

Haneen Al-Sayegh: The Invisible Tie

(OT: Das unsichtbare Band)

Sample Translation
By Translator Joanne Haslett

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The Wall

As the last vestiges of winter were still clinging to the mountain villages, a new spring crept into the towns which, in my own way, I was imitating. At nine in the morning, the bus pulled into the small bus stop by Aley city hall. When I stepped out, I was rather frantic. For a moment, I thought I had left my case holding the documents on the seat next to me, but I was holding it in my hand. Taking a deep breath, I walked towards the square where the taxi rank was located. It was lively at the junction. People from the nearby villages were visiting the municipal office to pick up documents and papers, a real hive of activity. Street vendors were selling cheese sandwiches and saj bread and here and there, heavily armed police with tired eyes and bent over backs could be seen. Further back stood a few minibuses and taxis. I wanted to take a taxi because my plan required a driver for me alone. Moving quickly, I walked round the vehicles trying to find the right car with the right driver. “Taxi, taxi!” the drivers called out, as though programmed to yell at any passers-by. Some of them were Druze sheikhs with long moustaches, white turbans, and wide, black trousers. Something prompted me to keep away from them. At the end of the square, I discovered an old white Mercedes with the door open and a sixty-something-year-old driver sitting sideways on the seat. He was smoking and the voice of the singer Fairouz sang out from the car radio. I liked all of that and had a feeling that I ought to travel with this relaxed looking chap to overcome my own tension.

“Good morning! I would like to go to the American University of Beirut.”

“To al-Hamra?” he asked.

I had to quickly come up with a clever response to save myself the embarrassment of admitting to him that I didn’t know where the American University was. So, I pretended I hadn’t heard him over the street noise.

“Drop me off at the main entrance of the American University,” I answered.

“That journey will cost almost thirty thousand Lira. Why don’t you just take the bus? It departs in ten minutes.”

“No, I have the money, don’t worry.”

Before I had even finished my sentence, I opened the back door to avoid further discussion. I was fearful and unsure but acted confidently which cost me rather a lot of energy: energy which I really needed for the task ahead. With the words “In God we trust” the driver turned the key in the ignition. The old motor jumped into life, the smell of exhaust fumes getting up my nose. I felt slightly dizzy and rested my head on the window.

We drove past the main market in the mountain city of Aley. When I looked out of the window,

it seemed to me as though the town was rushing past on a screen. I knew it well. This familiarity with a place which had barely changed during my lifetime gave me the feeling that the town was dead. Only the deceased don't change. As we came to the roundabout at the end of the market and the car turned off towards the coast, I felt my stomach tie up in knots and the dizziness grow. Curve after curve, reflecting my agitated thoughts and worries: Oh my God, how dare I? How did I come to dream of studying at the American University? Then the tone of my inner voice changed and began to reassure me: you are a young woman with a dream. Nobody knows your fears. Nobody knows that you're not sure whether what you're doing is right or that this is your first trip to Beirut without your husband.

The taxi driver interrupted my thoughts, "Where are you from young lady?" His words mingled with the noise of the radio reporting the news.

"I'm from the village of Ainsura," I answered hesitantly.

"Oh really? That is a blessed village as most of the inhabitants are sheikhs. And who is your father?"

How frightening this question was! I didn't know why it made me so afraid – afraid of ruining my father's reputation, afraid of being vilified or were there other reasons to be afraid which I did not yet know?

He noticed how my silence lasted longer than it ought. "I'm sorry to be so intrusive. I just wanted to make conversation on the long journey," he said by way of apology.

"My father is Sheikh Ali Bou Nimer," I replied in the hope of bringing the uncomfortable conversation to an end.

"You see. We are directly related. The Druze are a chain!"

I've often heard this sentence when Druze meet for the first time. However, for a long time I didn't understand what it meant and what this "chain" represents.

