Orphaned by Halley's Comet

A Short Story by Yesim Ternar

From the start, sadness was my lot. I was destined for sorrow. The midwives had given me up for dead and rushed to take care of my mother who was in great pain. I lay motionless on a table for a few minutes before I cried and started kicking. Color came to my cheeks, and my body got warm. My mother was still moaning in her bed; bleeding profusely. When she heard me cry so loud and angry, she smiled and for a minute, she forgot her pain.

I was her miracle baby. She had me when she was well in her forties. She had come out recently from the palace to be married and have a child before it was too late. She had me, but I wasn't alive at first. Then I lived. A few years later she died.

Right after my mother died, I had a Syrian nanny. She took care of my basic needs, but could not give me love, for only a mother truly cares. My nanny was a huge woman who hennaed her hair. When she uncovered her scarf, her hair fell on her shoulders in bright ripples of red.

Nobody can take the place of one's own mother. My mother caught small-pox in the big plague of 1910 and died. I don't remember her last days. I was a child. What does a child remember? She kept herself secluded so that she wouldn't pass her illness on to me. So I lived. Sometimes I wish she had taken me away with her. I would have died safely at her bosom. I lived many years without a hug after she died.

My mother was a strict woman. She applied the palace discipline in our house. The discipline was firmly rooted in her. She certainly hadn't left her courtly manners behind when she stepped out of the palace door. She was harsh with me, too. She wouldn't allow anyone to raise her voice around her. She made me walk tiptoe on the carpets the way it is in the palace. And I learned to address everyone

with deference.

If I didn't follow her orders, if I exhibited a childish petulance, it would not be tolerated. Love, the way mothers give their love to their children now, was not her style. She aimed for discipline, good manners, and a sound education.

I'll never forget how she used to say, "He who doesn't come back to his senses with advice needs a reprimand; and if the reprimand doesn't work, surely a good beating would."

In my case, I often had no time to know which was the advice and which the reprimand before I felt her heavy hand on my cheek. But she was my mother. And I would have taken many more beatings from her willingly had she lived. As the old saying goes, "Roses bloom where the mother strikes." And, "Heaven is under the feet of the mother."

I swear I would have kissed the earth she walked on had she only lived.

The year she died, before she was taken ill with smallpox, Halley's comet came to pass. We were in Aleppo at that time. Some people fortified their houses by stacking logs in front of their windows and doors, leaving one door free for use. Some covered the holes in their walls with old rags wherever they felt a draft. Vendors everywhere were selling one type of remedy or another. I remember the sweet cinnamon potions most. Even my mother bought a few bottles. People prayed fervently. The unbelievers turned devout in great numbers as the Halley's star was announced to be approaching us. I was a child and I got scared. Worst of all, I suspected the grownups didn't know what to expect, either.

There were some wise men around my mother, they must have been Aleppo's notables, who said, "It's been around before, this star, and it did not alight on earth. It must be attracted to earth, so it comes to take a look, like a shy lover. But it won't come closer. Do not fear."

Some scornful women talked among themselves. They said, "If this star is indeed like a lover, as they say, it means he should not be trusted. A shy lover can turn spiteful overnight and decide to abduct its favorite. Or he can ask for perilous favors under the threat of blackmail. You never know what a lover will do. Allah protect us if Halley's star is the lover of our earth."

All of this made me even more anxious, because I didn't know what lovers were like then. I was still a child.

We had a scullery maid who had fallen in love with our errand boy except the errand boy was already married. The scullery maid was from the hill tribes and she was a pretty little girl, I remember. She had a silver carnation-shaped nose ring and very pretty dark eyes. Her teeth were strong and white. She let the errand boy ravish her despite all warnings from the women servants. I don't know what happened. She must have let him do something immoral. Anyway, my mother sent her back to her mountain. Then the errand boy got his wife pregnant.

So when Halley's star got closer, people began to drink their potions and finger their charms and amulets. I remember it got darker and darker, and then this long stream of starlight rode through the darkness sparkling in the atmosphere. Yes, you could say Halley was like a brazen-faced dandy strutting around in a dress coat with sequins on his coat tails.

Some women were charmed. Others were scared to look in case they would go blind. They shrieked and ran indoors. My mother grew stiff and reverent as if she were in the presence of our Sultan. She stood in the middle of our living room like a pillar holding up the firmament and awaited Halley's orders. I ran under her skirt. It was the only time she let me do that. I hid under the thick layers of her clothes and felt very secure with her warmth. I had never been this close to my mother. The fear of Halley vanished from my mind because I felt so safe. But my mother died soon after.

A lot of things got tacked on to Halley's tail that year, and carried away. One of them was my mother.

She was taken ill suddenly. It started with a headache. She was embroidering one afternoon, in the November afternoon light that she liked so much. Maybe my fondness for fall afternoons takes after her. She was bending over a Gobelin pillowcase she was working on. I was sitting on the floor at a distance from her, stringing glass beads to make a necklace. I looked up and saw her profile in the light, sharp and determined as always, and the elegance of her strong handsome chin, her gracefully poised neck. A few black strands of baby hair pushed out of the borders of the white silk scarf she had bound her head with. Her polished black stone earrings contrasted against the pink of her soft fleshy earlobes.

