

# **KISSIRTU KULLIMKIEN**

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## **Excerpt in Maltese**

### Roži tax-Xgħajra

#### *Roži*

Roži ffit kienu jafuha nies. Rari ħarġet mir-raġal ħlief għal xi tiegħ jew festin tal-familja. Li toħroġ 'il bogħod minn raġalha għal Roži kienet xi ħaġa kbira. Kienet tħoss diqa enormi, qisu xi ħadd ċaħħadha minn element bażiku ta' ħajjitha, u għal dawk il-ftit sigħat li kienet tqatta' 'l bogħod mix- Xgħajra, Roži kienet ittefted fil-libsa u tħossha kemxejn aġitata, b'genn inkallat biex in-neputi Liam jegħja jixrob u jfittex iwassalha lura d-dar. Ir-raġal tax-Xgħajra Roži kienet tħobbu wisq. Xi trid iktar? Kwiet, baħar li kwaži dejjem imqalleb biex jiffriskalek il-pulmun, knisja ħelwa u żgħira u l-istess erba' wcuħ, li forsi sindikajri xi naqa kemm, imma wara kollox kulħadd sindikajr, hemm min b'ħanġra u hemm minn b'sikta. Finalment Roži tberikhom għal ġieħ kemm-il darba sabithom fil-bżonn u r-residenti tal-villaġġ tagħha kienu raġuni oħra kbira għalfejn Roži qatt ma kienet toħlomha li titlaq minn hemm. Tiftakarha kuljum meta missierha tah attakk ikrah f'qalbu. X'kienet tagħmel mingħajrhom li kieku f'dik il-ġimgħa ma ħadux paċenzja biha? Iwassluha Mater Dei, isajrulha, u jitingħulha lil Ġovanna, il-qattusa ndannata u nofs grazzja li żżomm f'darha Roži.

Ix-Xgħajra villaġġ żgħir u ffit huma n-nies li jgħixu hemmhekk matul is-sena kollha. Ħafna kienu jiġu għal sitt xhur biss, igawdu x-xatt kwiet. Fix-xitwa, il-maltempati u l-irwiefen hemmhekk huma xi ħaġa fenomenali; ir-riħ tistħajlu xi kelb irrabjat qiegħed iħuf wara t-twieqi ta' darek, u l-baħar jogħla s-sulari sakemm fl-aħħar jispiċċa jiffarrak waħdu mal-blat xieref. B'hekk ħafna jiddeċiedu li fl-istaġuni iktar kešhin idabbru rashom lura lej' darhom f' Ħaż-Żabbar.

Imma Roži, sajf u xitwa hemm. Dejjem. Għalkemm ma kinitx toqgħod fejn il-baħar, kienet ixxomm dik ir-riħa ta' ilma mielaħ minn kullimkien. Magħmul minn diversi niżliet paralleli, li kollha jagħtu għax-xatt, il-baħar fix-Xgħajra tarah, tħossu fi mnifsejk ma' kull kantuniera.

Imma mhux din l-aħħar sena. Minn meta waqqgħu d-dar ta' hdejjha, u dik li tmiss mal- parapett ta' wara — hekk, kollha f'daqqa — Roži ma tafx x'laqatha. Flok riħa ta' melħ ma' kullimkien, hemm riħa ta' terrapien u ġir. Flok hsejjes tal-bejta għasafar fir-rebbiegħa jħaxwxu xi mkien mas- siġra tal-laring fil-ġnien, hemm floss ta' jigger li jtaqqablek il-voglia li tgħix il-ġurnata. Flok jilqgħek ir-raxx sabiħ tal-baħar dejjem imċaqtaq tax-Xgħajra hekk kif tiftaħ l-antiporta (li issa qed tkun rament miftuħa), tilmħek daħna bajda ta' trab tat-tfarrik ta' ġebel, li tidħollok f'għajnejk.

Il-qattusa Ġovanna wkoll qisha mhix f'postha. Qabel bilkemm kont taraha ġewwa. Dejjem moħbija xi mkien fis-siġra tal-laring — daqqa rieqda hemm, daqqa tiżvoga difrejha ma' zkukitha, u daqqa biex mingħaliha ħa tħebb għal xi għasfur tal-bejt. Imma issa Ġovanna dejjem rieqda fuq is-siġġu ta' ġewwa, u bilkemm titħarrek ħliet meta tisma' ċ-ċekċik tal-ikel. Donnha saret iktar fessuda wkoll. Sforz id-dwejjaq ta' dak li qiegħed jigi madwarha forsi — jew abbli qed tixjieħ u timmansa, taħseb Roži. Jew sforz it-tnejn insomma. Min jaf.

*Taħdita tal-istess erba' wcuħ —*

“Xi ġmiel Mari, rajthom t'hemm isfel?” “Xiex?”

“Tellgħu blokka. Ta' fuq nett jaraw il-baħar.” “Ija mela. It-tifla ta' Marju xtraw wieħed. Ma ħaduhx daqshekk ta. Mitejn elf. Bil-madum u l-kmamar tal-banju.”

“Il-Marija Madunna. Id-dar tagħna qrib l-għaxart elef konna xtrajnieha tletin sena ilu. U tara l-baħar.”

“Ijwa Tes ħi, imma għaż-żminijiet t'issa mitejn

ċuċata ħaduh.”

“Ija vera, forsi. Sbieh̄ hafna insomma. Ghidilha r-risq̄ hija.”

“Qed itellgħu ta, mhux hażin. Issa anke ta’ Rożi qed iwaqqgħu.”

“Ija?”

“Mela.”

“U Rożi? Ili ma naraha kos.”

“E, Rożi l-Imgieret hija. Kienet ilha bilkemm tista’ timxi miskina, imma qatt ma tħajret iddabbar rasha mix-Xgħajra dik. Dejjem hawn taraha. Itteftef xi ħobża fuq il-banketta. Ħa ngħidlek, aħjar Alla joħodni milli nispiċċa f’dik l-imniefah̄ dar tax-xjuh̄. Ommi kienet hemm, Alla jaħfrilha. Qisha dar tal-imġienenen ħi mhux dar tal-anzjani. Jittrattawk qisek tifla ta’ sitt snin, u bilkemm iħalluk toħroġ.”

“Miskina Rożi. U d-dar min ħadha allura?” “Ħuha ħi għandikun. Dik għandha ħuha xi għoxrin sena iżgħar minnha u ħa d-dar f’idejh u waqqagħha. Qed jistennew il-permess għal sular ieħor, qalli Twanny.”

“Issa ngħid lit-tifla ta’ oħt Joe, għax dik kienet qiegħda titħajjar tixtri flett lejn dawn in-naħat.”

## *Govanna*

Għadni qiegħda nħuf fiż-żibel li donnu dal-aħħar qed jįzdied fl-inħawi, bit-tama li nsib xi sidra ta’ tiġieġa bħall-aħħar darba. Imma minflok kelli nerġa’ nqatta’ lsieni ma’ ħaġa tonda li kellha xi fdalijiet ta’ xi tip ta’ ħuta. Hemm tfajla ġieli tiġi ttini xi ħaġa tal-ikel, imma mill-bqija rrid infendi għal rasi biex immantni ruħi. Minn għajnejja l-ħin kollu ħierġa żlieġa u ġieli juġġhuni u ma nkunx nista’ niftaħhom sew. Dal-aħħar ukoll l-għasafar bilkemm għadni nismagħhom. Eħħħ. Dak iż-żmien tas-siġra kollha blalen oranġjo, u l-ikel dejjem lest u s-sodda dejjem sħuna, spicċa. Dik ix-xwejħa tal-ġersi kulur is-sema u għajnejn kulur il-ħamrija, għebet bla ma biss qattli ċaw jew avżatni li f’daqqa waħda ħa nispiċċa bla saqaf fuq rasi.