Never have I felt a greater fear than that which comes from the feeling of inferiority. I felt as though that which I was striving for was beyond me and my abilities. But something inside me insisted on taking this path. To my mind, the American University was more than an educational establishment. It was a world which one only entered if you were especially intelligent, and I imagined that everyone who studied there possessed not only exceptional intellectual abilities but also social standing. I had neither, only my diligence. Nevertheless, I had contacted the university, gathered the required documents and resolved to apply for a bachelor's degree. For years, my husband had prevented me from studying. That's why I wanted to submit the application without telling him.

The taxi continued towards Beirut with ever more cars and lorries on the road and eyes staring at me from the buses. The passengers all seemed to be scornful of me and my dream. I had the feeling I was making a huge mistake. I wanted to express this mistake in words, but I couldn't find any. So, I searched for the root of the feeling. My memories led me back five years to the day when I first met my husband-to-be at our front door. He was a stranger and was holding a bronze statuette in his hand, a warrior with a broken sword.

"Is Sheikh Ali here?" he asked with a smile.

"Yes, he is in his workshop. Please follow me!"

We had to cross the entire house to reach my father's workshop which he could have reached a different way, directly from the backyard, without needing to pass through our hall, guest

lounge and kitchen. When my father saw us, he stood up to greet him.

“Welcome. My friend Esmat told me you would come and asked me to take care of you. Please, take a seat!”

I learnt later that the young man was called Salem and that his visit had nothing to do with repairing the statuette.

I still remember that day well as I had just come home from school with my report saying that I had finished the tenth class of secondary school with honours. I was in such good spirits that despite my dislike of guests, I wanted to help my mother.

When I entered, my father and the young man were just chatting about antiques and their prices. I offered the guest a glass of juice and turned to pass my father a drink as well. That’s when I noticed the guest’s gaze following me and scrutinising my body. I only understood the meaning of that gaze one week later when my mother asked:

“Do you remember the young man who visited us last week?”

“No. Which young man?”

“The young man you offered a drink to.”

“Oh yes. What about him?”

“He has just left. He came here with his mother. They wanted to get to know you, he said he was looking for a bride.”

“A bride?” I asked aghast. But I don’t even know him. And I’m only fifteen. How old is he anyway?”

“Twenty-five.”

“What did you tell him?”

I heard my father’s voice behind me.

“Salem come from a good home and his family reputation is highly distinguished. Esmat told me they count among the dignitaries of their village and Salem’s father has done many good deeds. He may not be a sheikh, but he had a prayer room for the sheikhs built in the village.”

“But I don’t know him.”

“You will get to know him,” my father answered adding, “marriage is a destiny and there is no compulsion. You know well that I would be happy for you to stay with us longer. But let the young man visit again so you can spend some time together. After that you can tell him your decision, but it would be improper to deny him a conversation. That would be impolite!”

Reluctantly, I took my father’s advice and waited for my mother to say something before he left the room, but she didn’t say a word.

Two days before the interested party’s second visit, I found my father with a book in his hand underneath the vines on the roof. That was where I spent most of my time reading and looking out over the landscape in front of our house, the high mountains which enveloped our village on all sides. The same mountains which kept our secrets, separated us from a world which in my mind, I had repeatedly invented, rebuilt and destroyed. But I had befriended the majesty of the closest mountains which showed me how insignificant and transient we are.

“You enjoy reading, just like me.”

I looked up at my father standing behind me with his hands clasped behind his back. He wore his black sheikh robe which he always wore when he attended the *khalwa*, where the sheikhs met for worship every Thursday evening.

“But I never see you reading,” I replied.

“When I was young, I bought lots of books at the flea market and read them by the light of the paraffin lamp in the evening.”

“And where are those books?” I asked.

“Your grandmother and Aunt Salima threw them away. When I went swimming, I found some of them wet and smudged in the river. I have never replenished my library since.”

“How sad that your family didn’t know what matters to you,” I said in a dejected tone.

