; it seemed clear that she was dying. She used to remain motionless like this for a long time, then open her mouth to try to say something. But when she did, she spoke indistinctly, or murmured in a language that he could not understand. Tired of trying, she would fall silent. Sometimes, she would nod her head towards a point in front of her. He would try to make her write down what it was that she wanted, but she would write in a strange image-like language, similar to the hieroglyphic inscriptions of the Pharaohs. When she first became ill, she would try with more resolution and desire to fight for her life, as a drowning person would clutch at a floating straw. Now, that he had sent the kids to their granny in order not to get weirded out by their mother's condition, she became drained of strength to carry on trying, devoid of persistence and tenacity. Days passed by and she did not try and he kept offering her everything in the house, but to no avail. He even brought her magazines, newspapers and photos to show her in the hope that he could see a change in the appearance of her face, a gesture from her head or even hear a faint voice come out of her mouth indicating her approval that this thing was what she wanted. Yet this did not happen. Her movements became limited to drinking her juice and using the toilet. He could no longer remember her voice or the way she used to talk. He could not even find any recordings of her to remember her by. She was the one who tidied things in the house and he never knew the way of anything. He was grateful to her that she had always kept his clothes and things tidy and in the front of the wardrobe so that he could find them easily. Had it not been for this, he would not have been able to find anything himself. Was her voice soft? Hoarse? He could not decide. The truth was, he could not even remember whether he had ever heard her utter a long sentence. Was she content with using only short sentences? Or was he not there to listen? He was baffled by these questions, but he could not care less about them now that he was trying to figure out what he could do to save her life.

Oh dear! Sometimes she used to tell him stories. He never fathomed why she would always resort to stories to get her message across instead of stating what she wanted in a simple way. A story! The story of... the rose—a white rose in the heart of winter, so desired by a little princess from her father, a globetrotter merchant. Her two older sisters wanted beautiful and expensive things: a necklace and a bracelet. However, meeting their demands was much easier for the father than finding the white rose. He nearly lost his life looking for the white rose, which was in the garden of a bewitched monster. Grown tired of her stories, he used to laugh and say: “I am too old

for stories, woman! Save them for your kiddos! And what has this story got to do with my question in the first place? I asked you what you want and you're blabbing about a white rose to me? Don't complain later that I don't take care of you!" He ran quickly and bought white roses. He brought them anxiously and put them close to her nose. She opened her tear-swollen eyes and looked at him fervently. He pointed with his head to the roses. She looked at them and a lone tear escaped her eyes. She tilted her head to the other side and seemed absent.

He returned to his chair, watching her. How did she end up like this? She was as active as a bee, as smart as a whippet, brimming with energy, sometimes even anger! She was... She had been a glorious rose! Oh, God! Maybe she had meant herself when she spoke of the rose? He scribbled to her with big letters on a scrap of paper, "You are as beautiful as the white rose." He held the paper in front of her eyes. She could not have forgotten her own language after all, even though she now spoke a weird one that seemed indecipherable to human beings. She read the caption on the paper and cried again. Desperate, he left her and returned to his chair.

After some days (maybe even weeks), to his surprise, she lifted her head up again and fixed her eyes on his. He was instantly alert, bemused and anxious. Then she opened her mouth, and said many things. She was not crying or in pain as she had often been before. She opened her mouth again, but this time she did not speak. He thought she was thirsty, and dashed to get her some water. When he returned he found her completely silent. Unresponsive. Lifeless.

His heart was shattered by losing her, and in the midst of his mourning, he kept thinking of a meaning for the white rose.

