The Artichoke and Her Tender Heart

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So Scheherazade began.
Anonymous, *A Thousand and One Nights*

Italians call it *carciofo*, in English it is called *artichoke*, but it is from here, from the Lebanese soil . . . " Khalil the taxi driver starts his story like an orator who's been preparing what he will say and how he will say it for a long time. He continues: "Her very name is Arabic, *al karsufa*, the plant with hard leaves." That very dawn, as he was about to begin his shift, Khalil stopped to pick up some from a greengrocer in his neighborhood, Cola, on the outskirts of Beirut. He reaches back and hands me an unexpected gift: a plastic bag filled with water spiked with a few drops of lemon juice and floating artichoke hearts. "It strengthens the blood, calms and frees the mind," he says. Like a druid who masters the secrets of the magic potion, he tells me that once cleaned, the heart of the artichoke must be put in water right away;

otherwise, her tender fiber becomes dark and her taste, bitter.

This morning, Beirut's streets are tinged with yellow because of the sand swept in by the storm last night—one of those storms with clouds that suddenly break and sand that blankets the city. Some say these storms come from Jordan, others that they originate in the deserts of Saudi Arabia, others still say they're from Egypt. Each teller is adamant that his version is true and will hear no other explanation. Beirutis never leave space for any alternative opinions. For the same reason, Khalil does not listen to my interjection to share with him an interesting fact I'd recently happened upon while reading: apparently, the ancient Romans loved artichoke and considered it both a delicacy and an aphrodisiac.

Good-hearted, witty Khalil. He was born with a gift for storytelling, and growing up in Cola had honed those God-given skills. He talks to me about the artichoke the way many of his fellow Beirutis talk to me about the storm, taking something he's read, mixing in something he's heard and seasoning it all with his own unique spice.

His silver Toyota snakes along the coast, meandering southward on the road that links Beirut to Tyre. The windshield is tinged with yellow this morning, and the wipers have left windy traces. On the dashboard, a bouquet of fresh gardenias radiates a potent perfume that masks the smell of Khalil's cigar. Dawn is breaking, the city is silent; Beirut emerges from a deep, golden sleep. Through the cigar smoke, Khalil is telling stories about Arabic travellers, the merchants from the Orient who introduced the noble artichoke seed to European soil. He modulates his speed to suit his narrative, accelerating or braking as his story demands. And as if

imitating the hairpin turns of the road, he deftly twists his tale in unexpected directions, inserting episodes that at first blush have nothing to do with the Mediterranean thistle but soon reveal themselves to be as crucial to the story as salt, olive oil and lemon juice are to a Beiruti feast.

Every story my friend tells me has a different source but they all flow to the same delta: memories of the civil war and the early years in Cola, where Khalil's father had a shoe factory. Once a year, the father and brother would go to Italy for the Milan fashion fair. They would take with them a sample mold with which they made shoes that, at least in Khalil's version of events, were of better quality than the Italian originals. On Sundays, his father would go to the *hammam*—which, in those years, was still at the edge of the city. He wore double-breasted blazers and shirts with cuffs; after shaving he would put on a cologne that smelled of sandalwood. Sunday was also the day of long family lunches in Cola, enlivened by visits from cousins and friends. The table was always heavy with delicacies: French cheeses and wines, mussels and octopus. Always there were artichokes that had been boiled in water with bay leaves. The last bite, the heart resembling a flower, was drizzled with dark green olive oil, seasoned with coarse sea salt and given to the kids.

Long afternoons were filled by games of backgammon, on the board made in Damascus, with mother of pearl inlays. Stories were told about Egypt, the Mohammad Ali Street in Cairo, shops where jewelry, and furniture handcrafted from rattan and straw were sold. Khalil heard about letters that merchants secretly wrote to girls from Egyptian houses,

surrounded by high walls and gardens within boxwood paths. They had exchanged only a glance—dark eyes with strong mascara line would quickly appear under the scarf—but they would wait for years, renouncing offers of proposers and gossip from the bazaar. The big house in Cola was full of laughter, while above the wooden board, anecdotes were floating about negotiating prices, Egyptian cabarets, belly dancers—stories about great journeys and hidden loves.

Khalil was ten when the first gunshots and explosions echoed through Cola. A different sort of people, men of different manners and appearance, began to frequent their home. The classic stories of the neighborhood were like a boot cut to the exact shape of its wearer's foot. But the stories these new men told were rigid, devoid of imagination, narrative skill or exotic Oriental charm. They inevitably focused on money and business, on who lost or earned how much, and how. And instead of backgammon, a leisurely game where intervals last as long as the spaces between the sips of Lebanese wine, card games were played, short and brisk, punctuated by shouting and table slamming. The women and children would be excused from the table before sunset, and the games would continue deep into the Beiruti nights. By dawn, the table was littered with coffee pots and strewn with tobacco ash. There'd also be a stray artichoke leaf or two, the residue of a lost, forgotten time.

The war lasted many years. It hopped from neighborhood to neighborhood, cunningly changing its face and intensity and pausing only briefly to take a breath. From the terrace where, when the firefights lulled, kids played ball, the hulls of

the buildings and hotels where the battles had raged loomed, close-by. One could see the edifices of the hotels around which battles were led. These buildings were once the favored haunts of Lebanon's elite and its deep-pocketed scions of business but the war transformed them into monstrous shipwrecks, grey scars that mar the cityscape even today. A diverse cast wanders through Khalil's stories. Masked soldiers rub shoulders with divas of the silver screen, and Egyptian directors filming comedies in Beirut pop up at the table where the father and his friends play their nocturnal poker sessions. This is where Khalil learned how to maintain a convincing poker face and shuffle a deck of cards, how to pour a drink and cut ice, how to prepare a hookah.