He paused and chose his words carefully: “I know you are a good student, but you must also know that I can’t send you to university. You may complete secondary school but that’s all. A religious man like me must obey the Sheikhs’ council and, in our village, girls are not permitted to attend university and go to the city alone.” He paused for a moment and then continued quietly, “I don’t tell you this to push you into marriage. I would have no objections if you decided to spend your whole life with us. Ultimately this is your home, and you can live here and help your mother around the house. But you can forget about studying.”

I nodded to show him I had heard him and said nothing more. He quickly turned around and left. He did not wait for my response because he expected no reply or discussion.

I can’t say that what he said shocked me, after all it was nothing new for me. On the contrary, I was deeply grateful that he had agreed to me continuing my secondary school education; and this gratitude is the result of a past incident which had found its way into my long-term memory and stayed there. I will always remember the evening I came home to find my older sister, Nermin, in the yard sobbing while my father shouted from the kitchen:

“Enough! I can’t afford it any longer!”

He complained about the shortage of work in his workshop and the lack of a son to take on some of the work and expenses.

“What is school good for? They’ll just get married anyway and stay at home. At times his voice was louder, at others quieter, as though he was trying to conceal his shame with anger. My mother’s gentle voice attempting to calm him eventually calmed us too:

“Education is a weapon for girls; nobody knows what the future will bring, Ali.”

“But where am I supposed to find the money to pay for school for four girls?”

“Let me worry about that! Just allow them to concentrate on their homework,” my mother said determinedly.

Suddenly, I saw the sea. Normally, my husband brings me into the city and whenever we see the sea he reminds me that we are almost there. This time, my journey to Beirut resembles skydiving – accompanied by a racing heart rate and the fear of an impact which my legs couldn’t absorb. How beautiful Beirut was. I found it more beautiful than ever. It was like seeing it for the first time as I looked at the traces of war in the form of bullet holes in the old buildings with birds flying in and out as though at once searching for and fleeing from something.

“We will soon be there,” said the taxi driver.

I tried to imagine the American University, but I kept my expectations in check so as not to be too surprised. The car stopped in front of a gate in the middle of a long, white stone wall.

“Please get out on the right. There are cars behind us,” said the taxi driver.

I quickly gathered my things together, paid and got out. Now I stood in front of the open, arch-shaped gate with black iron bars atop the arch. The fear which had accompanied me from the

mountains intensified as the city police and three security personnel guarded the gate. To the right of the gate stood an engraved stone tablet on which was written: *That they may have life and have it more abundantly.*

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Two Memories

I thought my Master’s degree and new Assistant post would help me to overcome the problems with my self-image or at least become more self-confident. But nothing of the sort occurred. The feeling that accompanied me that day, as I entered the American University for the first time, was still there: the feeling that I was only here because I had pulled the wool over everyone’s eyes and would be thrown out as soon as they realised. Despite changed circumstances – I had completed the first part of my degree with honours and had been offered a full scholarship with a part-time position – this feeling never stopped eating away at me from inside.

It didn’t take me long to understand that the problem was nothing to do with external circumstances, my success or the number of men who tried to flirt with me daily. The problem was much deeper, as deep as my long sleep on the soft mattresses of silence. And while I slept, I ignored the pea lying under the pile of mattresses which turned out to be an acorn. An acorn which germinated, sprouted until the tree grew and branched out, breaking through the layers of silence, and piercing my entire being like iron spikes. Every time I was silent, I lost another piece of self-respect and fed the voice humiliating me. *Everything we focus on thrives* – this sentence, which I’d read somewhere, made me understand that I had never been as loyal to anyone in my life as this inner voice which broke me again and again. This voice which knew everything. It knew that nobody had ever truly loved me. How can a person who had never been truly loved have self-esteem? How can someone who had never been truly loved believe that they can do something special? I admitted to myself shamefully that I too had never truly loved anyone. My love for my mother was burdened with sorrows such that it resembled a fellowship of suffering. And my love for my daughter was marked by feelings of guilt. If love can raise us up with one hand, then guilt can drown us with a single finger.

