

# Mariam

For Dr. George Resek

## Omar Sabbagh

*'Mariam' is a short story whose whole worth, as in say a Maupassant story, revolves around the last sentence. A small instance of a psychological thriller, it tries to explore the murky areas of motivation and intent in the romantic relationship of the central couple in the tale. The female lead is in some way a type of femme fatale.*

A Greek type of beauty, with hair in waves of darkling honey, blending into roasted-almond and amber and raven, equipped with a long white body, and eyes like black olives cut open for their dragon-green flesh, Mariam was no fool. She knew when she was being had, as she'd been had so many times before in her life. Each time she saw her oaf of a husband splayed, near-prone on the crimson-colored sofa of their living room, one outlaid foot folded over the other at a dangling angle, snoring like a phlegmatic rhinoceros, the thought of bloody murder passed through her mind. She knew she'd the cunning for it, an illicit and undetectable crime like that. She knew she'd good reason; or, if not really good reason, enough of the shape of what most women of her ilk took to be a reason. God knows, she'd already thought of the different ways it might be done. She might, for instance, poison him, and then when the police came round burst into wailing, keening tears, claiming he'd committed suicide, purposely ingesting a concoction he'd made himself; or, better yet, a concoction he'd forced her to make and feed him. Yes, the feigned, framed 'suicide' route would in all likelihood be the best one. He'd taken prescribed psychotropic drugs by then for nearly two decades, so that with that broad

profile, history, it would be far easier than otherwise (with enough nefarious wit) to convince people that he'd just had enough of this life like a vale of sorrows, or what have you. After all, she'd made use of his so-called 'history' nearly every day and night of their six-year marriage. Each time her husband overheard her lying and lying flagrantly on the phone to this or that friend or relative, slurring him like many an unhappy woman might, she proceeded without any sign of hesitation to double the misdemeanor into a veritable horror, when totted up, with sweeping denials she'd been up to anything of the sort: he was 'hearing things' again, over and over and over. She did it, he surmised, to make herself feel better. Stamping-down on the character of someone to all intents and purposes of a better nature, allowed her to then seem to those with whom she spoke a kind of victim – as though Genghis Khan were lamb-like, Stalin, a dear doll. She herself knew how horrible she was being; but an unhappy woman like the woman she was, wasn't quite like any other species of the 'unhappy'. No Linnaean typology or taxonomy quite had place for the wicked ire of one such as she, the bilious angst that seemed to drive her even when she loved. A deep, irretrievable unhappiness like that Mariam felt was to her

mind a bona fide carte blanche, to get-up-to whatever nasty, sinister betimes, shenanigans that might slake her hunger for vengeance. And it was in the nature of the Levantine valley down from which she wended to be hot-blooded and passional like this. That undulant valley gave the Sicily of filmic lore a good and ravishing run for its money, when it came to the vicious cycles of eye-eating-eye, vendettas, and all the other violent epiphenomena of a machismo culture, where honor and pride are innate as much as instilled – and even when the substance on which they might rest, honor, pride, was wholly vacant. The vacancy, the abyssal void of anything much to be proud of actually redoubled in fact the brittleness of temper, egging-on with more gusto the passional crime, the red-hot strike. The yearning for vengeance coursed in Mariam's veins well before she'd met her husband, or indeed his family. So that, that very vengeance she so viscerally hungered for now, was not really, in the last analysis, a vengeance to be reaped on her fat, but harmlessly good-souled husband; rather, a rage and a terror she wished to visit upon the malingering fingers of the gods who'd landed her with this, her lot. Her husband would be, then, merely a handy, propitious sacrifice to be made to those fates. A vehicle for her tenor, that's what he was to her in the end, dead or alive. She would make a poem from destruction, her lyre, strummed to the sound of a beating drum; the warpath, of course, her only avenue.

When Akram woke from his afternoon slumbers he found the apartment empty. He rose from the sofa in machinations, uncoiled and

creaky, lugging his near three-hundred-pound weight like an old dilapidated dog. His hair was splayed in different directions and he'd been drooling again on his sky-blue T-shirt. Briefly, he switched on the television, but saw nothing compelling to watch. He decided to inspect the apartment to see if perhaps Mariam had taken the opportunity of her own siesta-like nap. But the flat was empty. He walked to the window and looked out briefly upon the roads below. Nothing but a slipstream of cars coursing at speed down the intersecting highways was visible to his indolent eyes, the odd bit of rushing metal beneath the early evening sun glinting in stray points, as though the voluptuous, long-limbed highways were moving themselves, rippling scales of some giant prehensile lizard.

