

The Gist of It – Rasha Abbas

Translated from the Arabic by Alice Guthrie

What made me go along with what you wanted to do?

In the beginning we were in the car, rain lashing down so heavily it almost drowned out the streetlights' dim glow. My brother was driving, and you pointed out to me that he was asleep. I hadn't noticed, but when I looked over at him I saw you were right: he was actually sleeping, deeply, at the wheel. You stopped the car and got him out, while I just watched you. You laid him down on the edge of the road and adjusted his position, as if the ground was a bed. He didn't wake up, he just slumbered on, right where you'd put him, his white shirt getting soaked by the rain in seconds and sticking to him, turning transparent over his bony chest. Your confident, seemingly automatic way of maneuvering him on the pavement made the whole thing feel perfectly normal, a common-sense response to the situation: get the sleeper out of the car and lay him down on the road, so the others can continue their journey. So much so that I didn't even say anything about what'd just happened. We both stayed silent as you drove us away down the desolate road. The only thing that did make my heart suddenly start to race was the sight of a tree with huge green leaves burnished to a shiny black by the rain winking the gloomy streetlight back at me.

In these images and colours one can grasp clearer than ever the intrinsic nature of night: pitch black, despair, and the unknown fates of people like my younger brother lying there right now asleep, alone, somewhere back along the road behind us.

In the morning I had to go looking for him and find out what had happened. It was clear where I should head for: I'd climb up the flagstoned sunny hillside and go to his work. But I think I might have taken the wrong road, or maybe it was still his workplace but it was somehow different nowadays. In the centre of it I saw a space cordoned off with white plastic curtains where people were sitting, all crammed tightly together, and I spotted him in among them. All around the enclosure there were throngs of people like *me*, trying to reach those inside, and I began pushing and shoving my way through them towards the plastic curtains. I made it. He was sitting with the others but he had nothing on except some white cotton underwear, too big for him, as if it were someone else's. I managed – with unexpected ease – to get into the enclosure I later learned had been installed as a temporary prison. I sat down near him and when I actually focused on the truth

of the situation it was so crushing that I thought my heart would be overcome by it and just stop beating altogether. I didn't know yet whether he was aware that I was the cause of what was happening to him – I wanted to know exactly what he remembered about what had gone on the night before. He said he had woken up to find himself in the street and that the police had brought him here – ‘and of course they nicked my wallet’ he added with resignation – and he couldn't bring to mind any identity papers he might've had in it. I closed my eyes and I could picture his wallet as clearly as if it were in front of me right now: he had three yellow Lebanese 10,000 pound notes in there, and perhaps another 5,000 pound note as well. I gripped his pale delicately girlish hand, and told him I would give him even more money than what he'd had stolen, and I really believed what I was saying – I felt that I could definitely steal or kill to get the money to replace what he'd lost. It was absolutely clear to me that I could do it. I left the room to find out from someone how I could get him out. I asked a man who was sitting in front of the makeshift cell at a desk, looking more like a cafe boss nonchalantly propping up his counter than someone overseeing a prison, and he directed me on to another room. I went in there and asked a policeman what I could do for my brother, and he told me we'd have to wait a bit longer, perhaps until the next day. I left the room to go and talk to my brother again but the space in front of the plastic curtains was very densely packed now; I craned my neck this way and that, trying to see through the jostling crowd, but I didn't manage to catch sight of him again.

When I got home there were loads of people in the house. I didn't feel like being friendly to them, or even civil really, after having been chased away from the prison and not seeing my brother again. They were cheerfully milling about in every room of the house, cups and plates in their hands; I looked towards the balcony and saw the old washing machine was blocking the doorway, and I decided to shift it to one side so I could go out there and eat on my own. I went out onto the balcony with a cup of coffee, so I could drink it before lunch, and relax a bit. Two or three of them came out behind me. That was absolutely infuriating: I'd moved the washing machine and gone outside specifically so I could eat and drink by myself. I couldn't bear it – surely I had to have the right to be alone on the balcony, now that I'd been driven away from the prison and hadn't been able to see my brother again? I found myself shouting and swearing and hurling my cup to the ground, smashing it to pieces, then I stormed back inside, already rebuking myself a little as I went for having behaved that way in front of people who weren't actually to blame for what had happened to me and my brother.