Jien naħseb ħadha miegħu xi mkien dak ir-raġel ikrah li darba fost l-oħrajn lestieli platt bl-ikel favorit tiegħi. Jien għedt da’ kemm ħa naqla’ ikel illum? U sa anke ħariġli

I-plattina fil-parapett tan-naħa l-oħra li qatt ma kienet tħallini noħroġ fih dik il-mara tal-ġersi kulur is-sema. U jien u niekol bil-qalb, ir-raġel ikrah bi qmis kulur il-plattina għalaq il-bieb minn fejn kont ħriġt b'sabta, u bqajt maħsuda nħares lejha jgħaġġel 'il bogħod sakemm ma deherx aktar. Stennejt lilu jew lill-mara tal-ġersi b'kulur is-sema biex jerġgħu jfegġu ħalli jifthuli l-bieb. Wara tlett ijiem nistenna, iċċaqlaq minn hemm, u bdejt inħuf għal rasi, bit-tama li l-mara ta' għajnejha kulur il-ħamrija terġa' tiġi lura, u tiftaħli l-bieb għal ġewwa.

Imma meta għadda naqa żmien u rajt qisu annimal ikrah u enormi jiddevora lid-dar fejn darba kont ngħix, sa anke rajtu jqaċċat lis-siġra kollha blalen orangjo minn għeruqha; qtajt jiesi għalkollox u dakinhar u anke l-għada marli l-aptit għalkollox li niekol jew niċċaqlaq.

*Meta tkun trid tmūt fix-xjuħija, il-ġisem iċedi u jħallik tmūt*

Dakinhar li nbiegħ l-ewwel flett fejn darba kienu jimirħu omm, missier, ħut Roži u l-qattusa Ġovanna, Roži ħadet l-aħħar nifs imqanzaħ f'waħda mir-ringieli sodod bojod u minsijin tal-Imgieret.

Roži kienet ilha titlob lill-Bambin tal-Ħniena Divina biex joħodha miegħu u jeħlisha mit-torment ta' din il-ħajja ġdida li qatt ma basret se tiġi imposta fuqha proprju fl-aħħar żmien ta' ħajjitha. Ġieli kienet taħseb f'Ġovanna. Fit-tliet darbiet li ġie jżurha ħuha ż-żgħir, qatt ma rnexxielha toħodlu minn rasu x'kien għamel biha. Imma ħarstu kien idawwarha n-naħa l-oħra u Roži fehmet li bħalma rema lilha f'dan l-isptar ikrah fejn qatt ħadd ma jiġi jżurha, ma kienx ħa jiddejjaq jarmi lil Ġovanna wkoll.

Hawnhekk fl-Imgieret ma kienx postha, kienet tgħid Roži bejnha u bejn ruħha. Vera li meta kienet tgħix f'darha x-Xgħajra bilkemm kienet tiflaħ timxi, imma mill-bqija kienet tħossha tarmi s-saħħa. Ġara mbagħad imma li bil-bini u l-istorbju u kulma kien hemm madwarha, ħuha ż-żgħir fl-aħħar irnexxielu jikkonvinċiha li aħjar tingabar xi mkien fejn jistgħu jieħdu ħsiebha. Xi mkien sabiħ fejn hemm ħafna siġar u kwiet. U lil Ġovanna joħdilha ħsiebha hu. Tħabbilx rasek, kien jgħidilha. Waqgħet fin-nassa. Pu!

Hekk kif Roži kienet fis-sodda fl-aħħar ftit sigħat ta' ħajjitha, in-ners semgħetha tgedwed u tgħid ħafna affarijiet. In-ners tħassritha waħedha u qabdet sigġu u poġġiet ħdejha. Fl-esperjenza tagħha kienet taf li dawn huma sinjali li jimmarkaw l-aħħar ftit sigħat ta' persuna qiegħda tmut.

“Miskina, waħedha ħallewha u qgħadt ħdejha jien. Imma kellha tbissima kbira fuq wiċċha u bdiet tgħajjat lil xi ħadd Ġovanna biex tinzel mis-siġra ħa tagħmlilha l-ikel. Qabbditni l-bard kif bdiet titbissem u taqleb għajnejha fl- istess ħin. Imbagħad qabditli idi u staqsietni jekk irridx melħ mal-brodu. Komplejt magħha u għeditilha iva u mellistilha rasha. Staqsietni jekk hix qiegħda x-Xgħajra u kont naf li kienet tħobbu ħafna hemmhekk, taf int kibret hemm u kulħadd jafha mid-dehra. U jien għeditilha iva, ix- Xgħajra qiegħda, u Ġovanna qiegħda hawn ħdejja. Wiċċha sserja f'daqqa u staqsietni jekk Ġovanna ħafritlihiex. Ma nafx min hi di' Ġovanna jien, imma għeditilha iva mela ħafritlek.”

Reġgħet tbissmet Roži u baqgħet b'ħalqha kemxejn imċarrat hekk. U n-nifs beda jbatti bil- mod ma' kull minuta sa ma ħadet l-aħħar nifs.

Forsi wara m'hemm xejn, hemm baħħ, kif jgħidu ħafna. Imma ddeċidejt li nemmen li Roži wara mewtha marret lura f'darha x-Xgħajra, fir- riħa tal-laring, mal-ħoss tant għal qalbha tar-riħ isabtilha mal-antiporta u ma' Ġovanna rieqda fuq is-siġġu tal-kċina.

## Stejjer bejn bibien magħluqa

Ġulja u jien konna nħobbu mmorru f'postijiet abbandunati. Dak il-bieb żdingat biż-żebgħa kollha mqaxxa, b'dik il-fetħa żgħira kemm tistiednek tittawwal u tgħidlek storja fuq in-nies li ħallewha warajhom, qalb ħafna oġġetti li qatt ma ddaħħlu fil-kaxxi tal-ġarr. Kemm qbiżna ħitan u ma' kull kamra li rfisna, ġejna mħeddla fi sfera oħra ta' realtà, ta' memorji u passati, li għalkemm ma kinux tagħna, tant ħassejniehom vicin u parti minna.

Naħseb dik kienet li taffaxxinana l-iktar f'bini abbandunati: Dak is-sens qisu xi ħadd ħalla storja ddu u ddu mal-istess erba' ħitan, sakemm l-istorja kibret u ssaħħet, kwazi trid tkisser il-ħitan ta' madwarha biex issib fejn tinbet lil hinn minn dak l-għeluq li ilha snin twal maqbuda fih.

Konna ffissajna jien u Ġulja, induru u nħufu biex insibu djar hekk. Naraw ma' xiex ħa nixxabtu u liema toqba nsew jgħattu, ħalli nitkaxkru u niddeffsu minn ġo fiha biex fl-aħħar nidħlu ġewwa. U iktar ma nsibu ostakli biex jirnexxilna nidħlu, iktar kienet tħabbat l-adrenalina b'kurżità u b'seħer biex nesploraw. Dawn il-binjiet kienu jqanqlu misteri u stejjer, li bejn iridu jibqgħu sigrieti, u bejn mejtin biex jiġu maqsumin ma' kull min juri mqar farka interess.

U aħna u nduru u nagħqdu u neċitaw ruħna, konna nħossuna qisna tfal. Hekk kif taqbad tgħid, dik il-ħlewwa. Għal dawk il-ftit sigħat konna ninxtorbu fi ktieb li l-istampi tiegħu qatt ma rajna bħalhom, imma donna nafuhom xi mkien.

Imbagħad jien moħħni biex nieħu tazza nbid li dejjem ingorr fil-basket għal dawn in-naqa ta' okkażjonijiet daqqa ppjanati u daqqa le, u ħallini ħa ngawdi "l-atmosfera", u Ġulja moħħha biex tirrakkonta u tiffilosofizza b'dak il-leħen li ma jafx kif ma jkunx ġentili. F'mument minnhom, anzi kemm-il darba, ħassejna lin-nies li xi darba kienu jgħixu hawn qagħdu bilqiegħda magħna u qishom straħu għal ftit bil-preżenza tagħna. Huma jitpaxxew bil-preżenza ġdida ta' xi ħadd, u aħna nitpaxxew bl-antik għax forsi xbjana naraw konkrit u blokok ġodda li ma jirrakkontaw l-ebda storja.