He'd an appointment that evening with his psychiatrist. They'd been meeting monthly for the last five or so years, ever since he'd changed doctors, at the behest of his wife to whom he'd been at the time close to newly-married. Most of the time, nothing of much import or purport was exchanged between them; only an update on how he was feeling and a slack chinwag about daily things, like the relations with his wife, or his progresses or regresses at work. The doctor was a very kind-hearted man who, as a therapist, rather than in his role as an MD, prescribing drugs, followed on the whole the more American-like approach to therapeutic treatment. The ego was to be cultivated, not curtailed. His job was to be a pillow, a cushion, to offer any wounded patient a second chance at being mothered. So, when he saw Akram waiting, stirring an

untouched coffee, ponderously, in the coffee shop just round the corner from his clinic, he greeted him with a gentle pat on the back and led the way in. Akram seemed more enervated this evening than he was wont to be. Who knew: maybe a more riveting session this evening was at hand? It was about time Akram let-on about the deeper-set matters, the troubles which he, as a seasoned doctor and therapist, knew must surely be smoldering still beneath the surface of Akram's inborn complacency. Most sessions, of course, he wouldn't pry or push Akram beyond certain comfortable limits: there was simply no real need to take any such risks. He was coping with his life and all the variables that any staple life throws at you, well, quite admirably. Dr Marwan Bissat always liked to call it the 'line of least resistance', a more live-and-let-live approach to the wellbeing of his patients. After all, life came in all shapes and sizes, so the path of wisdom seemed to be, not to direct patients down certain too-rigorous lines of development or adaptation, but just to be on hand to steer them clear of disasters in the course of their ersatz, or was it, samizdat, lives.

'So, Akram. How have you been feeling of late? Still steady?'

Akram paused for a while, saying nothing. He scratched the back of his skull, while his eyes roamed the room. He'd this habit of setting his eyes on some still object when talking of intimate matters. At present, his eyes found their resting place on a sculpture placed on a shelf opposite his seat at the far end of the large square room. It was a medium-sized

sculpture of a man crouched low over his feet, in a womb-like position; or, no, perhaps in the coiled position of a sprinter, readied to fling his body outwards at the sound of the starting gun. Either way, the object seemed filled with life, intention.

'She's getting worse,' Akram now said.

'How so?'

'Well, the way I see it is, the more she descends into this spiral of negativity, the more she spirals into that same damned spiral. It's like she's making it harder and harder to get back on track to a healthier way of being. And of being together.'

'I see.' Dr Bissat was taking some brief notes, something he hadn't done for many, many months.

'She's just, I think, an unhappy person.'

'Ah.' The doctor now peered at Akram, quizzically, as though he'd just said something profound for the first time. 'What do you mean by that, can I ask?'

'Well, let me put it this way. Even if I was a better husband. Even if I was a far, far better husband. Even if we had more money and worldly success, she would still be unsatisfied. My sense is that she's doomed to be unhappy, no matter what.'

'But you admit you are not yourself doing your utmost as a spouse, as a loving husband.'

'Yes, I do, of course I do. But, knowing that whatever I did differently wouldn't change her, the way she is, substantially, well, that just makes me feel like there's no point in any case; so, I suppose, any chance of me changing is cut-off by the long-seeing vision of the way things are, will be, no matter what.'

'Yes, your complacency. We've spoken of this before.'

'Exactly, doctor. My complacency, and her desirous ambitions. I trap myself because I see too far. She cages herself because the only direction in which she sees is backwards.'

Dr Bissat was chewing his lips, as though that motion might help him in taking the discussion forward. There was silence in the room for a few minutes, as both men pondered the impasse. Then the doctor said, almost as a relief:

'And you?'

It was unclear what he meant by such a short question, gnomic in the circumstances.

'Me? Me what?'

'Are you happy? And if as seems likely, you are not, do you know or feel you know why?'

Akram's eyes roamed then landed again on the sculpture. This time, the athletic man's coiled body looked like it was to be released like a bomb, as though the fast motion of unleashing that folded muscular body would ex-

plode the same into infinite smithereens. He now said:

'I'm lost. For the first time in my life, I feel lost.'

The doctor nodded his head at Akram, as if he too were relieved. Then, nodding his head again with slow, warm intent, enticed Akram to elaborate.

'I've always felt like I knew the right thing to do in any situation. Soporific drugs or not, I've always felt that I was a centered person, that I was rigged to be OK in most situations, within certain limits of course.'

'And now?'

'And now, I'm faced with someone I care about, deeply, who seems to me to have no center. She seems always to be groping towards the knowledge of what to do, and that slipshodness of selfhood, well, it's beginning to infect me. For God's sake: her temper! She flares up at the slightest thing. I'm sure that it's not just me. I mean, I'm sure that I'm just like a local trigger for an anger that's much longer in its heritage than the few years we've known each other. And it's unfair. It's unfair that I should be the fall-guy, over and over and over again....'

