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The Kurd came once a year. The world became chaotic.

Grandma was up with the sun throwing buckets of soap and water on the verandah. She scrubbed and wiped the tiles till they shone like mirrors in the morning light.

'Up,' she said, coming back inside and shaking the sleepers out of bed, 'Take the mattresses out, the Kurd is here, hurry, wake up.'

The Kurd came early, five in the morning, on the first day of summer, with a turban of brown plaited snakes above his eyes, on his shoulder a line tied to the two ends of an acacia stick.

'I want fluffy mattresses this year, and don't leave me with bad stitching like last year. Look, here, and here, you call this work?' she'd tell the Kurd year after year. Grandma wasn't nice to the Kurd; she was paying him.

But he never answered back. Words, insults, and even natural disasters were distractions. He came for the mattresses. He sat cross-legged unstitching them one by one, emptying the cotton stuffing on the floor of the verandah. He gathered the cotton in a pile in front of him and began to strike it with his line. A lion tamer, he whistled the cotton in the air with his whip, cotton rain, cotton snow, cotton clouds whipped into light transparent haze, teased fibres, as light as air, now barely able to land.

'Don't get in his way, don't distract him.' Grandma would come out every now and then to reaffirm her presence.

The Kurd never spoke. He lived outside the language that was spoken around him. With his line, he scattered the white flock evenly on the verandah, allowing it to breathe in the morning sun before stuffing it back inside the mattresses. By eleven o'clock, a long curved steel needle appeared from within his jacket and he began the stitching...A button went in after measuring two hands from the edge, then another button two hands down from there, until little hills appeared, evenly spaced over each mattress. Grandma pushed her hand into the mattresses testing them for firmness and spring. She said nothing. She gave the Kurd his lunch. A good lunch, rice with lentils, which he ate with bread, wouldn't use a fork. He sat in a corner, drank from the jug which Grandma kept outside for him. No one else was to drink from it or touch it. It would be washed with boiled water and vinegar and left to dry for days.

After lunch, the mattresses plump, alive, were bounced back one by one inside the house. Then the doonas came out. Stuffed with wool; black, brown, and grey wool, they were emptied, the covers thrown in the corner of the verandah, limp skeletons awaiting the breath of life.

'Keep an eye on him,' Grandma said. 'I'm going to have my siesta now, don't come inside the house, don't bother me.' No sooner did Grandma disappear, than Abou Georges, came over.

Abou Georges, the neighbour, was as old as Grandma. A Turk, a vestige of a long gone empire, he worked at night as a waiter at the Phoenicia Hotel in the centre of Beirut.

He slept all morning and spent the afternoons in his pyjamas hovering around the verandah, and smoking.

'Make sure he puts all the wool back inside the doonas,' Abou Georges said with a smile, kicking back a piece of wool that had strayed away from the verandah.

The Kurd wasn't deaf. But there never seemed to be a need for an answer. He gathered the wool with his line and started whipping it in the air; dark rain, black clouds, thick heavy opaque haze.

'Keep your eyes on him, don't look away.' Abou Georges said walking inside the house to join Grandma. Abou Georges said too many words, he blew too many answers in the smoke of his Turkish Bafra cigarette.

The Kurd in the afternoon grew larger, stronger, the snakes on his turban looked venomous. His whipping loud, deafening now, gained a double cadence, a trot, a gallop. Turbulence was gathering..., a storm.

On the verandah, four doonas, emptied of their woollen stuffing gave the Kurd enough material to beat with all his might, to whip with all his life, till all the afternoons spent behind locked doors..., all the moans, sighs, pleas and whispers of desire and longing were exhaled from the woollen pile. Secrets, of illicit attachments, rose and rose, and took flight filling the air with grey speckles. Somewhere, from behind the opacity, the figure of Im Georges, Abou Georges' wife, appeared, wandering over in her wooden clogs and apron. From dawn till dusk, the apron never left Im Georges' waist, knotted at the front, the bow sloping gently over her round belly.

'Where's your grandma?' She asked scrutinising the wool. 'Did Abou Georges come round here?'

The Kurd let the warm teased wool fall slowly to rest on the ground. He circled around the pile, poking it, goading the fibres that might have gone unshaken. His eyelashes, a clump of grass beneath hissing snakes, dripped with perspiration.

'Hey, you, son of Adam, answer me, did you see Abou Georges?' Im Georges asked again, addressing the Kurd angrily. The Kurd said nothing.

The wool spread over the floor of the verandah, the sunrays slid like droplets off the lanolin. The Kurd swept the wool inside the doonas, all the wool, flimsy, slippery, till the last fibre.

'Make sure you count the doonas before he leaves,' Im Georges said. 'Tell your grandma, to do that, won't you. She knows what Kurds are like.' She looked at the door, then at the Kurd again and shook her head. 'They steal the wool and sell it, wherever they go, they have no country, they steal.'

The Kurd never answered, he never looked up. The world, the whole world lay beneath his turban...

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Loubna Haikal.