I could not afford to lose myself in these spiralling thoughts since I had an enormous responsibility. I had managed to bring work and family life under one roof. Unlike my colleagues, I never went out. I never took part in cultural events since at home, ninety minutes away from the university, my daughter and husband waited for me. I had got used to simply skimming the university newsletter and passing over the announcements of poetry readings and concerts, so feelings of disappointment never even arose.

Deep inside I believed that my time should be dedicated to my family and that I didn’t even have the right to study and work. Leisure activities to keep up with this higher social class, were out of the question.

I am unsure whether I realised how important rarities are. A rarity is like a sharp bend on a long straight path which you can walk with your eyes closed. Perhaps it is this bend which awakens us from the endless monotony of our lives. I was sitting in a room full of faculty colleagues

when I read a name that I knew well. It was an announcement of a lecture with the title: *The Image of the Woman in Religions*, followed by the name of the guest lecturer and details of the time and place. Was it really him? Who else could it be? Religion and women’s rights were the focus of his work. I had seen him for the first time in a video posted on an online women’s forum. I had actually decided to end my membership since most of the recent posts were just about cooking or relationship problems but no sooner had I clicked to leave the forum than a video popped up. The author Ahmed Abdel-Salam was speaking about the dilemma of Arabic women. I listened as he spoke about the demands faced by women in the Arabic world where the combination of patriarchal power, tradition, religion, and the conservative economic system made women’s liberation seem almost impossible without jeopardising them psychologically, socially and materially. He spoke impulsively and his speech was stirring; one could believe that he was personally affected by the gender-specific problems of the conflict.

I looked at his existing publications and came across his autobiography. Since that day, I read every piece of his writing and watched all of his interviews.

“Wednesday, 23rd March, 6pm, West Hall, Auditorium A,” I repeated over and over silently. At first, I thought: I’m absolutely going to go. This is an exceptional chance, a rarity. I would tell Salem that I had to work later, or I’d lose my scholarship. I would persuade him. If he didn’t agree with me coming home late, I would ask him to pick me up so he would have no excuse. I thought about it thoroughly all weekend and came to the conclusion to only tell Salem about it on Tuesday as I wanted to avoid unnecessary tension. I looked forward to the event and decided to take my autobiography of Ahmed Abdel-Salam to be signed and to tell him how much I appreciated his thoughts and how surprised I was that a man could speak about the sorrows and battles of women better than most women. I read even more about him and watched his interviews in other languages with subtitles.

But one day before the lecture, I changed my mind. I found the idea of standing in a queue of people who probably only attended cultural events out of politeness or curiosity, absurd. Although I was sure there were readers who were genuinely interested in his work, I knew nobody appreciated him as much as I did. For me, he was not merely an author and participating in this lecture would be a rarity, a break from routine and an act of rebellion. He was the mouthpiece for every oppressed woman who could never speak – my grandmother, my aunt Salima, my mother and many more. In our society the sorrows of women were only taken seriously when a man spoke about them. But for some reason, I had the need to restrict the relationship I had developed with this person to one of author-reader.

On the day of the lecture, while sitting at my desk in the office, this thought occurred to me: Why not go to the lecture without queuing up for the book signing afterwards? Why not simply creep in and out again, like I always do? I liked the idea and regretted not informing Salem that I would be late, so I called him. I tried to keep it brief so as to avoid arguments and endless questions, but he still got worked up during the short conversation, telling me I had a daughter at home. I ended the conversation by asking him to take Rahma to my mother and telling him I’d be home around nine.

I went alone to the lecture. I didn’t want anyone to distract me during the talk. Because this rarity came at a high price: I would probably be subjected to Salem’s unpleasant comments and surly face for a week. I needed to consider this talk as an investment and make the most of it. I entered the hall and sat myself down in the rows at the back. Once everyone had taken a seat,

a professor took to the stage to introduce Ahmed Abdel-Salam. Everyone applauded as he appeared. From my seat I couldn't make out his facial features clearly which helped me to concentrate on his talk. He spoke of the image of the woman in world religions quoting surahs, texts and stories from every civilisation illustrating how well-versed he was in the field. Then he moved onto women's freedom in relation to men, summarising his rigorous analysis in a single sentence: "If men were free, they would not need to oppress and patronise women". He explained that religions did not necessarily demand that women be oppressed but rather the religious institutions had monopolised the concept of love and turned it into a variable in the patriarchal equation – with the outcome that men were convinced of the necessity of monitoring women and restricting their freedom. This thought in particular spoke to me: The deeply rooted belief of women that they have no right to freedom and the feeling of guilt that accompanies their pursuit of freedom, are the crux of the problem in our society.

