

Orange Groves

It wasn't every morning that she looked, no, although often enough, but the grim, unspoken prohibition evident in everyone's eyes, and the fear, and the thrill of the forbidden act, and the desire to look anyway, the defiance – everything was dwarfed by her curiosity.

And she also felt quiet yearnings not only for the warm winter Saturdays and their, the Abu Saif family's, fruit stalls, but also for the summer days, for the sea and the freedom from school of July and August, and the desire to pick out sweets with her fingers from the stall at the end of the Carmel market, and the longing for the holidays at Grandma's. And like all the things interwoven in one thread of thought with the ideas flowing freely, joined together by loose, illogical connections, all the prohibitions and longings too were woven together and drifted out of Adele's window and beyond – to the gardens, the orange groves, the pool, the gleaming automobiles, the garage hosepipes, the crowds, the sound of shooting, the commotion of the children and all that riotous richness existing only about five meters from the entrance to the apartment building where she lived, enclosed behind rusty iron gates

and crooked fences, covered with coarse canvas sheeting whose green color had faded years ago.

‘*Them*’ – her mother always told her – ‘those people, that Abu Saif family, *them* and their drugs, and their guns, and their cash machines, it’s a pity that *they* aren’t shut in from above as well, it’s a pity you can still see everything *they* do there. They should be locked in, damn them to hell, so they can’t move around,’ she would say and shut the kitchen window overlooking the villas and the orange groves. And her father, who if he had not been retired so early from the police force due to an injury and spent his time surveying their enclosed plots of land through the smoke of his cigarettes, if not for his gaze at the orange groves, and the worry in his gaze, and the thought that the girls didn’t see anything, and even if they did see they didn’t – if not for all that she would not have been bursting with curiosity to peek out of her window again. Because whenever detectives from the police arrived all the familiar facts were instantly erased, and suddenly none of it had ever happened: no shots, no exchange of packages wrapped in shirts and rags underneath the fence, no chases among the orange trees, no dark figures lying down flat under the branches of the trees; there was only the preparation, the ceaseless practicing to be a little girl in Machrozet street and the rehearsal of the right answers: I didn’t hear anything, see anything. I wasn’t home, I was at school. I was on my way back from Grandma’s house.

And only when she was alone and it was a clear, fine day and laziness overcame her limbs even when her back was stooped under the weight of the books in her satchel, only then did she walk close to the fences and the canvas covering them, and beyond them were the orange groves, they too blocking the view from outside. Then she would measure her steps, brushing the bars of the fence with her fingertips,

lightly kicking clods of earth and gravel, raising sounds and whispers, after which she would wait in silence to hear the voices in the hidden yard.

On such a day, seemingly dry and ordinary, she was dawdling home to heat up a plateful of reddish spaghetti and thin schnitzels, and curiosity led her eyes towards the fence and the groves. There she sought out something that would catch her attention, stop her thoughts from going over and over her day at school, with every little detail she would have to report to her mother before she showed her the boring end of the year homework in the notebooks full of close lines of her winding handwriting. And in the dazzle of the sun, the weariness of her thoughts and the languor of her limbs, she trailed along the fence in a careless, childish emptiness.

In the canvas sheets attached to the bars of the fence, there were little holes of rot and erosion, inviting little peepholes. In the blazing sun of June in Jaffa, after hours of not drinking – there was nothing left in the bottle of raspberry juice in the pocket of her satchel – she clung to the fence in a daze, peeking at the children running round in merry circles, and the startled chickens, shedding feathers as they hopped to and fro, and the dogs, five of them, slouching in a menacing manner in front of the two houses she could see from where she stood.

A green and white football flew from side to side and sweaty boys in short pants and t-shirts or without them, a little older than she was, bounced it with their feet. Fat, well-dressed women sat at the entrances to the houses, glasses of dark tea in front of them, shooing away the toddlers fawning on them and demanding their attention.