U darba fost il-ħafna, f'wieħed mill-isqaqien fost mill-idjaq taż-Żejtun, jien u Ġulja rnexxielna nidħlu fil-famuża dar tal-bieb li xi darba kien ċelesti u li għandu loġġ kollu msaddad. Din l-imbierka dar kont ili li ċcombajtha 'l fuq minn sentejn u wara diversi

mistoqsijiet lil xi sħabi li joqogħdu lil hemm, sirna nafu li dina kellha ġnien li tulu kien imiss ma' sebat idjar oħra fuq kull naħa. Ġnien li mid-dehra kien iservi ta' sigħat ta' logħob għat-tfal li kien ta' spiss jirnexxilhom jiżgiċċaw għal ġo fih. Il-bieb li xi darba kien ċelesti sabiħ kien imsakkar b'katina u katnazz. Iċ-ċinga tal-katina kienet titwessa' biżżejjed tant li tħalli apertura żgħira. 'Ħabba li kien għadu d-dawl u 'ħabba li kien sqaq mimli djar abitati, ma ridniex nagħtu fl-għajn, u rħejnielha 'l hemm biex ngħaddu l-ħin.

Tlaqna lejn il-qalba tar-raħal fejn mill-gabbana ta' qabel il-pjazza ordomna erba' pizez imqanżħin żjut, cheddar u faqqiegħ, u belgħa kafè għal iktar adrenalina. Ġulja qabdet tirrakkonta l-esperjenza tagħha riċenti ma' xi namur ġdid. Xejn serju tafx, qaltli. Eżotiku. Sabiħ. Nieħdu gost flimkien. Jaf jaħxi hux? staqsejtha. Daħqitha. Kemm kienet ħelwa din Ġulja. Jien żbukkata salvaġġa għax drajt li bl-onestà taħli ħafna inqas ħin f 'ħajja daqshekk qasira, u hi tikkalkula l-kliem qisu xi ħaġa prezzjuża u sabiħa, u kull ħaġa li tgħid kienet tispicċa toħroġ bl-iktar kliem spjegat u addattat. Nikkumplimentaw lil xulxin bl-iktar mod stramb jien u Ġulja.

B'xi mod għaddew sagħtejn u s-sema kien ilu xi ftit li sar ċappa dlam. Ma kienx eżattament ħin l-irqad, imma din jew tagħmilha jew toqgħod tiġi bl-għax x'jista' jiġri u x'jista' ma jiġrix. Mela ħija, qbadna l-basket u rġajna rħejnielha lejn il-bieb li xi darba kien ċelesti sabiħ. Mingħajr ħafna eżitazzjoni l-ewwel iddeffist jien. Iddeffist ta' vera, għax Ġulja kellha timbuttani mhux ftit biex ngħaddi mill-apertura dejqa. Imbagħad hi għaddiet qisha mhix hi.

“Iż-żobb. Qisek fuckin' farfett għaddejt.” “Ħaħa uwejja. Anke int.”

“Ma jimpurtax li għandi naqa żaqq. Imma isfar ma tgħidlux abjad.”

“Uwija mhux żaqq. Just ftit iktar miftuħa minni.”

“Ommi ma. Ok. Ara ma twegġagħlix is- sentiment.”

“U ijwa ma nafx mela.”

“Ħaħa. Iddaħħaqni. Kif tikkonfondi.”

Armati nofs kedda bit-torch tal-mowbajl, sibna intrata wiesgħa, b'żewġ fethiet kbar li waħda kienet isservi għal kċina u l-oħra għal speci ta' salott. Ma' kull naħa kien hemm turgien li jagħtu għal fuq.

“Haqq min jaf kif tidher din fid-dawl tax-xemx.

Xi ġmiel hawn.”

“Vera, għalkemm innutajt li t-twieqi kollha imbaritati. Forsi ma jidholx dawl daqskemm suppost.”

“Hmm. Naħseb għandek żball ta. Fares 'il quddiem.”

U fl-aħħar tal-intrata nilmħu bieb kbir tal- ħġieġ bil-borduri tal-ħadid miżbugħ abjad. Dan il-bieb kien jagħti għall-parapett ta' barra.

“Il-famuż ġnien, Ġu.” “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa ...” “Ejj’ejja ħa naraw.”

U bħal żewġ itfal boloh tlaqna niġru għall- bieb tal-ħadid. Il-bieb kien jidher li għamel wisq żmien magħluq u l-ħadid donnu ssaddad u ġġamja. Ippruvajna niġbduh 'il barra imma l-ħsejjes li beda jagħmel ma bdewx ituna kuraġġ inkomplu.

“Haw’ ħallih għax qegħdin nagħmlu xebgħa storbju u hawn xebgħa djar imissu. M’għandix aptit żjara mill-pulizija ta.”

“Ok. Kif nistgħu noħorġu? Jien ili ffissata x-xhur fuq dal-qaħba ġnien. Irrid narah ta. Enormi man.”

Qbadna t-torch tal-mowbajl u bdejna nfittxu jekk kienx hemm apertura oħra għal barra.

“Qed tara bħali —”

“Xiex?”

“Il-ħġieġa t’hemm taħt imkissra kollha. Mhux ħa nbatu biex ngħaddu għax jgħaddu anke żewġ persuni minnha.”

“Hawnx għalik.”

U vera, waħda mill-ħġieġ tal-bieb enormi li jagħti għall-parapett u finalment għall- ġnien, kienet imkissra kollha. Aktarx xi ħadd mit-tfal li kienu jiġu jilagħbu hawn kien kissirha biex jidhol jara ġewwa.



Id-dawl tal-qamar barra kien biżżejjed biex naraw, u kif ħriġna 'l barra nilmħu bitħa enormi li ddu mad-dar kollha. Il-bitħa kienet kollha madum roża-ħamrani u kien fiha mill-inqas sitt metri tul u sebgħa wisa'. Lil hinn mill-parapett kien hemm foresta densa ta' siġar u pjanti u min jaf x'iktar. Id-dar tal-bieb li xi darba kien ċelesti kellha ġungla privata tagħha li ilha snin ma tiġi mmansata. U telgħet ta' rasha — kif wara kollox, hekk dejjem għamlet, qabel ma ġie l-bniedem u taha struttura li tappella lilu.

Jien u Ġulja ħarisna lejn xulxin. Ma nafx hux jien biss kelli qalbi tħabbat sitta sitta. Mhux bl-ansjetà, imma bl-eċcitament li sibna ruħna f'qisha sfera ta' realtà oħra. Hemmhekk, inħares lejn dik il-foresta żgħira, li fid-dlam dehret iktar densa u mimlija waħxijiet, stħajjilt hemm affarijiet ikbar minni. U dan il-ħsieb, l-istess ħsieb li jġini meta nara l-baħar miftuħ quddiem, dejjem tani s-serħan. Il-ħsieb fejn tħossok tickien u ssir farka f'nofs kobor sabiħ.

“... hekk naħseb ...” “E? Kellimtni?”

“Iva. Qiegħda nparla waħdi qisu.” “Intfajt toħlom jaqaw?”

“Iva. Fuq is-speċi ta' ġungla li hemm hemmhekk. Kemm hi kbira. Min jaf x'jgħix ġo fiha.”

“Xi wirdien u familja tal-ġrieden.”

“Ok. Kont qed nipprova nkun naqa iktar drammatika jien.”

“Qiegħda taħseb f'xi bestji li jgħixu biss fid-dlam? Ġewwa ġonna ta' djar abbandunati?”

“Ħaħa. Ok qed tiġġudikani. Imma f'dawn il-postijiet tibda tiġri l-immaġinazzjoni bja man. Għax xejn mhu ċar u ċert— 'qas is-soqfa, għax hemm ċans iċedu. Mhux hekk biss imma. Ma nafx kif ħa nispjegaha istra. Qisu fi djar hekk tħoss kollox jinbidel bil-mod u bir-ritmu naturali tiegħu. Qisu dar abbandunata tieħu ħajja għaliha, bil-pass tagħha u mhux bil-pass mgħaġġel tal- bniedem. Hekk qisek tħoss kollox wieqaf man, imma qisu kollox qed jieħu ħajja ġdida fl-istess ħin. Imma istra xorta ma nafx għala imma tħoss dik il-familjarità. Hekk, qisek ġa ġejt.”

“Naf ta x'inti tgħid. Dawn il-postijiet qishom ifakkruk f'xi ħaġa. Imma qisek ma tistax tagħmel sens minnha.”

“E. Qisha xi ħaġa tal-passat. Imma mhux passat li għextu int. 'Qas naf nispjega.”

“Naf. Ma tagħmel l-ebda sens loġiku meta tipprowa tispjegaha, imma qed tagħmel sens f'moħħi.”