His thoughts and analyses fascinated me, and I never stopped nodding along. However, my enjoyment was clouded by a conversation between two men sitting directly behind me:

"He must be scared of his wife," one of them said.

The other retorted, "I bet his wife wrote the talk for him."

And they both began laughing.

I started to feel rather uneasy. Their words brought me back to reality, to the fact that this talk was merely a 'happy pill' and the conversation between the two men was exactly what everyone around me thought. I was disappointed that these men, students at the most renowned university in Lebanon and members of the elite, were joking and laughing like the uneducated men in my village in order to avoid the moment of truth. Did that mean there was no hope? That a good education and economic prosperity would not rescue us from the stagnating swamp of our thoughts? Is it fair to blame village people who have never been educated for the fact that they do not respect women and treat them as inferior?

I thought all of this as Ahmed Abdel-Salam ended his talk with the words: "Here I'm speaking about women's liberty in the presence of people who form the cultural elite of this country. For those of you gathered here today, this lecture is food for thought and maybe a topic for discussion but the people who really need to hear my words are the women who have no access to a place called a university. The question of women's liberty may sound like an intellectual luxury in light of the difficult political and economic conditions in our region, but I say to you: freedom is indivisible and there are three criteria by which the progress of a society can be measured: how the society treats women, how it raises children and how they interact with ethnic and religious minorities."

After the talk some students gathered around the author as the hall slowly emptied. I watched from a distance as they talked among themselves getting their books signed and wished I were normal like everyone else. But my complex and the many contradictory voices in my head would not allow me to simply approach him to get my own book signed. I held it tight until my fingers turned white then stuffed it into my bag. Standing at the door, I looked at Ahmed Abdel-Salam once more before I left and forever lost the chance to stand face-to-face with him.

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A window on Gods Garden

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I shared these thoughts with Ahmed and we talked about love, freedom, self-image and hidden demons. Ahmed in turn shared his insights gained from his experiences of pain and opened his heart like a child showing their mother their wounds. He listened to me attentively without interrupting. His silence was a star showing me the way.

We didn't choose to fall in love. Love came to us as though in a dream – like a wave forming just by the shore. I knew we had feelings for each other but didn't have the courage to face them. What could a sophisticated author with endless opportunities find in a young woman from a simple background with so much baggage?

For months we telephoned each other every day. But when on one occasion, two days passed without hearing from him, my mind immediately began to create grisly scenarios. I was worried about his safety and mind. I asked myself whether something awful had happened to him or whether I had said something to anger him and scare him off. I hadn't expected his absence to cause me such emotional turmoil and to deprive me of sleep two nights in a row.

After two days I received an email from him which answered all of my questions.

Dear Amal,

Before I met you, I had never cried at a goodbye before. For me, travelling was like a quick death or a tunnel between two graves. I have travelled around the world to overcome boundaries, to flee from relationships and experiences and to overcome time and gravity. I travelled for the sake of travelling with little thought of the destination. Before I met you, all destinations were labyrinths which helped me to hide from absurdity and every country was a rabbit hole into which I crawled to escape from the trap of belonging. Yet now I must recognise that I can only find inner peace if I board an aeroplane which brings me to you.

Before we met, I flew over the sea of life with the apathy of a corpse. I soared motionless over time and adversities meeting no resistance. I was at a crossroads where there was neither peace nor war. At this crossroads, I met you. When you told me on our second meeting, you are like the ocean, everything changed. With the word 'ocean' as a metaphor for my existence, you hoped to surprise me. I didn't see myself as the ocean, though, rather as an iceberg which derives its right to exist from the cold of unexplored depths while the water feeds on its long, slow death.