And between their words, between the curses and the cheers, between the words in Arabic which she did not understand and those she knew and remembered from her grandmother, her eyes were unthinkingly drawn to a girl of about sixteen, a

tall, beautiful girl, whose hair was black and curly and a little wild, and whose smile was wide, radiant and charming. She was walking up and down in the center of the yard with a naked baby laughing and squealing with joy in her arms, waving his arms and legs about as she turned to and fro. Afterwards she put him down on the ground and he crawled contentedly on the grass, advancing purposefully – his eyes wide open and his cheeks smeared with chocolate – reached the fence, close to Adele she was standing, and with the same babyish determination grabbed hold of the fence, pulled himself upright, and fixed his smiling gaze on her, Adele, who had already dropped her satchel negligently on the ground next to her. For a few seconds she looked at the smiling little creature opposite her, and when she raised her gaze she saw the girl approaching her with curious black eyes, who immediately picked the baby up and swung him in the air, at the same time giving Adele a cutting look and scolding the baby: *‘Lesh truh lahon? Lesh ya ba? Hayat Allah, fish ishi hon. Binjib lak kaman chocolate min ya mma,’*¹ she scolded him and turned her back on Adele, sat the toddler on her hip like a practiced mother, went into one of the houses and disappeared.

Adele is quiet and the yard is noisy. No one notices her or the little incident between her and the girl, and she retreats from the fence and picks up her satchel. The sun blazes, her arms are already roasted, her head spinning and her tongue dry. Afterwards she ascends the dim stairwell, where only a few sunbeams penetrate the small windows and it is cool even in summer, and climbs to her floor, the fifth. The key squeaks in the first lock, at first refusing to open, and after that comes the upper, relatively new, lock installed after the burglary, and she has to stand on her tiptoes in

¹ Why did you go here? Why daddy? By Allah, there’s nothing here, we’ll bring you more chocolate from mommy.

order to reach it and turn the key one and a half times to the right. Only then will she go inside, lock the two locks and also slide the safety chain into its slot in the door.

She throws her satchel onto the armchair, takes the plate out of the fridge and peels the plastic wrap off the schnitzel and spaghetti, heats it up for a minute in the microwave and then eats slowly alone in front of the television, stares at the screen and still thinks about her, the girl, about her cheeky smile, her sharp eyes. And from the armchair she pads to the window, seeking their yard among the orange groves and fences – their dogs and chickens, the green and white football on the grass, the girl, who is also nowhere to be seen. No one is to be seen there, they have all vanished into the houses or the pool at the back, the pool she cannot see, she can only hear the merry shouts and laughter, and see a boy wrapped in a towel running from there to one of the houses, right after a loud shout: *‘Basem, ta’al hon, ya ba, wen inte? Basem, yinal abuk, ta’al bsur’a, daruri, fi telefon min a-shughl, ya ba.’*²

And all the nights of that summer, wrapped in a light blanket with the shutter in front of her almost completely closed and looking out strictly forbidden, in spite of it all, before she switched off the lights she took one last peek at the orange groves, searched behind the fences, scanned the view. Only afterwards, ensconced in her bed and bundling the pique blanket between her thighs, she would imagine, hushing her breath – so that the thin walls of the house would not betray her acts – herself in the yard among the children, standing face to face with the girl, who would smile at her, come closer, touch her, talk to her, and Adele would agree with every word even without understanding them, melt in her gaze and delight in the light, fluttering touch; like when she was watching American films late at night and broke with a soft moan on the living room armchair when there was nobody else there, so now in bed, easily,

² Basem, come here, daddy, where are you? Curse your father, come quickly, it’s urgent, there’s a phone call from work, daddy.

with surprising speed, she would bury her fingers between the folds of the blanket, squeeze her thighs and wait for the right moment, and afterwards bury herself, sweating, in the disordered blanket. For a few more moments she lay with her limbs sprawled out until she recovered her breath, and then she fell asleep and her dreams were hesitant, moving between the familiar and the strange. Gates opened and closed, called her to come in, and she wandered, floating, advancing further and further in, her house remained behind but her parents' voices called to her to get up, get up, wake up, abandon what had happened in the dream, which she could not pin down and remember, and which floated away, receding from her and utterly vanishing, and so with time did that inner turmoil, and the summer ended. And the new school year lay before her, drawing her into the new spaces of middle school, new subjects she had never studied before, and those glances towards the orange groves lessened, weakened, and the nights were ordinary, all she did in them was sleep, tired out, not looking for anything.