“Tipo hawn min jgħid li allavolja ngħixu ħajja waħda, xorta nibqgħu ngorru ġo fina l-affarijiet li għaddew minnhom in-nies ta' qabilna. Tipo xi jbeżżgħak u ma jbeżżgħakx u xi jferrġek u x'ma jferrġekx kienu l-istess bħal dawk li kienu jħossu nannietna u nanniet ta' nannietna. Jibqgħu jingarru minn ġenerazzjoni għal oħra. Xi ħaġ'hekk. Ġieli smajt biha?”

“Ija.”

“L-affarijiet jibqgħu fil-ġenetika naħseb. Traċċi.”

“... mmmm ...”

“U jien iż-żobb naf.”

Lil Ġulja tlietha. Moħħha kien fil-ġnien. U tatni ħarsa biex tgħidli nerħulha lejha. Xgħelna t-torch ta' wieħed mill-mowbajls u tlaqna lejha il-baħħ.

“X'riħa ta' ċitru.”

“Qed jaqbadni l-ħakk.”

“Ar'hemm il-friegħi għax jidħlu f'għajnejk.”

“Smajt tħaxwix?”

“Naħseb hawn fuq hawn xi bejta. Isma' —”

“Ooo, dak qattus?”

“Qed nisma' żunżana.”

“Madonna dal-ġnien ma jispiċċa qatt.”

“Haw' riħa ta' barbikju. Naħseb il-parapett ta' ħdejna.”

“Qed titkellem tgħajjat.”

“Illallu Madonna. Haw' vera ma jispiċċa qatt.”

“Ħares 'il fuq. Dak tin naħseb.”

“Irfist xi ħaġa. Naħseb frotta.”

“Ara hawn kancell. Il-ġnien jieqaf hawn.”

“Qaħba ilna xi għaxar minuti mixjin naħseb.”

“Min jaf min kien joqgħod hawn —”

“Tlaqna lura. Jidhirli fin-nofs tal-ġnien rajt bank l-ewwel.”

U qgħadna fuq bank li kien jinsab f’nofs il- passaġġ fin-nofs tal-ġnien— bank tal-ġebel bla dahar. Ftaħt il-basket u ħriġt l-inbid. Offrejt lil Ġulja. Mhux għalissa, ma tridx. Blajt żewġ belgħat u tajt ħarsa madwari. Il-qamar kien jidher bejn iz-zkuk twal tas-siġar. Paçi. Paçi kulaçi Madonna fuq rasi. Hekk qiegħda nħoss.

“Ara dik is-siġra t’hemmhekk kif tgħawġet lejn id-dar.”

“Daqt tilħaq il-gallarija ta’ fuq.”

“Istra, qed niftakar man meta konna morna l-Mellieħa, f’dak il-kumpless abbandunat. Tiftakar il-fergħat tas-siġar bdew jippenetraw ġewwa mal-wesgħa tal-binja kollha? Qishom qed jiddevoraw il-binja ftit ftit? Dakinhar ma flaħtx ma nitbissimx man. Wara dan it-tkissir kollu li qed isir ta’ għelieqi, siġar u kollox, tibda tinduna kemm dak kollu li jinbena ma jiswa xejn, għax jekk inħalluh waħdu, jisfaxxa fix-xejn. Tarah istra jitlef is-saħħa u tarahom ix-xquq ta’ weraq u zkuk jibdew jitfaççaw fi ftit żmien.”

“Mela. Issa dak tal-Mellieħa xi ħamsa u għoxrin sena kulm’ilu abbandunat ta.”

“Immagina x’jiġri f’mija man.”

“Darba rajt dokumentarju. Londra kieku tiġi abbandunata min-nies, f’mitejn sena terġa’ tiġi ġungla. Mitejn sena ta. Mitejn sena x’inhuma?”

Domna ħafna nparlaw. Mill-bank tal-ġebel iççaqlaqna għal fuq il-ħamrija, b’daharna jserraħ ma’ waħda mill-ħafna siġar. Sakemm tħeddilna, u ma nafx kif it-tnejn spiççajna rqadna. Waħda ħdejn l-oħra.

Qajjimni l-ħoss ta’ barmil ilma mitfugħ mal-art f’xi parapett ħdejna. Forsi l-istess parapett minn fejn kienet ġejja r-riħa ta’ barbikju l-lejl ta’ qabel.

“Ġu, qum.”

“Haw’, issa stenbaħt jien. Da’ sebaħ haw’. X’hin hu?”

“Is-sitta nieqes kwart.” “Inqumu?”

“Ija, aħjar issa kif għadu kmieni ħalli ma jarana ħadd ħirġin.”

“Immorru nittawlu fuq malajr qabel ma nitilqu?”

“Ija, qrajtli moħħi.”

Tlajna sa fuq u sibna żewġt ikmamar enormi battala, aktarx il-kmamar tas-sodda. Kull kamra kellha bieb tal-gallerija, b’midwal tond sabiħ fuq kull bieb minn fejn kien qed jidħol id-dawl minn barra. Ħriġna għall-gallerija li l-veduta tagħha kienet tagħti għall-ġnien. It-taraġ għat-turretta kien ċeda u ma stajniex nitilgħu.

Fid-dawl id-dar ħadet xejra oħra. Sabiħa mod ieħor u stajna napprezzaw l-ispazji miftuħa, is- soqfa għoljin u kull dettall sabiħ u kkalkulat li jiġi mibni b’kull reqqa u b’arti. X’differenza mil-lum. Kaxxi ta’ konkos u kisi u faqqa’ prezz Ġuż.

F’waħda mill-kmamar ta’ fuq sibna anke pitazzi, ittri u rċevuti antiki iktar minn mitt sena u qtajnieha li l-familja li kienet toqgħod haw’ kienet familja magħrufa fil-qasam tan-negozju.

“Inparpru?” “Inparpru.”

Qbadna kollox u nkiss inkiss ħriġna barra fl-isqaq fejn ma dehrinx ruħ. Iż-żiffa friska u d-dawl għadu nebbiexi ta’ filgħodu ġabuna lura fil- preżent.

“Tgħid x’ha jsir minnha din id-dar?”

“Hawn sqaq, ma jistgħux itellgħu.”

“Viva l-isqaq.”

“Hawn tama, ejja.”

“Taħseb?”

“Ma nafx.”

“Qed ikissru kullimkien.”

“Iva Ġu, vera. Imma dejjem hemm tama.”

“Tama fiex?”

“Li meta l-bniedem jara l-kruha, jibda japprezza s-sabiħ?”

“Il-problema mhix in-nies.” “Xi ftit iva. Xebgħa apatija.”

“Imma n-nies qed titlgħalhom l-ostja. Qiegħda nħossha r-rabja teskala man ma’ kullimkien.”

“Naħseb għadna lura ħafna milli tara n-nies barra jipprotestaw imma.”

“Ma naqbilx. Naħseb għal hemm mixjin.” “Jalla. Għalkemm finalment f’idejn il-gvernijiet.”

“Ma naħsibx. Ćjoè naqbel, imma hemm nies iktar b’saħħithom minn hekk. Li jagħmlu l-liġijiet huma.”

“Min?”

“Il-kuntratturi.”

“Vera.”

“Xorta. Fiduċjuża. L-affarijiet għad jinbidlu u n-nies qed tqum fuq tagħha.”

## Gegwiġija

Kos hux. Meta tgħix wisq viċin ta' xi ħadd, l-aspetti kollha skifuzi tagħna u tagħhom jibdew joħorġu jgħaġġlu wieħed wara l-ieħor. Ngħiduha kif inhi, sirna noqogħdu wisq viċin ta' xulxin. Il-qraba tiegħek, ta' ħdejk, ta' faċċata, ta' taħtek u ta' warajk, tistħajjilhom f'daqqa waħda qishom membri ta' xi familja kbira li qatt ma tlabt li tkun parti minnha.