وردة بيضاء¹

نظر إلى جسد زوجته الممدد على السرير عاجزاً عن الحركة، نظر إلى عينيها الزجاجيتين مثبتتين على نقطة ما فى الفضاء، كان قد حفظ تماماً ما يحدث منذ أن لازمت الفراش وبدا أكيداً أنها تحتضن، تظل متخشية هكذا لفترة طويلة ثم تفتح فمها وتحاول أن تقول شيئاً وتفعل بصوت مبهم أو بلغة لا يعرفها ثم تتعب من المحاولة وتضمت. أحياناً كانت تومىء برأسها إلى نقطة أمامها. حاول أن يجعلها تكتب ما تريد لكنها كانت تفعل بلغة غريبة، مصورة مثل لغة الفراعنة، فى بداية تعيها كانت تحاول بحماسة ولهفة. كمن يتشبث بشئ ليطفو. الآن وبعد أن أرسل الأولاد لجدتهم لئلا يصدّمهم حال الأم، بعَدت المحاولات وخلت من الإصرار والتمسك. تمر أيام دون أن تحاول ويظل هو يعرض عليها كل ما فى المنزل دون جدوى. حتى أنه أحضر المجلات والجراند والصور ليربها إياها عسى أن يلحظ تغييراً فى خلجات وجهها أو إيماءةً من رأسها أو حتى صوتاً رفيعاً يصدر عنها ليشير الى موافقتها بأن هذا هو الشئ الذى تريده. ولكن لم يحدث. اقتصررت حركتها على تناول العصير والدخول إلى الحمام. لم يعد يتذكر بشكل مؤكد صوتها أو طريقة كلامها. لم يستطع العثور على أى تسجيل لها. هى التى كانت ترتب الأشياء فى المنزل ولا يعرف طريقاً لأى شئ. كان ممثلاً لها أنها تبقى ملابسه وأشياءه منظمة وفى مقدمة الدولاب حتى يراها. لولا هذا ما استطاع أن يجد شيئاً. هل صوتها رفيع؟ غليظ؟ لم يستطع أن يحدد. الحق أنه لم يستطع أن يتذكر أنه سمعها أصلاً فى أى جمل طويلة. هل كانت تكتفى بالجمل القصيرة فقط أم أن الصدمة أنسته؟ حيرته هذه الأسئلة.. لم يكن ليهم بالأسئلة الآن وهو يحاول فهم ماذا تريد زوجته لإنقاذ حياتها.

أه! كانت أحياناً تحكى له قصصاً. لم يفهم لماذا كانت تلجأ للقصص دوماً ولا تقول ما تريد بشكل بسيط. قصة؟ قصة؟ أه! الوردة! وردة بيضاء فى قلب الشتاء طلبتها أميرة صغيرة من والدها التاجر كثير الأسفار. أختاها الكبيرتان أرادتا أشياء جميلة وغالية: عقداً وسواراً. تلبية هذه الطلبات كان أسهل من الوردة البيضاء. كاد الأب يفقد حياته لأجل الوردة البيضاء التى كانت فى حديقة وحش مسحور. كان يملّ حكاياتها ويضحك قائلاً "كبرت يا ستي على الحكايات. وقرّبتها للصغار. ثم ما دخل الحدوتة فى سؤالي؟ سألتك ماذا تريدن وتحكى لى عن وردة بيضاء؟ لا تشتك بعد ذلك أننى لا أهتم بك." جرى بسرعة واشترى وردة بيضاء، أحضرها متلهفاً وقرّبها من أنفها. فتحت عينيها المتفتختين. نظرت إليه فى توسل. أشار برأسه الى الورود. نظرت الى الورود وانفلتت دمعة من عينيها ثم مالت برأسها للناحية الأخرى وغابت.

رجع إلى كرسيه يرقبها. كيف انتهت بها الحال هكذا؟ كانت .. كانت .. كانت صاروخاً مكوكياً فى نشاطها .. شعلة فى ذكائها وحركتها بل وعصبيتها.. كانت .. ربما كانت وردة نادرة فى جمالها.. أه! ربما تعنى نفسها بالوردة؟ كتب لها على ورقة بيضاء بخط كبير "أنت جميلة مثل الوردة البيضاء" وضعها أمام عينيها. أكيد أنها لم تنس لغتها الأم حتى بعد أن أصبحت تتكلم لغة غريبة ليست كلغة البشر. قرأت اللوحة، بكت ثانية. تركها وعاد إلى كرسيه يائساً. بعد عدة أيام، أو أسابيع لدهشته رفعت رأسها مرة أخيرة وثبتت عينيها فى عينه. انتبه ملهوقاً. فتحت فمها وقالت أشياءً عديدة بلغتها الجديدة. لم تكن تبتك أو تتألم مثل كل مرة. فتحت فمها مرة أخرى دون أن تتكلم. ظنّها عطشى. جرى بسرعة ليحضر ماءً. عاد ليحضرها ساكنة تماماً. ساكنة أكثر من اللازم. سكوتاً نهائياً. انفطر قلبه عليها. وفى وسط التياحه ظل يفكر فى معنى الوردة البيضاء.

¹ Translated and published by permission of the author, Mona Elnamoury.