And one Saturday in winter, a few months later, when only vague memory of the figure of the girl remained, the gates of the orange grove were opened and wobbly tables were set out, covered with pale blue or white cloths and upon them crates of citrus fruits for sale. The women of the houses among the groves stood and packed oranges and tangerines, grapefruit and lemons into bags, at prices even lower than those in the market. For a number of Saturdays they stood there, the women, and only one man, tall, in rough jeans and a fashionable gray jacket circulated among them, supervising the sellers and also the Jewish buyers, residents of Jaffa D³ and the

³ Poor residential neighborhood located in the southern part of Jaffa, Tel Aviv.

housing projects in Bat Yam, dragging empty market bags with wheels, bargaining, leaning over the tables, groping lemons and tangerines, examining the merchandise.

And on the days of this improvised market all the fears and the anxieties and the sullen anger disappeared, and the children of the neighborhood were sent to fetch the fruit on their own. On the many warm, fine days of the Jaffa winter, juice stalls were set up on the other side of Machrozet street, next to the corner of Pa'amonim street, and fresh juice was offered for sale, squeezed in household squeezers and served in disposable plastic glasses. 'Five shekels a glass!' shouted the boys. 'Vitamine C, vitamine C!' They called and hustled in a little commotion far from the main streets, a neighborhood commotion which repeated itself every year without variation, except for when it was outdone by police raids, and demolition orders, and nocturnal shootings, and the activities taking place in the heart of the orange groves and the crime dens of the Abu Saif family.

And Adele pads five floors down in furry pink winter slippers, in her pocket a twenty shekels note, and repeats to herself: five oranges, two kilos of tangerines, one red grapefruit, and steps into the street and passes between the stalls, adopting the airs of a housewife: examining every orange and tangerine, inspecting the prices written on cardboard notices, scanning the faces of the sellers, passes from table to table, and the desire to please her parents drives her to seek out the finest fruits. She steps between the stalls, touches the fruit and dismisses it, until she encounters a familiar face, a broad smile and sharp eyes, which examine her from head to foot.

'Can I help you?' inquires the seller, not taking her eyes off her for a moment, fixing them on her and recognizing her. A questioning and accusing look, malicious but pleasant, direct, and Adele is confused, alarmed, excited and drops her eyes. 'Oranges,' she replies, 'five oranges.' And the girl stands her ground, not moving an

inch. 'What's your name,' she asks her and Adele keeps her eyes on the ground but steals a glance. The question is asked with charm, playfully and curiously. And she answers her: 'Adele, I live here,' she points, 'right opposite you.' The girl nods, takes out a plastic bag, hands it to her, and Adele chooses the oranges one by one, feeling them, turning them round and inspecting them like she's seen her mother doing dozens of times, until the girl suddenly takes hold of her right hand, places it on an orange on top of the heap and says: 'Here, here's a good one for your mother.' And Adele, obedient, picks it up and drops it in the bag held out to her and mumbles a low thank-you between her lips. And the ritual continues in slow silence: Adele puts out her hand, searches, and the seller stops her with a light but determined touch above different orange each time, until the five most golden are in the bag.

'Anything else?' asks the seller with a smile, and Adele presses her toes down in her slippers, shifts her weight from right to left, hesitates, blurts out a question and immediately feels that she has gone too far – 'What's your name?' – emphasizing the 'your', and immediately falls silent, as if not anticipating an answer. 'Tahrir,' the girl replies, 'my name's Tahrir,' and Adele nods her head and says nothing. The orange seller presses her: 'Say Tahrir, say it.' And Adele raises her eyes, sweat tricking down the back of her neck, and also between the fingers buried in the left pocket of her trousers and crushing the banknote there. 'Tahrir,' she says, 'a pretty name,' she adds and takes out the banknote and hands it to the girl. Their hands touch again, and the change is doled out coin by coin, and she says goodbye and turns to go home.