Falling Down Politely or, How to Use Up All Six Bullets instead of Playing Russian

Roulette – Rasha Abbas

Translated from the Arabic by Alice Guthrie

But where's the skill in loading a gun with just one round of ammunition and pointing it at your head, trying your luck at deliverance?

The ingenious thing would be to fill all six chambers and let every bullet kill you, one after the other.

Bullet 1

Even though the voice ringing out from the stereo in your bedroom belongs to a singer who didn't die at twenty-seven like those other musical geniuses – Kurt Cobain, Jimmy Hendrix, that lot – you still listen to him every morning.

You open your curtains to find a severed head in an elegant plant pot on the windowsill. It's bald, and the eyes are peacefully closed. As far as you remember you've made no visit to al-Mu'tamid ibn Abbad's medieval garden of severed heads to pluck this one from among his enemies, so perhaps the early-onset Alzheimer's promised by your mother's genes is setting in already. Or maybe al-Mu'tamid himself arrived in Damascus last night bearing these heads of his as gifts born along – as you saw in a waking dream last night – in a convoy darkened by the shadow of a thousand curved swords, which blocked the way through the Bab Sharqi old city gate. You sat down on a wooden chair there once, right on the kerbside, worn out by a show-off drinking binge that hadn't made you look hard like it was meant to; a German tourist dabbed at your brow with a damp piece of cloth, saying 'You'll be alright,' in a scornful Germanic English voice. Then you got into a taxi with your skint friends and terrified them – you were so out of it that you actually launched into a mangled recitation of an Old Testament psalm in broken Hebrew (you had just about learnt the basics of it) as the taxi driver stared distrustfully at you in the rearview mirror. 'Give thanks to the Lord!' you said to him in Arabic, as if in response to his glares, then completed the line in your dodgy Hebrew 'keiy... lei awlaam... khasdu' ('for his steadfast love endures forever').

Right now, as you carry a jug of chilled water over to the window and water the new head's soil with it, what you wish is that you were being stalked by an infatuated lover who couldn't find a less miserable way of seducing you than by leaving you

these wretched gifts, as if attempting to prove that he's just as sick as you are.

Bullet 2

You listen to the song, and you think about the things that make you prefer YouTube to television. All they put on TV is cookery shows, and the music they like, and sheikhs, and corpses; in your worst and most perverted fantasies you don't find corpses at all enticing, so you take yourself off to YouTube where you can have your own way and watch hentai anime clips for free. Women with pink hair get fucked by all sorts of things – not just blue-haired and bespectacled urbane young men, but ugly monsters, grotesque machines and creepy humanoid trees. The women's skin looks flawless and clean, and there's all this flabby cloying drama; but you need these films, even if you do get irritated by the way the women and girls are depicted with that pained expression on their faces during sex. Why do these female hentai characters always have to be in pain?

You fall asleep halfway through the film, to dream of cats like you have every day for the last year – clingy cats wrapping themselves around you, kneading at you. If you happen to have something edible in your hand you feed it to them, but they'll swipe whatever you are carrying away themselves anyway and gnaw at it – even the money. You dream of your lithe friends – half-cat, half-human – springing nimbly from roof to roof, bowling along through the city streets, full of grace and free to roam around undeterred by anything: no one snipes at cats or hits them with electric cattle prods. During the dream you decide not to have any friends except for cats from now on.

Bullet 3

You pour water onto the severed head once again, even though it's seeming more and more dried up – it doesn't want to drink any water, and you don't know what's to be done. You peep out of the window at the police station in your street, straining to hear if anyone's getting beaten up at the moment – but there's no sound.