Tat-tieni parapett tal-lemin tiegħek taf li jħobbu d-diski Taljani tas-sebgħinijiet, u taf ukoll li r-raġel li jgħix hemm għandu ħabta jitkellem qisu muntun ma' dik li assumejt hija martu. Tal- gallarija ta' faċċata dejjem tħalli t-tieqa u l-purtiera miftuħa, u tħobb tilbes riċipetto blu skur u tidħol tinħasel għall-ħabta tas-sebgħa nieqes kwart ta' filgħodu. Naf għax dak il-ħin inkun qed nieħu l-ewwel sigarett, mal-ewwel kafè fil-ftit u kważi uniċi mumenti ta' kwiet f'dawn in-naqa ta' toroq fejn qisu ġie xi ħadd u waddab bomba u minnha ħarġet gegwiġija ta' flettijiet. Biex ma nsemmux il-maratona ta' wara l-ħamsa xħin jibdew ġejjin il-karozzi lura mix-xogħol, fejn jibda d-daqq tal-ħornijiet u/jew serje ta' dagħa. 'Ħabba parking ħażin. Jew ħeqq għax wieħed ipparkja nkaxxat mal-linja qabel ma jibda l-garaxx, u fuq kemm kulħadd hu egoist, u ħa nċempel il-pulizija, jew mur ħudu f'għoxx razztek. Dawk fost serje ta' kummenti ħelwin li tisma' int u tixrob dik il- belgħa te ta' wara x-xogħol fil-gallarija. Ġieli jien kont li nfqajt nidgħi għax laqtuli l-karozza f'dik in-naqa ta' triq dejqa li għamluha two-way plus żewġ parkings fuq żewġ naħat. Ġieli jien laqqattha s-serje ta' dagħa minn ħaddieħor għax wara li nkun ili ndur imbikkma nofs siegħa biex insib parking, nispiċċa nipparkja fuq yellow line.

Ħeqq vera, mhux jien xtrajt flett? X'fettilli? Ma nafx. Xtaqt dar antika. Imma qtajt qalbi nirroranġa fiha. Ħsibt li mhux ħa niflaħ finanzjarjament waħdi. Lanqas fiżikament. Skużi? Forsi. Fil-verità, ma kellix bajd jew enerġija għal proġett hekk dak iż-żmien. Illum naħsibha mod ieħor, imma illum biex tixtri dar waħdek trid tirbaħ is-Super 5. Anke biex tixtri flett waħdek trid jew ikollok paga ogħla min-normal jew trid tkun ħadt xi wirt jew tassew kont persuna rari u għaqlija u ġemmajt ħajtek kollha.

Insomma, meta ġejt hawn għaxar snin ilu, faċċata tiegħi kelli xi sitt tomniet għelieqi li kienu qegħdin jinħadmu. Mhux xi għaxqa ta' ftuħ. Imma tal-anqas kien hemm il-ftuħ. Kien għadda xahar u nnutajt li kont ili ma nara l-Isuzu ta' Joe pparkjata. U kif stennejna, xi sena wara li ħadd ma rifes fl-istess għelieqi, rajna l-famuża karta tal-PA li ġentilment avżatna li biċċa sew mill-għalqa kienet ħa tinbena blokka ta' erbgħa u għoxrin appartament, tmien maisonettes u erba' penthouses.

M'iniex se noqgħod nidħol fid-dettall tal-istorbju ndimunjat li kien iġenġillek is-sentimenti u s-sanità mentali minn kull sitta u nofs ta' filgħodu sa xhin jidlam. Fis-sajf agħar, sat-tmienja u nofs kienu jġebbduha. Tiġi wara x-xogħol u mingħalik se tiftaħ għall-arja u forsi tieħu sigarett fil-lussu tal-gallerija, imma minflok trid tagħlaq għax il-ħoss ta' binja tielgħa orrur għall-menti. Imma għal ġieħ il-progress, naħfru kollox. Wara kollox min irid jiftaħ it-twieqi għall-arja meta hemm l-airconditioner għaddej ievenen 24/7? Min irid iħares barra mit-tieqa jekk għaddejjin stampi sbieħ kontinwament fuq it- televixin? Min irid jisma' għasafar fis-siġar jekk nisimgħuhom kull filgħodu bir-ringtone tal- alarm bl-għasafar ipespsu?

### *Figollu u Nawnu*

Madankollu, il-flett rajt kif stajt u għamiltu kif xtaqt jien. Għamara rriċiklata, librerija kannella kbira li ziti kienet ħa tarmi— addottajtha u mlejtha kollha kotba—kċina ħadra ċara antika, u biċċiet 'l hemm u 'l hawn li mgħaqqdin f'daqqa, fl-opinjoni tiegħi tal-inqas, tant għamlu ħelu. Ħassejt li dak l-ispazju, ċkejken kemm kien ċkejken, kien kompletament tiegħi.

Jakkumpanjawni f'dan in-naqra ta' spazju kienu żewġ boċoċ suf li ġabu ħafna tkissir u mħabba. Figollu u Nawnu. Nawnu u Figollu. Hekk ġew mgħammda. Nawnu huwa xi isem mitoloġiku li kont qrajt f 'xi ktieb, u Figollu, għax wikkiel u ħanżir daqsu Alla għad irid joħloq.

Nawnu għandu pil oħxon abjad li jittimbra ma' kull biċċa oġġett inanimat li qatt eżista f 'dari. Nawnu issa għandu disa' snin u ilu għandi minn meta kellu xi erba' jew ħames snin, skont il-vet. Sibtu boċċa suf abjad rieqed mal-bieb ta' barra jilgħaq ix-xemx. Għajnejh kbar ħodor jinfdulek qalbek. Mellistu tnejn u meta ftaħt il-bieb, baqa' tiela'

miegħi fil-flett qisha d-dar kienet minn dejjem tiegħu. U baqa' hemm bla qatt ma kellu ħajra jaħrab lura. Malajr dara. Il-gallarija kollha xemx saret id-delizzju kkunsmat ta' Nawnu. F'temp ta' ftit xhur sar konka xaħam u d-dar saret l-oġġett tal-logħob tiegħu. Żewġ sufanijiet, erba' siġġijiet tal-qasab u kemm Alla ħalaq purtieri, kollha sfaw vittmi ta' difrejn Nawnu. Imma kif nista' ma naħfirlux meta nsibu kuljum jistennieni jgħajjat mill-gallarija xħin jisma' l-ħsejjes tal- karozza tiegħi waslet, jew meta narah jitħarrek mill-kobba suf, jiffissed hekk kif jinduna li qiegħda nħares lejha?

Imbagħad Figollu. Kaxxa ġenn. Jibla' kollox.

Imma tant jġri jvenven minn kantuniera tad- dar għal oħra, li ma jdumx wisq ma jaħraqhom il-kaloriji. Figollu kien għadu ċkejken meta ġibtu. Sena. U ġie minn barra t-triq ukoll. B'pil qasir isfar kont tarah jispara minn wara xi siġġu jew joħroġ itik qatgħa minn wara s-sufan jew jiffitta lil Nawnu sakemm Nawnu jballatlu tnejn bil-ħlewwa f'wiċċu, f' xi attentat inutli biex iħallih bi kwietu.

*Darba waħda ...*

Kienet il-bidu tal-ħarifa f' għodwa kmieni. Dejjem kont inħalli l-bieb tal-gallarija miftuħ matul il- lejli, imma dakinhar niftakarni ngorr u nqum nagħlaq għax ir-riħ tajjarli l-pjanta li kelli man- naħa l-oħra tat-tieqa. Anke l-ħoss tal-krejnijiet bilkemm kien qiegħed jinstema' b'dak ir-riħ kollu jvenven. Bilkemm kont għadni rgajt dħalt lura nitnikker fis-sodda li ma smajtx ħoss kbir ta' xi ħaġa tqila li waqgħet, bil-ħoss ta' ħġieġ jinkiser ftit sekondi wara. Il-qtates taru mis-sodda u sa ma tkaxkart mis-sodda għall-gallarija ta' quddiem, in-nies kienu diġà ħarġu minn darhom ħa jaraw x'gara iktar mill-viċin. F'salt kien hemm twerżiq ta' mara, akkumpanjata minn twerżiq ieħor ta' nies fil-viċin.

“Madonna Madonna Madonna Madonna Madonna Madonna!”

“Dik tifla?”

“X'ĠARA?”

“IKKALMAW! AGĦMLU L-ISPAZJU ĦA NARAW MIN WEGĠA'.”



“X’gàra? X’GÀRA?”

Harist 'l isfel nipprova naqta' x'gàra fost kaos ta' nies li ngemgħet f'daqqa. U nilmañ ganċ kbir mal-art bid-demm u l-ħġieġ madwaru. Telgħet għoqla ta' rabja u dwejjaq fl-istonku.

