

THE QUARRY

Ramona Hester

Time to Talk

Ibrahim stubbed out the cigarette and finished his bowl of tea. He had been reading yesterday's newspaper and he now folded the thin edition in quarters and laid it down on top of a pile of its predecessors beside the telephone. Then he padded into the bedroom and began rooting around in the top drawer of the cabinet for a better pair of socks. In doing this he was obeying his wife. If she were not already out on an errand she would be reminding him to change them. Even if it was just a visit to the bazaar she would be telling him, 'And what if you meet someone and they invite you into their house? Are you going to sit on their sofa drinking tea and making small talk with holes in your socks? Those holes will be talking louder and faster than your mouth ever could.'

He peeled a sock off, sat up and pulled it over his hand. Positioning his fingertips at the mouth of each hole, he moved them about slowly, feeling the rim of each hole catch on the hoary domes of his fingertips. Three extra mouths like this would be useful. His own mouth had always been inadequate in the most important of situations. He had never been good at saying what he really wanted to say. He knew other men for whom this was not a problem. Not that they were able to speak more wisdom than he. Those men could speak camel shit and leave it at that. What control they held over their consciences! No regrets for things said or left unsaid. No room allowed for uncertainties which may give cause for pause. Men who lived their own truths and insisted that wife and family fall into step. Ibrahim had never been able to do it. In the years that it took his young wife to grow from girl to womanhood his marital situation had become clear. He was bound to a woman greater than himself. Fourteen years

her senior, his headstart had at first masked this truth. He had spent the first few years trading on his life experience. But innate ability does not take much time to catch up, and he could only watch as she absorbed his hard-learned wisdom, mixed it in with her own unique insight and applied the result to a variety of opportunities that he would otherwise have shied away from. Yet his admiration for his wife had been embellished with silence. Ibrahim unfolded a fresh pair of grey socks that would cover the yellowing toenails and tough old heels of his feet to his wife's satisfaction. Time to talk. He picked up his wallet from the bedside table, put on his shoes, coat and hat and shuffled his way down the stairs, out to the courtyard, and then down the busy street to the bus stop.

The white minibus stopped in front of him with a screech. The ticket seller pulled back on a rope and the accordion-like door folded into itself with a hollow clap. She was yelling the route number out the window like an automatic weapon, 'Thirty-eight, thirty-eight, thirty-eight. Route thirty-eight,' and Ibrahim responded obediently. Securing his hat on his head with one hand, he reached into the doorway, grabbed the thin metal pole to pull himself up to the vehicle from the pavement, then ducked under the narrow minibus entranceway and found himself a seat in the back row. There he readied his money. The ticket seller would do a round of the vehicle, collecting the paper fares in a large black clip and dispensing her fragile tickets from a smaller version of the same.

Miriam's stairwell door had been jacked open with a brick and he could hear the conversation of electrical repairmen echoing down from a floor above. Ibrahim walked in without buzzing and began climbing the stairs to his daughter's apartment door. She might not be home. He hadn't called in advance to tell her to expect him. Truth was that he hadn't wanted to tie himself into the arrangement. The only way that he had managed to drag himself this far towards the encounter was the possibility that it may not happen. If he had not been unable to face the conversation today, if he had chosen mid-trip to shout 'I want to get off' from the back seat, abandoned his journey, crossed whatever road he was on and taken the next bus back home to his familiar silence, who would have known? He had not wanted to secure his daughter's anticipation and once again be the father that failed to turn up.

At the door, Ibrahim hacked a wet, nicotine cough. By the time he had worked up the courage to curl his hand into a fist and knock against the hollow metal security door his daughter had opened it out towards him and he had to quickly shift backwards away from the out-swinging metal fortress.

‘*Dadam!*’ His daughter was in the middle of cooking something, decked in apron and a tight fitting headscarf to keep her hair out of the mix. ‘I knew that was you coughing in the stairwell.’

