

Sama Hasan

## No

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If only she could find that word in her vocabulary. If only that word would cross the threshold of her mind and heart and make its long way from the depth of her bowels to her lips. After all, it was the shortest word a person could utter. Two letters, that's all, as opposed to "*na'am*," yes, which was three letters, and which she uttered all the time. If not out loud then with a nod, or with another word, such as "*hader*," "at your service," and sometimes, when the bitterness and despair overwhelmed her, she placed her hand on her head as if she were saying, "*ala rasi*," "on my head," "just name it."

How she longed to say no. Sometimes, when she thought no one was watching, she tried to whisper it, but nothing came out of her mouth but breath. Damn! Didn't that word exist in her lexicon? Why was it so hard for her to pronounce the letters "n" and "o"? She had uttered them many times, but never in the right order. She tried and tried, but only air and spit came out of her mouth, sometimes in bubbles of foam, as if she were having an epileptic seizure.

Once, she watched a TV show of which she understood nothing, except for a single fact that was seared in her memory: an organ that is used grows, and an organ that is neglected shrinks.

She memorized that fact. Her hands are surely the biggest and strongest organs in her body, because she uses them more than any other organ. She wakes up early in the morning, hurries to the concrete cast tub, and stands in the shower bowl, pouring water over her head the customary three times, to wash the remnants of her husband off her body, and then rushes to cook and bake for the members of her large family who go to work every morning in her husband's father's nearby field. They work endlessly, dashing from here to there and from there to here, coming

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home at night and saying nothing but: come, bring, take, pick up. How she would like just once to say “No, I’m tired.” But all it takes is one withering look from her father-in-law, with his thick white mustache and burning eyes, to strike her mute. She swallows the two letters and continues to work until the sun sets.

Despite the sweat that drenches her body that never stops working, she can still feel the remnants of her husband on her thighs. She presses them with her hands, to stop the liquid she imagines pouring onto the grass in front of everybody.

There is not a single night her husband spares her exhausted body, even though he is even more tired than her. Not even when she gets pregnant. She still remembers how he laughed one evening while still chewing his food and said: “Nothing will stop me from exercising my right, even if this child turns out to be the hero who liberates Palestine.”

That small opening in her body leading to her womb is the showcase of her husband’s manhood. She feels it grow and turn into an empty cave emanating the stench of death and loss. The more her husband plumbs the depths of the cave, the more exhausted she feels. If only she knew the magic words that opened and closed her Ali Baba cave.

Though she has little education, she can read some Qur’an, and one verse lingers in her mind: “Your wives are your fields.” She understood that her body, like a field, needed to be cultivated so that it could give her husband the best fruit. Once, she tried to plant a seed in front of her house. She watered it casually, as if she were relieving herself, but it didn’t sprout. Later she replanted it, this time watering it like a mother giving her infant the breast, praying it would grow and blossom. And sure enough, the seed broke forth and rose from the earth and turned into a handsome plant. Every time she saw it she grieved for her body plowed by her husband.

One night, when he brought his face close to hers, she tried to push him away. He didn’t try to kiss her or smell her face or bury his face in her hair. Exhausted from work, he plowed her body relentlessly. Outside he was nothing but one of ten sons who obeyed their tyrannical father, but here in this narrow room he was a man. Once, only once, did she dare to close her thighs and raise them before him. He looked at her surprised, growled silently, and struck her forcefully between the knees. She opened them, fearing further pain.

When he mounted her again she closed her eyes tight. A giant hand, like the one she saw on their visit to the city, appeared and filled the darkness. Her husband explained to her at the time that it meant “stop” and expounded on the problem

of speed in the city, as if he had ever lived there. In fact it was their first visit to the city together, to go to the doctor after she had a bloody discharge from her womb.

The doctor hinted to him that all his wife needed was rest, and winked at him, but on their way out he cursed her and the money she charged for the appointment.

When he possessed her again that night, she felt as if her whole body were that painted hand, but he didn't see anything. He cut into her flesh with his thrashing until an uncontrollable cry of pain rose from her lips. She felt her flesh turning into letters, one letter attached to the other. Only two letters, "n" and "o." He stopped for a moment, grabbed her by the shoulders, and stared at her face as if he were asking, "What's gotten into you?"

She shook her head as if she were saying "Nothing," and felt the failure blind her eyes, as if she were drowning in the amniotic fluid in which her fetus was floating while her husband hacked away at them both. You are nothing but family property, the thought pierced her mind. Hands and womb, hands and womb.

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### **About Sama Hasan**

Sama Hasan is a Palestinian author and journalist living in Gaza. She has published five collections of short stories in Arabic: *City of Silence* (2008); *Diary of a Besieged Woman* (2012); *Gentle Chaos* (2014); *Laughter and Play, Tears and War* (2015); *Corners* (2016). Selected stories have been translated into many languages.