Kellhom jgħaddu ffit minuti sa ma l-gàra qaltli x'gàra, biex sirt naf li l-ganċ tar bir-riħ b'dil-forza. Kien hemm tifla t'għaxar snin fi triqtha għall-vann tal-iskola. U l-ganċ tar għal fuqha, u ħallieha hemm imċarrta.

“Imma mhux suppost ikun sod?” “Iva.”

“Imma jiċċekkjawhom dawn l-affarijiet?”

“Ma nafx, wara kulħadd bravu. Sadattant mietet tifla.”

“Ma nafx kif iħalluhom jaħdmu f'dan ir-riħ.”

“Ma nafx.”

*Smajt ...*

Smajt li l-inkjesta ngħalqet ġimagħtejn wara, meta suppost dawn l-affarijiet jieħdu x-xhur. Heqq, x'tagħmel? Tħalli l-flettijiet mibnijin nofs kedda? Bl-inkjesta għaddejja, ix-xogħol ta' kostruzzjoni ma setax ikompli. Xi tragedja. L-incident inqata' bħala ACT OF GOD. U l-għada li ġie ffinalizzat ir-rapport, għal ġieħna, il-kostruzzjoni reġgħet bdiet. Smajt li l-familjari tat-tifla li mietet tellgħu lill-kuntrattur il-Qorti. Smajt li l-kuntrattur 'qas biss kien jitfaċċa l-Qorti, u minflok kien jibgħat lill-avukat, dak li kien magħruf fuq kemm jaf isib ħofor fil-liġijiet u jsawwar argumenti eċċellenti tad-difiża. Smajt li l-familjari l-każ wara sena waqqgħuh, għax il-każ kien tefagħhom lura, kemm mentalment u kemm finanzjarjament. Smajt li finalment appellaw lill-Gvern, sa anke kitbulu ittra miktuba b'reqqa, fejn fiha ssuġġerew li jiġu rregolarizzati l-bini u l-kostruzzjoni b'penali ħorox, kodiċi u liġijiet. Biex tal-inqas, il-mewta tat-tifla tkun fissret xi ħaġa. Smajt li l-Prim Ministru qatt ma bagħtilhom ittra. Heqq, okkupat wisq. Smajt u smajt u smajt.

Sadattant telgħu l-appartamenti kollha, il-ġmiel tagħhom. F'sitt xhur kollha nxtraw.  
Il-ġungla komplet tiddensa, u t-tifla ntesiet.

## English translation by Clare Vassallo

### Roži from Xgħajra

#### *Roži*

Not many people knew Roži. She very rarely left her village, and then only for some wedding or family gathering. Spending time away was a big deal for her. It distressed her, made her feel as though some basic right was being denied her, and the few hours she was away from Xgħajra were usually spent fiddling with her dress and battling feelings of anxiety as she waited with increased desperation for her nephew, Liam, to decide he'd had enough to drink and get around to driving her home. She loved that small village of Xgħajra so very much. What else could one wish for? Peace and quiet, being close to the sea — which was always just restless enough to freshen your lungs, a pretty little church, and the same few faces — people who were perhaps a little nosy, but then again, most people are a bit curious. It's just that some express their nosiness at the tops of their voices while others whisper in private. In the end, Roži blessed her neighbours for the help and kindness they showed whenever she needed something. Those villagers were in fact another important reason why Roži could never dream of moving away. She never forgot the day her father had a massive heart attack. How would she have coped if not for the villagers' patience and help? They drove her to Mater Dei Hospital, cooked for her, and fed Giovanna — the crazy, clumsy cat that lived with Roži.

Xgħajra is a small village and very few people live there all year round. Most come only for six months to make the most of the pleasant seashore. In winter the storms and gale-force winds are extraordinary, the wind sounding like a wild dog on the prowl outside your window, and the waves rising as high as buildings until they finally crash and disintegrate against the sharp rocks. And this is why most people decide to head back to their homes in Ғaḏ-Żabbar for the colder months.

But not Roži — who's spent all her summers and all her winters there. Always has. And although she doesn't live quite by the shore she can still smell the salt spray all around her, set as the village is along a few parallel hills running down and converging at the shore. There are open sea views everywhere and fresh sea air reaches your lungs at every corner.

But not this last year. Not since the house next door and another one whose garden used to come right up against her backyard wall were pulled down — just like that, both at the same time. Rozi doesn't know what's hit her. Instead of the scent of sea spray in the air, now there's dust from rubble and lime. Instead of the rustling sounds in spring from birds' nests in the orange tree in the garden, there's the excruciating sound of a digger destroying your very will to survive the day. Instead of the welcome spray from a choppy sea against your face when you open the front door, which she rarely keeps on the latch now, there's a white cloud of fine dust that hits you and gets in your eyes.

Giovanna the cat is restless too. She barely came indoors before. She was always tucked up somewhere in the orange tree — sometimes fast asleep on a branch, sometimes sharpening her nails against the trunk, and sometimes actually imagining she might catch a sparrow. But now Giovanna is always fast asleep on a chair inside the house and barely bothers to move except when she hears the rattling sounds of her food being prepared. She seems to have become more affectionate, too. Possibly due to boredom caused by what's going on around her – or perhaps because she's getting older and meeker, thinks Rozi nowadays. Or maybe a bit of both. Who knows.

### *Same faces, same chatter*

“How beautiful. Mari, have you seen the ones over there?”

“What?”

“A block has gone up. There are sea views from the top flats”

“Yes, of course. Mario's daughter bought one. It's wasn't too expensive, you know. Two hundred thousand. That's with floor tiling and bathrooms all done.”

“Madonna! Our house only cost eleven thousand about thirty years ago. And we can see the sea!”

“O yes, Tessie, but for these days, at that price she's got it for a song.”

“Yes, well, maybe. They're quite lovely really. Wish her luck, will you?”

“Quite a few going up now. Even Roži’s house has gone down.”

“Really?”

“Yes, for sure.”

“And Roži? Come to think of it, I haven’t seen her in ages.”

“Ah, well, Roži’s at the Imgieret Home now. She’d found it hard to walk for a while, poor thing. But you know, she never wanted to leave Xgħajra. You could always see her out and about. Sitting on a bench, snacking on a sandwich. Let me tell you, I’d prefer God to take me a little earlier than end up in that awful old people’s home. My mother was there, God rest her soul. It’s more like a madhouse than a home. They treat everyone like children and hardly ever let you out.”

“Poor Roži. So who’s taken her house then?”

“Her brother, I think. She’s got one who’s about twenty years younger and he’s taken over and had it pulled down. They’re just waiting for the new permits to come out, so he’ll be able to add an extra floor. That’s what Twanny said.”

“OK, well I’ll let Joe’s sister’s daughter know about it. She’s thinking of buying a flat around here.”

*Giovanna*

Still hunting for food, I am. In the rubbish — there seem to be more of it around here lately. I was hoping for some chicken breast like last time, but instead I’ve cut my tongue again on a round thing with bits of some kind of fish on it. A young girl comes to feed me sometimes, but mostly I have to fend for myself. My eyes water all the time — they’re blurry and sometimes hurt so much I can’t open them properly. I hardly hear the birds anymore either. Ah, those days in that tree of orange balls, food always ready and waiting, and a warm bed for the night. They’ve well and truly gone. That old woman in a sweater the colour of the sky and eyes the colour of earth disappeared without saying goodbye or even warning me I was about to find myself without a roof over my head.

That awful man must've taken her away. He once prepared a plate of my favourite food and it made me wonder just how much food I'd be getting that day! He even took my plate out to the far side of the backyard — where the woman in the sweater the colour of the sky never used to let me go. Just as I was digging in, the ugly man in a shirt the same colour as my plate slammed the back door shut, and I was stunned to see him scuttle away into the distance. I expected him or perhaps the woman in the sweater to come back soon and open the door, but after three days of waiting I moved on and began to hunt for my own food, still hoping that the woman might still come and let me back in.

But time passed and a monster turned up instead. It devoured the house where I once lived, even pulling up the tree with the orange balls by its roots. I knew it was all over, and that day, and the next, I lost my will to eat or even to move.

*When you're old and want to die, the body gives in and lets you*

Roži took her final rasping breath on one of those white, forgotten beds in rows at the Imgieret Home precisely on the day the first flat was sold in the block built where her mother, father, brothers and sisters, and Giovanna the cat once lived.

