

Tamara Naser

Ice Cream in the Car

Translation from the Arabic: Serene Husni

Literary editor: Shoshana London Sappir

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Before the flaming ball of the sun, I stood and saw my summer projects vanish. Dust of flying nihilism that was crushed, faded without passing through the orderly phases of disappearance. I had an elegant abortion: no blood, no tissues, no internal organs, no intestines, no liquids, and no mucus. The sun rays slipped away inside me, and I had the feeling that my organs were swelling and bloating like a fruit that overripened and rotted. I stole a glance at a shady spot and I headed toward it, defeated. I had a headache. She put her hand on my shoulder and said: “It’s OK sister, it’s only a driver’s license . . . Take it easy.”

“What’s OK? No, it’s not OK, don’t touch me!”

She was trying with me in different ways. She brought a bottle of water; I swallowed it at once, then spat it out in consecutive rounds. She reached into her purse, looking for something for me to wipe my face with while repeating her sentence that everything would be all right, and that my reaction was somewhat excessive and wasn’t proportionate to what had happened. I felt that what had preceded this anxiety attack was just a blurry event that I hadn’t cried about. I wasn’t crying about the driver’s license that the police and the Israeli court had just taken away from me, I was crying about something I’d lost a long time ago . . . something that wasn’t mine to begin with. My mindset just chose to adopt the story of the license.

I said: “I’ll calm down now . . . I don’t know what came over me . . . yes it’s just a license.” Her smile was racing a river of tears that I didn’t immediately understand, like I was used to. Was she happy that I was quickly convinced that she was right and everything would really be OK? Or did she allow herself to fall apart quickly and delicately only when I began to show some composure?

The sun was burning, melting layers of skin off of me slowly. “Let’s get out of here,” she said.

I drove the car back. The decision would only go into effect two months from today. Things appeared in high definition through the windows—the details were a lot clearer than they should be, and the colors were so bright they appeared to me to be outside the spectrum.

“What now?” she said hesitantly.

“How should I know?” I snapped.

Then silence fell like a closed curtain dividing the space into two shores: one of language and another that didn’t know language. We didn’t say a word for a while, then I saw her pull out her phone and write a text with two thumbs that seemed to me to be competing for screen space. Meanwhile, I was searching in my head for what she meant by “What now?” Ontologically: “What now? What later? And what about before? And what about God?” . . . My head was noisy with words and the edges of their letters were sharp like a knife, which caused me more pain.

I said: “I’m thinking of going to visit my parents.”

She said: “How come?”

“How should I know?” I said; then silence fell over us again.

The sun was mean, and I felt like it was kissing me on hell’s grill; it removed the first layer of my skin. I pulled the car over, and before she left the car to head to the apartment, she said, “OK, send me a message when you arrive.” I nodded and watched her get out of the car and walk toward the stairs, while her thumbs returned to that wrestling match in the center of the glass ring. And when I was sure I was out of her sight, I drove the car so fast, the speed was nearly excessive and illegal. Who cares about “legal” after today, I told myself, they’d confiscated my license. Then a thought crossed my mind that the worst they could do now was throw me in a cell with clear borders. Was that what I wanted?

I continued at the same speed and flipped radio stations: Al Shams, Galgalatz, Kol Yisrael, Sawt el Mada, Sawa. I turned the radio off. I tried to ignore and distance the voices of my father’s wrath because of the way I dealt with car issues, the driver’s license, the insurance and the test (in Yarka), the water and oil check (whenever I had the chance), and the handbrake (which should always be pulled all the way up) . . . But why should I worry about these things now? They weren’t what was terrifying me.

The sun was hellish and the car's air conditioner couldn't handle the heat. My complexion liquefied and dripped out. How was it that tires didn't melt in heat like this? My father continuously reminded me that when I was a child, I asked him that question every summer, and his response came to me readily. He'd say: "How will they melt? We humans will melt and decompose before these tires do." Then he'd step out of the car while I watched him fill his tires with air (bar 2.5 with a smile on his face, or what I thought was a smile, and it eluded me that his facial expression might have been annoyed with the sun). I looked at the fuel gauge and, contrary to expectations, it was fine.

While I tried to adjust the air conditioner, I received a message: "So did you make it?" I read it and threw the phone at the passenger's seat, as I did with everything that got into the car with me.

An old memory suddenly came to me: we were in the car coming back from school. I had just finished enjoying a big ice cream, and it seemed my body had been injected with the dose of sugar, and with a random and elaborate arm movement, I threw the ice cream stick in the car, thinking it was kind of cute. A moment later, I saw my father gradually slow down until the car came to a stop at the side of the road. It seemed as though his yelling was coming from the depths of the world. He scolded me for what I'd done, and bit by bit his yelling took the form of a lecture in which he said: "Dima, the car is like a house, by God, it's like a house, Dima! Is this how you behave in your house now? Is this how you'll behave in your house in the future? . . . A human spends as much time in the car these days as they do in the house. You have to take care of the car the same way you take care of yourself and your house."

I remember when we arrived at home that day: my mother was at home by chance. She looked at me and asked what had happened, and my father quickly responded that he had taught me an important lesson today: "Your daughter treats a car like a garbage dump." My mother patted my shoulder: "It's OK, my love, the car to your dad is like his wife . . . I wish he took as much care of me as he does of his shit car."

I got bored with trying to adjust the air conditioner and surrendered to the heat. How would I tolerate the rest of the road? I started speeding, then I took a quick look at my phone at my side: "So did you make it?" Where was I going anyway this early in the morning, even though I already knew the house was empty at this time? Was this what I wanted? For it to be empty?

I slowed down and grabbed the phone. I looked at it again. I looked up at the street for a moment, then looked down at the phone again, and during this dance,

a stray creature appeared before me—it seemed to me a dog from a distance, and when I got closer, I thought it was a jackal, and then I saw a cat in it. Why didn't this creature get out of the road? How stray is this animal, I said to myself; then out of nowhere, my tears started to fall. Tears and sweat and heat. Ice cream, I want ice cream. I stopped the car at the side of the road. I wrote a message: "No, that's it, I want to turn back." I recalled those small summer projects that I thought were forever gone, so I turned the car around, and drove back to them.

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About Tamara Naser

Tamara Naser is a Palestinian author. She studied English literature, film, and psychology, has an MA, and is a certified bibliotherapist, providing therapy through stories and writing, at Haifa University.