Slowly, the house was leeched of its treasures: one by one, the copper vases, rugs and figurines made of amber disappeared. Outside, the house was shaken by a war with no end in sight, and on the inside it was hollowed out by the father's spiraling gambling addiction. Like a drowning man, he pulled the others down with him. When his debts reached crushing proportions, the father shuttered the family's small shoe factory, abandoning the remaining molds and tanned leathers. The whole family moved first to Cairo, to Khalil's father's birthplace, and from there to the Balkans, to Bulgaria. There, Khalil learned the language of his host nation, acquiring a colorful collection of Bulgarian expressions that he would hold on to for decades, peppering his speech with idioms he'd translated literally from Bulgarian. But Lebanon exerted a powerful pull, and at the first sign of an enduring truce, Khalil returned to Beirut and reopened the business.

"A foot cannot be bare, even if it there is gunfire around," Khalil tells me with a knowing glance into the rearview

mirror. "Wearing a beautiful shoe," he continues, "one feels younger, quicker. . ." Abruptly, he disappears into the wheel well and emerges a second later with his deerskin moccasin in one hand.

In the markets of Beirut, shoppers select artichokes with the care of a devoted gardener selecting the perfect rose. The petals should be just so, neither too tightly closed upon themselves, nor too fully unfurled.

"I once brought back to Bulgaria from Beirut a suitcase full of artichokes that I had bought on the very road that we are driving on now," says Khalil. When he opened the suitcase, the fruits of the Lebanese land spilled out onto the floor. Khalil's father cleaned the artichokes, one by one, with a knife and then boiled them in a large pot, tasting the liquid every so often. With each spoonful of the sharp, sour liquid, the old man shed the vestiges of the man—the gambler, the drunk—he'd become.

"Layla helped me more than anybody else," says Khalil, showing me the picture of his wife, an art teacher at an elementary school, and their two daughters, both born in Bulgaria. "She knows people's nature. I can say a lot of things, I sometimes swear . . . She knew that, sooner or later, we would go back to Lebanon and Beirut, as indeed happened. Where our factory in Cola stood once, there's now a store selling shoes made in the Armenian quarter, Bourj Hammoud, my brother is still in the business. The old man paid his debts a long time ago. And now, who would have ever imagined, of all things he dedicated himself to religion! He is reading the Koran and other holy books. This man who used to drink himself unconscious now drinks only coffee,

taking abbreviated sips from the steaming mug like a nervous sparrow drinking from a puddle of rainwater.

On Sundays the house in Cola is filled with stories, like the ones exchanged around the campfires by the men in their flowing indigo gowns who moved camels across the desert. On Sundays, the old man regales his grandchildren with tales of the old Beirut times. He describes in exhaustive detail where houses and stores and gardens which are no more had once stood; he recounts his travels in Egypt and waxes poetic about Aleppo pistachios, which are also no more. He never talks about the war. If the conversation drifts in that direction, he goes silent and puts his head down, as if he's waiting for a storm to pass.

Suddenly, Khalil suddenly emerges from stories of the olden days, pivoting to the present, to the car ride and the road that spools out before us.

"I brought this car because it fit my proportions—not too small or too big. There is enough work, *hamdullilah*. I drive Beirutis, Iraqis, Saudis. I drive you as well. As far as I'm concerned, we can drive wherever, even to Damascus . . . And Beirut will again be a place where that people will flock to. This, this is the center of the Middle East."

Khalil observes life through his own very personal lens, painting in bright hues both the events of his own days and those that fill the newspapers. He scrubs all his stories of anything that hints of evil. Next to us, along the road, stands are selling fruit and vegetables. Close to Sidon, workers

have lit a fire, wrapped artichokes in aluminum foil and are placing the silver bundles onto the coal with iron tongs. The fruit will cook in its own skin. While we are putting suitcases in the trunk, Khalil wipes his sweaty forehead and all of a sudden his face is bright as a midsummer morning; he picks up the phone and talks to his daughter. She wants to go with her girlfriends to a movie at 10 pm. He asks me my opinion, whether I think that teenage girls should go out that late alone, but before I have time to answer, he informs me that's decided to drive them himself. He will wait for them and then drive them all home. Like an artichoke devoured leaf by leaf, I listen to his stories. When he stops, I repeat the last line. He continues.

Not even now, after having seen many changes of season in Beirut, do I know exactly when artichoke season is. Suddenly, as Khalil drives and talks and I listen in the back seat and stare out the window at the passing landscape, I'll catch a glimpse of an artichoke bud. It looks like a pine cone, this plant with a tender heart. Like orange from Nakhoura, the artichoke blooms more than once a year. Sometimes it tastes sour, and the leaves are tough and chewy, but with the summer days it grows sweeter and softer. Its light green heart, covered in olive oil, preserves the warmth of the Lebanese summer.

Translated from the Serbian original, "Biljka mekog srca" in "Stories from Lebanon" (Priče iz Libana) by the author.