Roži had for some time now been praying to the Baby Jesus of Divine Mercy to take her, to release her from the torment of this new life she'd never imagined would be forced upon her precisely at her end. And she often thought of Giovanna. During those three visits of her brother's she never managed to prise out of him what exactly he'd done with her. He just looked away, and Roži understood that just as he'd summarily dumped her in this hideous home where no one ever visited her, he wouldn't have thought twice about throwing Giovanna out either.

This Imgieret place, it just wasn't for her, she told herself over and over again. It's true that when she was still at her house in Xgħajra she could barely get around, but she felt strong and healthy in every other way. It was just that with the building works and constant noise and everything going on around her, her younger brother somehow managed to convince her that it would be in her best interest to move someplace where she could be taken care of. Somewhere beautiful, full of trees, peaceful. And he'd take care of Giovanna, don't worry, he said. And she fell right into the trap. Phu!

Lying in bed in those last hours of life, she mumbled to herself. A nurse overheard her, pitied her there all alone and pulled up a chair to sit beside her. She'd had enough experience to recognize the signs of a person dying.

"Poor thing, they left her all alone, so I stayed with her. But she had a big smile on her face as she called out to someone, Giovanna, to "get down from there" so she could feed her. It gave me the shivers to see her smile and roll her eyes at the same time. Then she grabbed my hand and asked whether I wanted salt in my broth. I went along with it and said yes as I stroked her hair. She asked me whether she was in Xgħajra and, because I know she loved the place so much — you know she was brought up there and everyone there seems to know her — well, I just said yes. You're in Xgħajra, and Giovanna is here next to me. Her face got all serious suddenly and she asked whether Giovanna had forgiven her. I don't know who this Giovanna is, but I said yes of course, she's forgiven you."

Rozi's face broke out in a smile from cheek to cheek and she stayed that way as her breathing got shallower and slower with each passing minute until she took her final breath.

Perhaps there's nothing after this, an emptiness, as many claim. But I decided to believe that after her death, Rozi returned to her home in Xgħajra to be surrounded by the scent of oranges, to wrap herself in the sound of the wind —which she'd loved even though it sometimes slammed her door shut. And with Giovanna fast asleep on one of the kitchen chairs.

## The bus driver and Fransina, who used to take the 135

Fransina was her name. At least that's what the driver called her. Petite, with a tiny frame and legs bent with age. Those consonants and vowels linked together in her name sat well with the sweet presence of this old lady from Marsascala.

The relationship between the driver and the old lady was a gentle and caring one. He'd pick her up from the corner just where she lived. Despite the bus company's regulations having got stricter recently, the driver — whose name I don't know, made an exception for Fransina. He turned off the main road and down into another one just so he could pick up Fransina. Her house was old, small, and looked like it was about to collapse any minute. It was still very pretty though, especially when you consider that those little houses had become something of a rarity among the jungle of new blocks of flats in Marsascala.

Fransina would slowly make her way up the steps and into the bus and go straight to her place on the bench to the left, just to the driver's left.

“Good morning, handsome.”

“Morning, Fransina.”

Everyone was aware of the extra bit the driver added to the route for Fransina's sake, but no one ever spoke a word of complaint about it, or if some passenger ever risked so much as a sigh at the addition of precious extra seconds, he was immediately rewarded with a dark scowl from the driver, or from one of the other passengers, me included.

You could say that we were all familiar with one another. It was always the same twenty people who caught the 6:45 from the village, if you could still call it that,



towards the Marsa Park & Ride, and finally to Mater Dei Hospital. My usual place was the first seat on the right of that old-style bus. In other words just behind the driver and almost exactly in line with Fransina, who I'd see if I looked to my left. Neither of them ever spoke to me but I somehow still felt myself part of this odd, tender relationship.

The driver, from what I could make out, was in his mid-forties, married to a woman who kept him too tightly under her thumb, so he made up for it by snapping at people on the bus, especially any new passenger and even more so if Fransina was watching. But he never snapped at Fransina. Fransina would often laugh with him as though she felt part of a double act, and sometimes as she laughed she took a sidelong glance at him as though to tell him he was being rather naughty. When the driver returned her smile, I'd find myself smiling too.

Fransina was probably in her late seventies and she caught the no. 135 at 6:45 every day from Marsascala to Imgieret. Each day, my trip and the other passengers', most of us on our way to work, would begin as she gave an account of things to the driver, and he to her. The driver often complained to her about feeling so locked up in his marriage and how much better life would be for him if he were still single. Let's just say, however, that from the size of his round tummy and his ruddy face, married life didn't seem to be treating him too badly.

"Am I still handsome enough to pick up a woman, Fransina?"

"A young man like you, why ever not?"

"Then I'll leave my wife, Fransina, what d'you think?"

“Weeeellll. Who knows what’s best, dear, who knows. You’ll still find something to complain about. We weren’t like this before, you know. We suffered hard times but life was more beautiful.”

“You didn’t have many comforts then, did you?”

“That’s true. Who knows what’s best.”

“True. Like the damned, we’re all trying to keep up with everything and everyone, crazy. Starting with me.”

Fransina, on the other hand, didn’t speak much about her private life. She was more likely to talk about memories sparked off by some place we passed on our route. Something like, look over there — my Aunt Lieni had fields there, which she tended herself on top of taking care of her three children after Uncle Pawl died. Or, look at those houses coming down there to make way for blocks of flats. Or, when I was young that area was also all fields, with lots of blackberry bushes.

“Not many blackberries left,” she’d say.

“No. They say they caught a fruit disease brought over from Sicily.”

“I remember Ħaż-Żabbar was full of them. My father would carry us on his back, taking us to fill buckets with berries.”

“There aren’t any left, are there?”

“As if. They’re all houses now,” she laughed. “Or flats ....”

And one time as we passed through Żejtun:

“Look there. If you walk up a little way you’ll come to an alley, it was called Tal-Laċċi. They used to show films outdoors there, projected against the wall of the band club. I

used to go and stay over at my aunt's almost every Saturday to watch a film with my cousins."

"Or perhaps to flirt a little, Fransina, eh?"

"Hardly, not with *my* father! He used to box our ears, he did, God grant him eternal rest."

"But weren't you at your aunt's?"

"Oh, she used to tell him everything. That's the way things were at the time."

Fransina would eventually get off at the bus stop just before the entrance to Imgieret. It was the most beautiful part of the trip because every day there was a snow white cat with a yellow tail waiting there for Fransina. It waited precisely at the bus stop and ran circles around Fransina's legs as soon as she stepped off. The driver spent about ten extra seconds at the stop for us all to enjoy the sweet daily scene unfold. The second her tired feet touched the tarmac Fransina would hold up the bag of cat food and shake it at the white cat with the yellow tail, who she called Fox, and then a whole bunch of cats would emerge from behind parked cars at that sign from Fransina.

*One day*

One day Fransina did not get the bus. The next two days the driver didn't seem very worried. After all everyone gets sick sometime, and Fransina wasn't exactly young. When Fransina turned up again after three days the driver's face lit up.

"Where were you?"

“I’m losing my strength, dear. Age, my boy, is making itself felt.”

“You’re as fresh as a flower, Fransina, my dear,” the driver said with a half smile and a little sadness.

But after that, Fransina turned up less and less often until we only got to see her a few times each month. The driver continued to extend his route towards her house, just in case, and when he didn’t see her waiting he’d step a little harder on the accelerator as he made his way back to the main road. The few times Fransina did turn up the driver would get out and help her in and out of the bus since her legs suddenly seemed to have lost all their strength and even her face had shrunk. Now, whenever he started a conversation or shot off some joke Fransina barely reacted. Nevertheless, the few times she did come she still brought her bag of cat food, which — perhaps it’s just me, but I thought was a little larger than it had been, probably to make up for her absence on the other days that she hadn’t been feeding them.