I saw her like this, all in an instant, and I was in love with her. She was all mine even if she didn't know it. Even if she was so harsh with me, she was my mother.

She looked up from her embroidery, turned at me and silently examined my face. It was a short, searching look, quite anxious. Not at all the way she normally looked at me or anyone else. She rose from her chair and said she had a headache and wished to lie down. Would I please send her the servant, she asked me.

I bowed my head, indicating compliance. She was gone when I looked up.

I saw her next about a week later. I had cried and begged, but the servants would not let me near her. They said she was very tired and needed rest. From the way the fat cook screwed her eyes when she looked at me and clicked her tongue, I knew something dreadful was happening to my mother.

My stern and cruel father came home earlier than usual after my mother was taken ill. But he would not talk to me at all. He would ask his dinner to be sent to his room and retire early. I don't know if he visited my mother at night. He never talked to me.

He would come home, take a look at me like I was a bothersome thing that someone had tricked him into accepting, and instruct the servant that I be fed my supper early and sent to bed. I could not sleep and I used to wet my pillow with my tears, sobbing under my heavy quilt. There was nobody to pat my head and my shoulders. No one came at all to comfort me. I would lie sobbing in my bed in the dark, and wish that my mother would tiptoe in and lift me from the pillow with her arm around my chest and kiss my forehead. No one came of course. In that state, I would sink into a fitful sleep.

I had thus fallen asleep when I was awakened by my tutor. She shook my shoulders and asked me to get up. I protested. But when she told me that my mother had sent for me, I got up quickly. I forgot to tie my hair or cover my nightgown with a shawl. I slipped into my slippers and followed my tutor who was lighting the way with a gas lamp. There were more people at the entrance to my mother's room. My tutor was instructed to hold me back until I would be allowed in. My heart was throbbing and my hands were clammy from apprehension.

Finally, she let me go. She prodded my shoulders as if I needed to be pushed ahead. I was not resisting her. I *wanted* to see my mother.

The room was dark. There were no lights save a distant glow from the outside. After a while my eyes got used to it. I realized that my father and the doctor were standing in one corner of the room whispering at each other with bowed heads.

My mother beckoned me toward her. I could barely make out the lines of her face and her hair which she had left undone. I

realized years later that she was hiding the deformity her illness had caused; even in weakness, she had been proud.

"Come over," she said in a barely audible voice, moving her lips with effort. She fixed her eyes on me as if she wanted to verify that everything was all right with me. I was afraid she would scold me for appearing in front of her in my nightgown and with my hair loose, but she didn't seem to mind.

She actually smiled at me before she said in a whisper, "My gazelle-eyed girl, my sweet little girl." Those were the kindest things she had ever said to me. She said nothing more. She fell back on her pillow, exhausted.

I looked around the room and saw that the window was open. I was alarmed. The chilly winter air could kill her, I thought in a panic. She was always so afraid of drafts. I was about to ask the doctor if the night air could harm my mother when I realized that strangely, the air outside was not very cold, that it wasn't really a threat to her. Perhaps my mother had even asked that the window be raised.

Then I understood that she must be feeling very hot, that her fever must have made it unbearable for her to stay in a room with closed windows.

Death claimed her soon before dawn. I was not allowed to see her again. The washers and mourners who came to perform the last rites were women I had never met before. They did their work efficiently and quietly.

I caught a glimpse of her clean white shroud and I remember the whole thing smelling of fresh soap before it was lowered into a coffin of pine.

I took to roaming the streets alone at night afterwards. I couldn't sleep at all for months and months because I was always thinking about how alone I was in the whole world. I would wait till the household had stopped stirring, then I would slide down an oak tree whose branches reached to my window. I would dress in dark clothes so as not to be seen because a girl, alone at night in Aleppo in 1910 was unacceptable. I would slink through the back streets, following the garden walls of the houses until I reached the center of the city. There, all the shops were decked in light, and cafes stayed open until the morning. Music and conversation was in the air. I went to see the lights mainly and to see the people. It was the golden age of Aleppo.

I disgused myself as a little boy. Sometimes, I disguised myself as a shadow. I went whistling in the dark although this was considered very unlucky. If you whistled in the dark, it meant you were calling the devil. I scared people that way.

Often I went hungry. I was a child and got hungry often, but my miserly father would lock the larder with a chainlock and carry the keys with him. It's not that we were poor. The larder was stocked to the brim with dried fruits, nuts, cookies, and confitures. The peasants brought them from the village every day. People gave gifts to my father because he was a powerful man.

He continued receiving my mother's gold coins from Istanbul. He should have kept them for me. That gold was sent to my mother from the palace as payment for her services. When she died, they were sent to me in my father's name. But my father took them all. When he died, strangers enjoyed them. Relatives we didn't know had spent my mother's money.

After my mother died, my life was lonely until I got married. First I was sent to the German school in Aleppo, and then to Istanbul, to Kandilli Girl's School.

