



Source: Ian Black, 'On spy hill, old enemies could be looking at a new peace', *Guardian Unlimited*, 08/06/07.

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Writer/s: Lina Saneh

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In 1991, when I was twenty-four, I found myself one day with my boyfriend Rabih discussing something with the father of a friend, I don't remember what, politics probably.

We barely knew this man, but we knew that he was extremely cultured, that he was now very old, that he was still a dyed-in-the-wool Communist, untiring, quarrelsome, anti-dogmatic—something which had caused him all sorts of problems with the party—a loud-mouth, a womanizer, preferring his daughters to his son, who he refused to acknowledge as his own, despite the fact that they looked like two peas in a pod. That was a pretty amazing thing for a patriarch to do in this part of the world! And it didn't offend us, quite the opposite in fact; it piqued our curiosity and our desire to know this man.

When we arrived at his place, the scene was almost picturesque; it played like a veritable cliché or a stereotype. A beautiful old bourgeois Lebanese house, in a pitiful state, but standing as a witness to a comfortable past. There were tattered books stacked on shelves stuck between the jambs of a door, and a huge piece of wooden furniture, rare and shabby, but which must have had its moment of glory at some point. It wasn't just the effect of time, but a negligence typical of those enfants terribles of the old and stable bourgeoisies, who took a spiteful pleasure in displaying their subversive political choices by attacking the weak and now inoffensive signs of their class membership. Signs that are today much sought after in flea markets by the middle classes with properly leftist and/or intellectual tendencies...The sort of irony that is such a good tonic.

The meeting made an impression, despite the banality of the circumstances, familiar to us already from films and novels. Who is the simulacrum of whom? Who is the pastiche of whom? Such a disconcerting era that we live in! He was a large man, with now fallen shoulders, like all his flesh for that matter, with a hanging head, long disheveled white hair, swollen red eyes, a haggard look, dressed in light pyjamas, with long dirty yellowed fingernails, basically, the perfect image of a dead-drunk vagrant. But he wasn't drunk; despite his red nose, his growling, his slow movements, his long pauses, his brusque words, and his quirky and capricious mood, making us wait for ages before he would speak. And then, only after he had said all that he wanted to, ranting and grumbling about the party, would he finally respond to our question. He was not drunk, despite his fixed and obsessive gaze concentrated on the bottle of Coca-Cola placed before him and for him on the large shabby dining-room table, at which he was seated at one of its ends, while Rabih and I were glued with shyness at the other. He kept filling his glass and drinking greedily, heedless of the drops of coke falling all over his shirt and staining it. Finally, he blurted out a word, which we hoped would be the answer to our question: 'Nothing new

under the sun,' he said, 'Ecclesiastes,...Old Testament...' I didn't hear the rest...We were completely shocked by this phrase, so beautiful and yet so terrifying. It fascinated us, but at the same time we wanted to reject it completely, so discouraging was it to our joyful and optimistic youth, contradicting our Marxist convictions, and refuting our modest experience of the things of life. I didn't understand the rest; too complex for my youth were these philosophical, political subtleties that merged religious prophecy with Marxist critique. I no longer understood who he was ranting at, nor who he was aligned with. At that young age, positions have to be clear and well-defined, without too many doubts, or at least without too many obvious doubts, for we are surrounded everywhere by so many enemies who want us and who wait for the right moment to come down upon us. So we must not show our weaknesses, nor leave ourselves open to their venomous blows. And we were surrounded by such enemies!

To begin with there was the Israeli enemy, the Zionist; the imperialist enemies and the Western colonialists, like the United States and Europe; the combined Arab States, Islamist and/or military, reactionary, archaic, dictatorial and non-democratic (though being mindful to exclude several neighbours because we needed their military aid to deal with our wars, civil or otherwise!—like Syria for instance, which the party Comrades declared least harmful to the revolution towards a better and brighter future); but to return to our long list of enemies: the Lebanese regime itself; the fascist and Falangist parties of the interior; and finally, and just by way of finishing, the Islamist enemy. But these last ones, as our Comrades declared, were less dangerous, as long as they fought by our sides against the imperialist West, against Zionism, and against all the other enemies. That the Islamists are killing more of our Comrades than doing effective harm to Imperialism or Israel, (under the pretext that we are the atheistic enemies of God), did not seem to put the Comrades off, sure as they were that after the GREAT battle is over, they will easily be able to sort out the fate of these fundamentalist Islamists, either with new wars and battles—and the Comrades were in no doubt that they would end victorious and that it would be worth all the horrors—or by the hand of history, whose impeccable scientific logic will reveal itself to their fanatical beliefs and open their eyes to the dazzling truth, the non-religious, secular, socialist truth.

In the uncertainty, the doubt and the fragility of relativity in which I was fatefully plunged by this meeting, I recovered the single certainty and guarantee against the religious and dogmatic absolute immobility. And, as Ecclesiastes so eloquently says, that hurts.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Lina Saneh. Translated from the French by Hannah Williams.*