You turn up the stereo – maybe someone in there's longing to hear a song – and you fall back into your familiar fears: you frighten yourself that you're like that pitiful man in the film, selected at birth to be the subject of a global reality TV show, and that at this very moment everyone around the world's watching you in a live broadcast via hidden cameras positioned all over your room, laughing at you as you dance by yourself and talk to yourself in the mirror like an idiot. You glance over

uneasily at the doll with the staring eyes tracking around your room, and you turn the stereo up higher, then – in utter futility – you pour water on the head, blueish driedup veins showing clearly now.

Bullet 4

Your mother opens the door to tell you off about how loud the stereo is, and another cat wriggles into your room between her feet. You immediately wonder how you'll answer if she asks you about the blaring stereo and the severed head and the black blindfolds covering the dolls' eyes, and about all these cats surrounding you: you don't have a good answer. Your only solution would be to claim that you've gone mad or got depressed because of the cold and 'flu medicine you've been taking – but she doesn't even ask. All she says is that one of the cats seems to understand plants better than you do – 'Look,' she says, pointing over to the window sill: the cat is licking the lips of the severed head, whose cheeks are turning pink. Your mother's right, cats understand better than either of you do. You think about the reasons you prefer spending time with cats than with your mother.

Bullet 5

There among the tens of blindfolded dolls and the skittish, playful cats in the room with you, you open the laptop and think about what makes you prefer Facebook to TV. You can't find any particular main reason, and you're distracted – still feeling suspicious about that despicable doll that spies on you every second of the day, transmitting your dumb behaviour via the cameras hidden inside it to giant TV screens in squares and parks all over the world, despite the black tape you've blindfolded it with.

You rush to cover the lens of the laptop camera with a little piece of paper. You heard once that those cameras can be hacked into and tapped.

The website of the women's magazine says: 'And if you like this boy who you don't know, you must make it seem like your social life is very lively, teeming with friends and parties and so on...' Fuck these magazines, you haven't got time for this shit, there are cats that need taking care of – more and more of them, they're scattered through the streets in all sorts of danger – and there's an extremely beautiful severed head on the windowsill which could wither and die at any moment, and there's a police station in your neighbourhood, and there's al-Mu'tamid who arrived in Damascus yesterday – you need to get a move on.

Exasperated, you lash out at a clown doll that's strangely close to the computer screen and seems highly interested in monitoring your Facebook account – when you smack it over the head it falls to the floor and is instantly pounced on by a seething mass of cats, acting out the rage they can smell wafting out of you so clearly. Wow, cats! You decide that if there turns out to be any time left you'll grow up with them, all of you together in a house with no one else, and you'll name them all after you. Facebook chat shows he's online, so you get straight to the point with no preambles. 'Listen, I really want to put cheddar cheese all over your body and eat it off you.' He suddenly disappears from the chat list – and when you check you find that he's disappeared from your friends list too, so you send him a new friend request and you wait, thinking that his being married doesn't mean anything, and that if one day he updated his Facebook relationship status to 'divorced' you wouldn't be embarrassed to put a cheeky 'Like' on it – of course that would have to be in the case that he'd added you as a friend again by then... The clown doll on the floor has had its blindfold pulled off by the cats – Shit! It must've seen everything!

Bullet 6

Dearest Mother,

If you are reading this most respectful composition of mine, which I hereby affix to the freezer, then please be informed that I am indeed no longer able to complete a set of tasks which I would therefore like you to carry out in my stead.

Fear not if you see a line of blood at the door to my bedroom, but enter calmly. Do not be alarmed either by the sight of a clown doll who has been hanged from the ceiling: it was what she deserved and we made sure that she did not suffer unduly.

Tread carefully so as not to step on any of the cats' tails; if you find them licking the blood off the floor do not scold them or shoo them away. I had sworn to these cats that I would grow up with them and that we would share our old age in seclusion, and I have now broken my promise. On the window sill you will find an elegant plant pot, empty of earth, near to the one containing the severed head. There are pumpkin and sunflower seeds therein: kindly transport my head over to said vessel and place it on the seeds to staunch the bleed. Use my Facebook password and ascertain whether the Cheddar Cheese Boy has restored me to his friends. Put a link to some song or other as my status update, bid my friends good morning, and tell them the lie that I love them all equally.'