I adapted well to the German school. The Schwesters were kind to me. Schwester Mathilda, to whom I was assigned, became a second mother. I picked up German very quickly and I enjoyed the discipline. There was a healthy joy in the order of our days. We would get up very early in the morning and wash our faces and necks with cold water. Then we would exercise out in the yard before breakfast. I liked this, because I was a very good gymnast. They were fond of me, too. Schwester Mathilda cried unabashedly when my father informed her that I would be continuing my education in Istanbul in a French school for muslim girls.

I stayed for a very short time at the German school and yet I remember Schwester Mathilda's face best among all the people who took care of me. A lot of people took care of me in my youth. Their faces were different, maybe, but their manners were the same. Of all my retainers, Schwester Mathilda sticks out, with the same manners as the rest, but a different face, the only one who cried for me.

At Kandilli Girl's School, there were clocks on all the walls; a different one in each classroom, and large ones in the hallways. There were round ones and hexagonal ones, octagonal ones and square ones with luminous dials; some in Arabic script, some in Latin script, some with majestic Roman numerals and others with sinewy Arabic numerals.

Each clock had been carried from a different territory of the Ottoman Empire, as a memento of times past and lands lost. Clocks that ticked for passengers in ancient railway stations in Eastern Europe now ticked for us girls. Some were reassuring, and some still agitated as they counted away the moments.

My life passed under those institutional clocks. I often wondered about the men, the brave soldiers and precautious army captains who had looted them to become our benefactors. Those men captured this solemn booty for us, I used to think.

My father continued to be stingy. He'd count every penny before he gave it to me. All the while my mother's gold coins piled up. I'd pull the tip of my stockings and fold them underneath to cover the holes. I patched everything I could with matching fabric and small stitches. I walked instead of taking the tram on weekends, so I could buy a new pair of stockings or underwear. I was a young girl. Surely my father noticed that I was growing up. He lived in Aleppo and came to Istanbul for short visits. I grew between each visit.

The more my father was relentless, the more I withdrew. Oh, I had my friends and my teachers. I was well liked and I always acted in school plays. But I was sad in my heart. Once after my father came to visit me at Kandilli again, and counted the pennies into my hand, I went for a walk in the school garden. It was a weekend, so most of the boarders had gone home. Only a few were as abandoned as me.

It was early spring. I stood under a sprawling oak and looked up at its bare branches dividing up the sky like the lines on my palm. My heart felt still. I shut my eyes. Then I had this whirling sensation that I was a universe within; that in all that loneliness, something else had developed — a universe of planets and comets and multiple dimensions; a darkness streaked by light, populated by cosmic creations. In my chest, I realized, lay the darkness and the immensity of the whole universe.

At Kandilli, I loved literature classes and acting best. But all my compositions were about sadness and being an orphan. We used to illustrate our compositions with French postcards we bought at Beyoglu on our weekend outings. Here is one of a little girl crying. She is dressed in laces and white frills and even from her profile you can tell that she belongs to a good family. But she is crying. She could be an orphan.

This is a composition I wrote when I was fourteen. The ink has turned brown, but I've kept it carefully folded in the middle dividing the width of the page in half; not the way they do in schools now, folding a page in the center, joining its top

and bottom.

This is my composition:

"The little orphan stands by the bay window in the dormitory, watching the aloof grey sky and the softly falling raindrops. Her own grief is suffused with the sorrow of nature.

The incessant raindrops seem to echo her stifled sobs. She watches the damp cement in the orphanage back yard and the grey trunks of the ancient trees in the rain. Everything outside seems to be bearing a burden as well, but she feels that the weight on her shoulders, that sorrow that would crush a much sturdier being, is the heaviest burden of them all.

She shivers in this pervasive dampness of the winter rains and gasps for breath. She is unable to inhale. Her frail chest feels crushed and she feels the cruel whirlpool of grief suck her deeper and deeper into a bottomless void.

Even death would be welcome now for at least it would end her loneliness. In death she knows she would join her mother. However strict she was, she was her mother.

Then just as she feels totally alone, a wise old angel descends from the sky. It flaps its white wings and throws a divine light on the little orphan's vulnerable body with its loving gaze.

It descends slowly and alights on the window casing beside the little orphan and takes her under its wings with all the love of a mother and father combined. Outside the rain is still falling, but a gentle warmth has already begun to envelop the little orphan's heart."

My literature teacher at that time, Monsieur Hulki Kerkuk had written his comment on the back of the page, but it appears to be on the front page of the composition after folding it the way we used to fold it. The swift strokes of his sharp pointed pen are still clearly visible after all these years; and his ink is indelible, while mine has faded. Monsieur Hulki Kerkuk has noted:

"This is a very poetic and truly convincing piece, but it would require a bit more organization."

A bit more organization Monsieur Kerkuk, a bit more organization? I poured out my heart to you and you ask for organization?

I expected my literature teachers to understand me, but they always betrayed my trust.

Lupe Rodriguez
***Transitional Series #2*, 1987**
mixed media on rag paper
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