Eventually Fransina stopped turning up at all. Fox and the bunch of other cats kept waiting for her at the bus stop for weeks, even in a downpour. The driver started to look the other way, sadly, as though he couldn’t bear to take in the scene below him. I don’t know whether he was feeling sorry for the cats who waited for nothing, or whether he remembered how Fransina’s kind heart took her to Imgieret to feed them every day, or perhaps because he just missed her sweet presence, which had become part of his early morning run. I don’t know if it’s just me who feels all these things. Perhaps I just imagine the driver feels them too. But — and not just once or twice, especially in the first couple of weeks — I noticed a tear in the driver’s eye as

he looked out on the emptiness of Fransina's own bus stop. I once also saw him sniff and wipe his nose quickly with the back of his hand. Was it a cold or was he crying?

How could he not?

If He Could, He'd Silence You

*In Cafeteria No. 18*

“Why do you let this black shit buy a fucking sandwich here?”

“Keep out of it, Ton, my friend. Just sit there and dribble away into your tea. Don't cause trouble.”

“Can't you see what's happening to us? A Maltese can't even complain about a foreigner in his own country.”

“Isn't he paying just like you? At least he bought a bite. And he'll leave soon — you spend hours here over the same seventy-five cent cup of tea. Just get on with it, then. And I'll pour you another in a minute, on the house, I know how touchy you are.”

*In the container*

The running water is always cold as ice. In the middle of winter many of us get sick — pneumonia is as common as sugar in tea here. Now they've stuffed twenty of us in a container that only takes twelve. Can't sleep. How can you sleep? The summer heat is intense inside, and the breathing, the snoring, the incessant shifting around — we're like chickens in a coop. But, what does it matter to them? They say we're worse than chickens. They insult us to our faces and think we don't understand Maltese.

*In Cafeteria No. 18*

“A shot to the head and out, no fuss.”

“Either that or send them back.”

“Filth. *Hmieǳ* all of them. The other day one of them was bothering my wife. I didn’t beat him up because there were people around. Dirty, ugly rat! Fuck his stinking mother who brought him into the world.”

“What did he do?”

“He was looking at her, the disgusting piece of shit. Fuck him!”

“That’s it?”

“You fucking asshole. Who the hell asked you? Don’t you try to defend them. Shall I go get you a black bitch so you can get all hot with her?”

“Some of those women are real sexy, Ton. Find me one and I’ll really give it to her.”

“Just listen to this fool. He’ll “give it to her”, he says! What will you give her?”

“If she’s pretty, a sore cunt.”

“At least a black cunt might take you, asshole.”

*In the middle of a deep black sea*

When my mind begins to dwell on things and the anger builds up, I close my eyes and remember the incessant movement of that sea. This way and that, this way and that. Four whole weeks. The emptiness of the night. The nausea. The nauseating rocking of a boat that never stopped. I thought I’d go mad. I often thought of jumping

into that sea during those weeks caught between lands that didn't want us. On rare calm nights I looked into the blackness and felt the fear of infinity, and that same fear consumed me from inside until I went numb. Fear that no one would come and save us. Fear that I am not worth saving. Fear that they'd forget who I am and I'd be lost, drowned somewhere at the bottom of a cruel, black sea. I felt myself going mad, deep inside. Where was land? Even now, months later, when I shut my eyes I still feel the swaying of the sea and the sickness returns. And that same sickening feeling reminds me of the real fear — that no one wants us.

*In Cafeteria No. 18*

"You want to say something to me, my friend?"

"What the fuck does he want? *Xi ž-žobb!*"

"I'm talking to you, my friend!"

"I am not your friend. Get out of here."

"What did you say about me before? I understand Maltese, you know."

"Go back to your country, filth. *Ħmieġ.*"

*In my mind, black as the black sea*

Why did no one want us?

Because you're *ħmieġ*, filth, an ugly voice in my head repeated. It sounded like the voice of some of these men dressed in their uniforms here. *Ħmieġ* is what they mutter or sometimes shout while looking us straight in the eye. Do they think we



don't understand? Or do they do it on purpose? That too. But the dirt has indeed penetrated me now, has defined me and the more time I spend here the weaker I feel, less able to fight the ugly voices in my head.

Fight back. How can I fight back? I have food and a roof. Nothing else. What's left to me is only memory and trauma. I've found little love here. A handful of good souls sometimes volunteer to come over and ask us what we need. Last week another one of us hung himself — the third this year. I understand him. I've looked over the edge too often lately. They don't publish details in the newspapers, Ahmed tells me. That's the guy who sleeps in the bunk beneath mine. I barely care. I've lost the will to do anything.

*In Cafeteria No. 18*

"I am a person. Like you, my friend. I was student in my home country. I must leave because soldiers torture my father just because they want it. They would kill me too because I shout at police. No money for food. No opportunities. No talking or government kills you."

"What the fuck do I care – piss off, *xi ž-žobb*."

"Why you do this? Why you don't listen?"

"Get away from me. Before your filth rubs off!

"Ton, just leave him be, you're going to cause trouble. And now, you go! Leave him alone. No trouble. Go, *ejja*, quick."

*In the cell of my memories. So you understand better*

What reason have I to live? At home in Eritrea my father was imprisoned. Same with my younger brother. My father because he refused to spy. And the young one because, even though he agreed to spy, he never reported anything. Because he had nothing to report. My father was beaten to death. My brother spent months recovering from beatings. The government has total control over us. We can't protest. Because they'll kill me and my family too.

We have no newspapers or any way to share news. If you even dare complain, even with just words, you know where you'll end up. Detained, lucky to escape torture — subject to the soldiers' moods and whims. I was lucky to have the chance to study for a while. Most people in Eritrea are not given that luxury. The government doesn't want educated people. Education is the greatest weapon for raising a revolt against the atrocities the state is committing against its own people. But I couldn't carry on with my studies. I was drafted into the military. Refusal meant never again seeing the light of day. Apart from certain and abject poverty. Do you know how much it costs to buy a can of cooking oil and a bag of pasta? The equivalent of five euro. And the salary per month? Fifty.

And mind, don't even dare complain because should you be overheard by a neighbour, who was probably also threatened and recruited as a government spy, you'll end up in prison. That's the way the government operates to keep people from joining forces and rebelling — they turn people against one another. No one would ever want to live in that never ending nightmare. NO ONE.

*In Cafeteria No. 18*

“Tell him I’m not *ħmieġ*.”

“I tell you what I want. Fuck you, filth.”

“Why you speak like that to me?”

“Cause you are dirt. Like your mother.”

“Because I am black?”

“No. I’m not racist. Don’t start with that racist thing.”

“Why dirt?”

“Go fuck yourself and your mother.”

“Why you being angry with me? What did I do to you?”

“I don’t want you here. You have a country. It’s big. Not like Malta. Small. No place for you here. Russian, Chinese, African – I don’t care. All rubbish.”

“Everyone else *ħmieġ* and Maltese not *ħmieġ*?”

“You’re calling the Maltese rubbish? Go pick a fight in your own country, damn your filthy face. Fight your government. Put them down. With a gun. Stay in Zimbabwe.”

“Zimbabwe? No. From Eritrea.”

“I don’t care.”

“We don’t have money for food. They shoot the guns. At us. Not us at them.”

“Not my problem, my friend.”

*A ray of sunlight and with it some hope*

I got my papers in order so I could apply for work. The voluntary organisations helped a lot throughout the process and explained my rights to me, and what I should avoid and how best to proceed. They also gave me some therapy. After all, I was afraid to go out. Me and many others in my position were afraid they'd hate us here. They'd hurt us. And we couldn't fight back in any way because it would make things worse for us. We heard stories about people who fought back. We didn't want to end up like them.

Some time later I found work in the fields in Gozo. Ahmed had told me that Gozo was a little better for finding work. Quieter. When I insisted and insisted, my boss finally registered me after months of work, but only putting down a few hours a week — even though I work three times those hours. Less tax for him and fewer rights for me. But at least the boss pays on time. I manage to just about scrape by and thank God and the Madonna that I've made it this far. I have other plans for the future.

*In Cafeteria No. 18*

"My friend. He died."

Silence.

"On the boat he died. He come before I come. It was cold. After two weeks he died with flu in January in the middle of the cold sea. No one wanted us on land."

"Is this arsehole ever going to stop? Kick him out."

“My other friend. He died too. In Malta. He killed himself. Hanged from a tree. He gone mad. His child died in his arms on the boat. I am here. I work. I pay taxes. I pay rent. And I go to I.T. course at MCAST.”

“Do what you want!”

“It’s my second year in MCAST. I hope to be happy.”

Silence.

“Goodbye, my friend.”