No, it wasn't the word 'ocean' which surprised me, but the word 'you'. Previously, it had always filled me with fear. That fear came from the chasm between my fragile self and the image of me that others had. In order to bridge that divide I created endless portraits of myself to meet everyone's expectations... I thought, this disguise would protect me but in reality, I denied and humiliated myself. But as these three letters came from your lips, they seemed to be magical, like a sculptor's chisel wanting to depict my features. I stood there with my naked existence, innocent as a newborn not yet overwhelmed by life yet burdened with the memory of a thousand years. Back then, I knew nothing of your life circumstances and nothing of your willingness to embark on a journey into the unknown in my fragile boat.

After our second meeting I tried to understand what was happening inside me – tried to rationally examine my feelings for a woman I’d only just met and knew little about. I told myself that the feelings would settle down as soon as I left Lebanon, but I was wrong and couldn’t last a single day without thinking about you.

Now I know that love was our companion from the beginning and I also now know that this love, which in recent months has raised me up to heaven can take me to hell. I now know that love and fear cannot be separated.

For the last two days, I’ve been like a bird with a bloodied throat but who can’t stop singing. I feel lonely and overwhelmed by fear which I can do nothing about. I fear life won’t give us a chance to see each other again. I worry about you when you drive steep mountain roads. I want to protect you from the questioning looks still seeking explanations of what you are doing, to protect you from the fear that you see in your young daughter’s eyes when you think about me right now and from every other pain. I feel lonely, and I need you!

After reading Ahmed’s letter several times, I sat down and replied.

Dear Ahmed,

It is hard to believe that our paths only crossed by chance. I cannot imagine that this meeting was not predestined from the beginning of time or a previous life. When we met, I was also at a crossroads imagining the horrors lurking at the end of every path but in the end, I always returned to my place of suffering. Something in your words, your power, allowed the seed of strength buried in me to germinate. Our meeting was like two planets colliding. You have awakened womanhood in every cell of my mind and body.

And I also cried as we said goodbye. At that time, I couldn’t face the feelings I had for you because I believed that my heart and body were bound by my marriage contract. But I was wrong. Now I know that I loved you from the start and that love accepts no deception and does not wait for consent when it lands like a colourful butterfly on our murky hearts.

I have forgotten none of our first conversations. I still remember how fascinated I was as my shell slowly cracked around me and I could look in amazement at the world you wanted to show me. In every river I cross, I see the tears you wept in the forest. I wished you had gifted me a book which summarised your philosophy of life so I could read it again and again. But now it is clear to me that a man like you does not love through thoughts and that you need to bring your roots to plant them in the soil.

After this email exchange things began to develop quickly. We were in contact for several hours every day. Our conversations shook us to our foundations and aroused all the feeling which had been dormant for years. Some days tasted like pure love; I felt as if I were the lightest, happiest of all creatures. On other days there was a mysterious fear, the source of which I couldn’t identify.

Soon we sensed that words were not enough and nothing except meeting could satisfy our longing. So, Ahmed decided to interrupt his work in Berlin to visit me in Beirut. I waited in joyful anticipation since this time I would not meet Ahmed Abdel-Salam, the famous author, but the man I loved. It was hard to believe that my heart, which for years had known only sorrow was capable of such great joy.

At the airport I looked at the flight details. Suddenly a green dot appeared next to his flight number announcing the arrival of the aeroplane. Mixed feelings overlapped inside me – happiness, excitement, and confusion. What should I do when he came through, I thought? How do lovers who have fallen in love across a great distance behave when they first meet? Would I get to grips with my shyness? I walked back and forth in the arrival’s hall keeping an eye on the sliding door.

Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder. My heart skipped a beat, and I turned around saw his peaceful gaze, his endearing smile. I don’t know what happened then. He pulled me close, and we embraced. I felt like I was being embraced for the first time and he held me as though he had finally found a home.

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