He lingered in the doorway holding his hat brim flat against his chest. Even though it was he who was coming to see her unannounced, she still had the advantage over him. She had her head cocked to the side, one hand on the door handle and the other on the door jamb. He should say something.

‘I’ve come.’ He lifted his hat from his chest in a small salaam.

‘Have you come?’ She was giggling at him. Then she swept the inner wood door wide open with one arm, lifted her other hand off the doorjamb and waved him into the apartment, ‘Come in, *dadam*. Come in.’

Miriam held his elbow while he slipped off his shoes, then she took his coat and hat and hung them by the door. The apartment smelled rich and sweet like wet flour. ‘Are you making noodles?’

‘Are you hungry? I’ll make you something,’ she said.

‘No child.’ He could feel her steering him towards the sofa, but he did not want to be the guest, ‘I want to sit with you inside. In the kitchen. I’ll watch, and we can talk while you work.’

He sat at the kitchen table while she washed her hands and then began kneading the dough. She worked with her back to him. He could see the muscles flex in her shoulders and back as she worked the mixture. She had grown up strong and capable like her mother. And she had married a good man, educated and kind. And she had borne Adiljan into the family. Ibrahim put a shaking hand to his lips. This beautiful woman was his only remaining child. He watched her alternately punch and fold the dough. Two children had gone, like buds snapped off the branch. Neither of them with the chance to marry and have children. Little Adiljan left living with the weight of the entire family resting on

his fragile frame. Ibrahim pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his eyes. It had been his own little family that had been fragile. He had seen his wife's fortitude and presumed that any babies she produced would somehow share the same level of resilience. As if a fainthearted disposition was something that only he could be afflicted with. It turned out that his son's Mehmet's courage was all external; formed from cigarettes, cars and alcohol. And Rahima's was the false bravery that took her to places that, God help us, she should have rightly feared. So that in the end she feared nothing, not even God.

Miriam finished the kneading and placed the dough back into the bowl to rest. So far her father had been his usual quiet self. Perhaps he just wanted company and an opportunity to stop thinking about difficult circumstances. She moved over to the sink and washed the dough off her hands, taking time to clean the wet flour from around her fingernails. She would put the kettle on and cut him some fruit.

When she turned, her father's face was dripping with tears.

'*Apla!*' She walked towards the first man in her life, pulled out a kitchen chair and embraced him as his shoulders shuddered in raspy sobs.

'*Kizim, kizim,*' Ibrahim called out to his daughter.

Miriam pulled him closer. She wanted to say, 'I'm here with you,' but which daughter he was calling for? Instead she leant into his torso with her full weight and offered him soft repetitions of '*Dadam, my father.*' When they were young they would refer to him amongst themselves as *dadimiz, our father*, yours and mine. Now there was nobody who shared this man as father. Nobody who shared her mother. Nobody to call her sister. They had lost a measure of themselves when Mehmet had passed away. This was one more slice cut from still raw skin.

Miriam did not offer him the usual supplications to stop crying, or encouragements to stop thinking about it. He had come this way to her house and chosen to do here what he could just as easily have engaged in on his own. He had wanted someone to mourn with, and he had chosen his daughter. She rubbed his back and kissed his head as his sobbing eased off. Eventually he lifted his head from its bent position and sniffed the tears back up his nose in

one noisy, wet inhalation. He rubbed his handkerchief across the bottom of his nose and wiped the back of each hand across his eyes. Just like Adiljan. How vulnerable her father was in this world. A vulnerability that Adiljan would never be able to outgrow.

‘*Kizim.*’ Her father raised his hand and stroked her hair. The cooking scarf had fallen back off her head. ‘What pitiful circumstances you have seen in your life.’

She lent forward until her forehead was touching his.

‘I wish it hadn’t been like this for you, *kizim*. I wish I could have given you a life without suffering. I wish it had all been different.’

‘*Ay, dadam.*’ She put her arms around him again. ‘These things come from God. They all come from God.’