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The Mark of Daraa

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“At the department of - but it is better not to mention the department.” - Nikolai Gogol

The process by which all men and women between the ages of anything and anything are snatched from the market while sniffing fresh parsley and examining inferior bread, tossed into the backs of unmarked trucks between rows of

plain-clothed officers from some Syrian department or another of the kind fully staffed by Joseph Mengele-certified specialists in Humanities, and driven to unknown locations on hard terrain, is generally known to begin – for the snatched – with a sense of disbelief.

That monstrous combination of hope and anxiety which leads you to think that it's a matter of grave misunderstanding that you, of all people, have ended up in this specific situation: lying on top of someone else's disbelief between pairs of unrelenting boots while a sea of casual sadism and familiar profanities sails on the prenatal trance of filth pressing into your soul. A serious misunderstanding, you say out loud, but softly. Surely, at the department you're hurtling toward, there are reliable men who can be trusted: grey-haired men at senior positions who listen and smile; who apologize on behalf of the department.

You're not going to cry, you say, until you've safely walked out of the Department. You won't feel sorry for yourself, you say, until you no longer have reason to. The process – it is known – by which all men and women between the ages of anything and anything with souls already predisposed to departure depart, begins with a gentle hand on your shoulder; with someone whispering beautiful Syrian words into your ear.

“Come with us.”

For how does one spend the night at the Department; what are the dimensions and how friendly or unfriendly are the guards? Do they – if you can afford a banknote, and if you slide it with considerable success through the seams of the

little opening in the door, asking for something or another – deliver? And did whatever you ask for really cost that much? And if it didn't, do they withhold the change, or do they return it with a sinister smile that you may get a glimpse of if you lowered your head far enough and they were standing at the right angle and the light was on and the officer wasn't walking around; and do they return it right away or do they laugh at your desperate attempts to snatch it as they repeatedly slide it in and out, standing outside, fully clothed and certain and groomed, perhaps even smoking a cigarette whose smoke they're blowing on the rust and rot of the metal door deformed with a heritage of the corrosive desperation of fingernails of others who've come and gone, or are currently still inside, perhaps even sitting next to you, not even laughing at your fresh hope and not dismissing it, but simply and wilfully observing the raw passage of time; simply and wilfully designating as waste what they knew was waste?

And when you're awakened in the morning by what seems to be a gentler banging on the door than what you're accustomed will startle you out of a nightmare and into the next, and when the door is then violently pushed open, and the duty officer steps in with his youth and the menacingly contoured uniform and the law enforcement-tinge of the aftershave, and when he begins to read the names of every prisoner with you in the limbo of temporary detention, and when the guards start pouring dirty water on the floor, throwing a few mops at you and your fellow snatched, commanding you to get to it, and when the leftover orange from yesterday's dinner – that you'd earnestly saved for an afternoon session of feeling anything in the world on your tongue; on your self – starts to roll in the breaking waves of dirty water and disarray, and when one of the guards picks

it up and throws it through the door, and the officer notices your eyes which remained tethered to the orange, and when he smiles and he asks you “beddak yaha?” and when everyone laughs, do you then issue that desire in an audible form in the same breath with which you doused yet another defeat?

And when the next night befalls this garden of the fugitives, and when you’re trying to sleep in the living art of seventy bodies, physics-defyingly sprawled in every conceivable position, with feet fitted into the smoothness of armpits and heads on the comfort of crotches and arms over chests, and when it’s too hot to fall asleep or to make any sense of any desire or idea, and when you try to muster the massing beads of exhaustion from every corner of every cell, and when you fail at that and make for coaxing the acquisitive gaze of this night into, first, seeing the point of pleasure, and second, attaining it by whatever complex means.

You try to focus on any single idea; on your cold resolve to rename this moment as whatever the opposite of it is; persevering and fending off the vultures of reality flying oppressively low with jaws clasped toward the only thing you got left: her, or him, or some home somewhere, where the people are nearer and dearer; some parallel universe version of this city where the only words that can be said in Syrian are “I love you” or “she’s getting some rest” or “what’s for lunch?”; some place where the storage facilities of departments are overflowing with fossilized fish and flamingo feathers; a place where no one ever misses anyone because no one ever left.