

## The Disbelieving Believer

*Umar Timol*

*Translated from French by Saffiyah Chady Edo*

As he pulls out of her, he starts crying. Not because of this pure moment of bliss, or the soothing feeling that washes over him, or having satisfied his primal needs when comes the night, but because this moment, frozen in time, gives him the feeling of being liberated, transcending the barriers of the possible, reaching the impossible, like holding a mirror, meant to capture and enhance a perfect face and body which have belonged to him at that point in time. He doesn't fall asleep right away. He watches her. Once more, he wants to caress her face. But he must not touch her anymore. Not now. There is a time for lust and a time for contemplation. The great mystical poets from his readings say that the woman is the embodiment of the divine. She might well be, but what's the use, he reflects smilingly, of these theories, if we can experience the divine through the pleasures of the flesh? Isn't it therefore better to stop thinking, pondering?

There's the night, tears, sleep and clarity. He would have wanted to feel guilty, remorseful. After all, he, the believer, is sleeping with a woman out of wedlock. Contrary to popular belief, his faith not only allows but praises the pleasures of the flesh, but within the bonds of matrimony. He has, of course, wanted to get married; who doesn't consider marriage at one time or the other? The instinct for life coexists, after all, with that of death, but misunderstandings, unrequited love, a fear of commitment and other minor catastrophes won over. Time goes by. Age sets in, with wrinkles drawing lines on faces, and there is no longer any place for marriage. Is he regretful? Sometimes, he wonders about the kind of life he would have had, had he gotten married, with kids, taking holidays abroad: an inexorably quiet and happy life despite the inevitable ups and downs. But at sixty, when death is looking at you right in the eyes, there is no time for regrets. You learn to enjoy the few years that are left for you to live.

He would have wanted to feel guilty, especially since his relationship with this woman is far from conventional. What's the term? Paid service, consented? What is the appropriate word? Reaching the sixties equates to attaining a peaceful but terrifying place, for one's sex appeal is no longer what it used to be. The women who consider you a respectable bait are mostly oldies, who might as well be desperately looking for love. Who wants to take on wreck when one is on the point of sinking? Even if he is far from being poor, he is still not rich enough to entice a young woman. He might come across as cynical, but cynicism makes happiness possible. Unchain yourself from any expectations and appreciate what you are being offered, as little as it may be.

Everything is simple with her. He doesn't offer her money. He showers her with gifts, dinner in restaurants, strolls in little known alleyways of the big city, inconsequential, intense conversations between two persons who are joined by a contract rather than duty. In the capitalist jargon, this would be called the deal of the century. Can one want more? However, the secret to this happiness boils down to a five-word mantra: do not fall in love. Definitely not. To love would mean to turn into a drooling dog at the feet of this goddess. To love means to be enslaved by the other. Therefore, nothing but pleasure.

He would have loved to feel guilty, but he cannot bring himself to it. He reconnected with his faith, never having truly abandoned it, following a serious road accident, which could have easily sent him six feet under. Suddenly, life lost its veneer and His was the only presence, the only reality. During his painful recovery, he could feel His pulse in every fibre of his being. He started to pray once more, to obey His laws. He was more convinced than ever of the veracity of his faith. But then, time took its toll, shallowness and futility regained the upper hand. He didn't lose faith, but it morphed into an intellectual kind of faith, a conviction of the mind, a perfect object that we observe from a distance. Despite his increasing faith, he had more or less abandoned any religious practice.

Never had a man had more faith, and practice his faith to a lesser degree, simultaneously.

How does such a sense of guilt feel? He imagines every moment filled with torment which reminds him of his capacity of wrongdoing, of his evil act, from which he cannot escape. Nights spent lashing himself with the whips of remorse. Days spent on his prayer mat asking, demanding His forgiveness. Himself, valiant knight fighting the dragon with all his might. But... nothing of the sort. Sometimes, he may suffer from an irritation to his conscience, akin to the morning breeze on a mountain.

He is envious of the faithful and the religious practitioners. Not that he considers them better than him, far from it. He has mingled with them long enough to know that the faith that leads to the ultimate truth can also bring out the worst in people. But these people are rooted in their convictions. It does not matter if they are wrong in their interpretations, or so vain and arrogant because of their firm conviction that they are the recipients of Truth, that they know the difference between right and wrong. The line between is clearly drawn, of which they are conscious even if they do cross it from time to time. In other words, they know that they are actually mucking around but they work towards doing so at a lesser degree.

At one point, he had considered getting married to this young woman, to give this albeit strange relationship a legal status. When he now thinks about it, he cannot help but burst out laughing. What an absurd idea! Does he wish to prove that absurdity kills? He would make the headlines: "The body of an oldie has been found, finally killed by the absurd". Or even better: "Wedding between the Beauty and the (Stupid) Beast."

From time to time, he promises himself to break up, if that applies to their relationship, with her. He would forgive him, for He is the Forgiver; it's never too late. But he doesn't want to, he cannot, he doesn't care really. He knows that in the end, He will triumph over him. It's only a question of time, He triumphs over everything, over each of our human frailties. He just has to choose among the vast array of misfortunes. What can I serve you, Sir? The death of a close one, an incurable sickness, a natural disaster; make your choice and you will come back to Me, with your tails between your legs.

Why then break up when he doesn't feel any guilt? Tomorrow night, he will meet her, she will be more beautiful and fragile than ever. He will wonder if such a face is even human, if it is made of light or something else, he will wonder about her bold beauty that seems to be out of this world. They will then walk in the narrow streets of a city that hasn't yet been soothed by the night. They will talk about stupid things, won't be able to help but laugh, they will also have deep conversations, with tears mingled with magnificent silence, emanating from moments full of beauty. They will then go to her hotel room and make love, he will surrender to the ritual of oblivion, flitting from his body, becoming this breath that is devoted uniquely to her beauty. And at the peak of orgasm, he will whisper the name of this woman, and the name of the Creator and the name of the Creator and the name of this woman, mingling their names for he will know that he has never been closer to Him than at that moment, him, the disbelieving believer.