Akram exhaled long and slow now. Dr Bissat completed a note, and then looked up.

'Do you think she may need treatment herself?'

'I do,' Akram replied, almost instantly.

'Then...'

'But you see, that itself is a case in point. I'm OK, I think, but always willing to seek help, as in our sessions here. She's not OK, but can't countenance that she mightn't be. It's a quagmire, a cul-de-sac.'

Akram looked past the doctor again, back at the still sculpture. The athletic man folded over his bunched knees now seemed smaller. The room felt like it was shrinking.

After a little more aimless dilation about Akram's work, the doctor rounded off his notes, and looked directly back up and at Akram. Closing the session now, he simply said:

'So, you feel restricted, in a hopeless situation?'

'Something like that,' Akram replied. 'But I'm worried as well.'

'Worried? Why, how so?'

'Well, the worse she gets inside of herself, the more likely it is that her temper tantrums will develop into something worse, more directly dangerous.'

Dr Bissat peered at Akram again, twisting his small, mouse-like face to the side, as if more genuinely piqued.

'What, exactly, are you worried about?'

Akram paused, gathering his wits, gathering his heart.

'I'm worried that she'll do something one day,

when in a fit of anger, something that's more than just meanness, cruelty, something with a more lasting, irreversible impact.'

'Such as?'

'Such as...'

Akram couldn't quite finish the sentence; or, perhaps, couldn't quite bring himself to finish the sentence. He wasn't sure what exactly he was worried about. He'd some concrete suspicions, having overheard a few of Mariam's more licentious phone conversations of late, but in truth still couldn't quite believe his ears. He merely told the doctor that he just felt this amorphous apprehension, intuiting danger that fitted no present words. The doctor, fobbed off by Akram's partially retracting his statement, recognized the deflection, but decided to end the session nonetheless. The two men shook hands, and Akram departed, partly relieved, partly afeared still. Relieved, because now at least someone in authority knew about the danger he felt, foreboding. Afeared still, because, well, what did it matter that someone knew of his worries: the harm Mariam might be intending to inflict might be so final in its impact that all the king's horses and all the king's men....

It didn't take long for the issue to materialize. Nine days later, Akram was dead. He'd committed suicide, there was no doubt about it. Mariam was in tears, not only before the audience of the police who came to take charge of the body, but even in her most intimate moments. That morning, she had awoken earlier than her husband, which was normal. But three hours later, returning to the bedroom she'd looked down at Akram and seen his body stiff-

ened in a strange still-shot of rigor. She spoke then shouted then shrieked his name, but he stayed still, stilled. She shook him, at first gently, then with desperate violence. But he was dead, gone, passed over. When she'd called the emergency services her voice had been calm, still in shock no doubt. But when they arrived to assess the situation and take charge, she couldn't help breaking down into a swell of weeping. She was spouting words, incoherent fragments of sentences. It was clear to all that Akram had purposely taken a fatal overdose of his anti-psychotic medication, enough, the inquest later found, to sink a horse.

When questioned, Mariam had been wholly honest. No suspicion fell on her after that. Primarily because it seemed Akram had made the decision to end his life based on a misunderstanding. As Mariam relayed it, seemingly guessing-at his final despair, Akram must have taken one of her more recent threats seriously. Why he would do so, she couldn't understand. It was only a cruel-minded prank. She would have never followed through. She loved her husband, she said. He didn't love her, but she loved him.

'It was just a thought, a bit of fun. Why would he think I would actually do something like that? He was prone to paranoid thinking – his doctor will confirm that. But why he would

think I would actually do it, I don't know; I just don't know. I mean, what sense would there be in a wife, and a dependant, hacking his files in the middle of the night, shearing away his authorial name, and placing them all on the internet? Who would believe such a thing? That I would frame my own husband? It would have had the potential to ruin his career. And then, where would that leave me? How could he think I would do such a thing? Even if I hadn't loved him, even if all he thought of me were true, it would land me in a hole if I'd done something so gratuitously harmful. I don't understand. I just don't....'

Nearly all the relevant parties were convinced by this. The man did after all have a 'history' of mental illness. This sort of thing happened every day. A few tempestuous weeks followed, in the wake of Akram's death; weeks in which his own dear parents had flown over to mourn with such piercing agony the passing of a dearly beloved son who hadn't even reached middle-age, weeks in which Mariam had wept too. It was only doctor Bissat who had and held reservations. There was nothing legally to do for the departed. It was an open-shut case. But in his doctorly heart he knew that sometimes a threat, even if empty from the one pertaining side, is enough. And what's more, he knew that she knew.