And already after a few steps she turns and goes back and stands facing her, and with renewed strength she says clearly: 'I need two kilos of tangerines too and a red grapefruit.' And Tahrir nods, silently holds out another bag with a merry, amused look. '*Jamila inti*,' says the girl stretching her hand out over the fruit and stroking

Adele's cheek, and she blushes like a little girl. 'What did you say,' she asks, and Tahrir gently strokes Adele's hair, 'Pretty, I said you're pretty.' And the embarrassed Adele passes her hand over the pile of tangerines, reaches out with her right hand to pick one up and drop it in the bag, and Tahrir clucks her tongue, shakes her head, 'No, not good' and Adele goes on searching, takes hold of another, and again the shake of the head and the clucking of the tongue, and her hand hovers questioningly over the fruit, asking for help and guided by Tahrir's long fingers, and seven tangerines are collected and tied in a bag. Adele's hand reaches out again with the rest of the coins, her fingers almost refusing to give up the coins and thus bring to an end this moment, what has happened between the two of them, and suddenly the bearded man in the jacket appears, stands behind Tahrir and murmurs: '*El-kull kwayse? Esh bida hadi el-bint, aktar min nus se'ah mawjuda ma'ak, bitjanenek?*'⁴ he asks and looks at Adele with a neutral expression. '*La, kwayes, tfakker ktir, tokhod el-wakt,*'⁵ she replies and looks into Adele's eyes when she places the change in her hand. 'You only need a grapefruit now?' she asks in Hebrew, and the man walks on, continuing his inspection. 'Yes, a grapefruit,' murmurs Adele, and the exchange takes place, and the man yells loudly: '*Yallah, halas, we're closing*', and yells '*Shabab, ya shabab.*' In an instant all the sellers pack up their merchandise, boys appear in the entrance to the courtyard, emerge from the gate and begin to clear away the crates of fruit, the tables. And Adele looks, she doesn't budge from her place when the stall in front of her closes down, and a pimply youth come out of the courtyard holding a baby and hands him to Tahrir, and she carries him on her hip in that practiced way and turns toward the orange groves, waving her free hand at Adele, passes the boys with their loads and

⁴ Is everything alright? What does that girl want, she's been standing there for more than half an hour, is she driving you crazy?

⁵ No, she's alright, she thinks a lot, takes her time.

recedes into the distance. Everything happens quickly, within a few minutes the citrus fruit has vanished, and only Tahrir's back is visible and also the smiling baby on her hip, who looks back at her. Adele takes a hesitant step towards the courtyard, she wants to go in and even to be shut up inside, but with a metallic creak the gates slam shut.

Faced with these gates sealed off from curious eyes by sheets of canvas, she turns back to the building where she lives. Five floors she climbs to her floor with the two bags in her hands, and when she rings the bell she is immediately greeted by her mother's 'What took you so long' face and her father's 'We thought the Arabs had kidnapped you,' and both of them laugh. And her mother fills the colorful bowls with the fruit, oranges in one, tangerines in another, and grapefruit in a third. And the radio blares jarringly, and the television is on without sound, and her father is slumped limply on the couch, the remote held slackly in his hand.

Adele takes the change out of her pocket and puts it in the kitchen table. Then she goes to the window and stands in front of it, leaning on the bars and looking towards the orange grove, tirelessly searching for Tahrir and the baby. And the sun dazzles her, glittering too on the distant sea, behind the quarters of Jaffa C⁶ and the ancient Muslim cemetery and the end of the new promenade that they kept on building and building, further and further, as far as the beaches of Bat-Yam and the edge of the horizon.

⁶ Residential neighborhood in the south of Jaffa, Tel Aviv.