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Benevolence

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been a donkey, and said proudly: "The operation was successful—but the old man died."

Shadwan, carrying the body on his shoulders, left Giza and went back, along the same way he had come. He who was crippled by life disassociated himself and began scolding him. Said he who was crippled by life: "I knew the old man well—he wasn't a man to depart this world and leave us to benefit from his donkey."

translated by Denys Johnson-Davies with Anna Lillios

BENEVOLENCE

THE WOMAN NOTICED that her daughter had slowed down and her movements were sluggish, as if she had to drag her body along. Her body was not big enough to be heavy. Her neck was slender and her breasts were like two peaches.

The woman paused at her daughter's breasts and was surprised that the two peaches were extraordinarily ripe for her fourteen years of age. As the woman stood studying her daughter her anxiety grew. The girl walked with her legs apart, even though her thighs were not fat enough to make her walk that way. On her face, usually pale from undernourishment, two small apples were sparkling with near-bursting skin which set free the blood underneath. The girl's eyes were bright and wide, as if she were feverish, while her body appeared full and well fed.

The mother's eyes travelled to her daughter's stomach and she became alarmed. The stomach did not appear extraordinary and it ambiguously told nothing, but the girl seemed to pay great attention to it as she moved about, as if something within irritated her.

The mother stretched out her hand, took the girl's small hand and drew her behind her into an inner room where she inspected her body. Only then were her doubts confirmed and a stone fell on her heart.

Weeping, the girl explained that she had not willingly taken part in what had happened. She had been under the old tree on the hill while the sheep were grazing a stone's throw away. Just before sunset a man suddenly appeared and raped her. The act took awhile, but she did not care very much.

The woman was not listening. Her face darkened and became gloomy, for she was absorbed in thinking about her husband, who had died without leaving a son behind. For this reason she cried bitterly and

blamed him. Had he left a son, she would not now be poor, weak, and lonely.

The girl slept because she was tired, even though she knew her mother was having a breakdown as she sat in front of the stove and stared with haggard eyes at its fiery opening. Her imagination drove her to fantasize what her coming days would be like when her daughter passed through the village, stomach protruding.

Before dawn, the woman rose having made a decision, gathered together her things and woke the girl. She went out in her big, black robe with her daughter following. Before daybreak, they left the village behind.

The sun had risen high to find them climbing down a hill to level ground. The woman was old, worn out, and overburdened with cares and wants, but she gathered her strength and went on her way.

Now and then she turned her stony face to the girl who hastened behind, lowering modest eyes at such moments, as if shame were chasing them.

The day passed without their stopping. Sunset found them at the outskirts of a village near the end of the valley. The woman dropped onto the river bank, unable to walk further. She rubbed her swollen feet, wailed, and complained of her misfortune. The girl walked down the bank of the river and brought some water for her mother to drink. She washed her mother's face and wrapped her feet. But the woman did not stop wailing.

A man passed by them and saw the woman crying. He stopped and asked what the matter was. He was big, his bones were well defined, and his neck thick. She told him her story.

The man looked towards the girl who lowered her face. He contemplated the situation while the woman continued complaining that her husband had died without leaving her a boy.

The man said to himself: "Be kind for once. Here is a weak woman with no man to help her."

He was a professional killer, robber, and thief, but times change.

He said to himself: "Old age has begun to creep up on me and I have nothing left. Any action I take, I pay the price even now."

He patted the woman's shoulder and comforted her. He carried her belongings and led the procession to his home. At home he served them food, which they ate, and then prepared a bed for them, telling the woman to sleep peacefully and let him take charge of her worries.

As night descended on the village, the man approached the girl and broke her neck. He put the girl's body into a sack which he carried to the river and dumped in. He then returned home lightheartedly.

In the morning he prepared breakfast for the woman and placed her and her belongings on a donkey. As he walked beside the donkey back to the village, the woman raised her face to heaven and muttered prayers thanking God for the man.

translated by Elizabeth Bloeger and Vivien Abadir, with Anna Lillios