

## VERSE IN ARABIC

*by Birgitte Rasine*

I didn't notice the rays of the rising sun slipping through the wet branches of the tall nameless trees we passed by; I didn't see the emptiness of the streets we drove through; I cared nothing for the worries all those people flitting past my rain-strewn window carried deep inside. I didn't feel the cobblestones rumbling beneath the wheels: all I could think about was *him*.

My driver was happily expounding upon the joys of his night before, but I wasn't listening. I grunted politely now and then to slip him a quiver of apparent interest, but all I could think about was *him*.

I was certain he would terrify me. He had become a legend, a dark legend by force of his complete absence from the public eye. Everyone knew about him: elders invoked his name whenever something inexplicable occurred in their neighborhood; mothers kept their daughters at home after dark; children scared each other senseless in the streets before going home to dinner. I thought about what he looked like, what his voice sounded like, what he would say or not say, whether he would look at me or mutter incomprehensibilities the way many introverted criminals do. Yet somehow I could not reconcile the notion of this man as a criminal—he was a medical doctor.

My journalistic pride bubbled up from my gut. Doctor or no doctor, he murdered her, in her own house. *Over-worked physician murders patient in cold blood*, I thought. But I just couldn't make myself believe it.

My editor had come across the original article in a back issue of a competing newspaper, if running a paper under a national umbrella of censorship can really be called competition. Printed in the year 1946 in a paper much more loyal to the *Generalissimo* and his cronies than ours, it was over two decades old, but my editor, possessed of a morbid sense of irony—and somewhat righteous rivalry—felt it would be a rather good idea to revisit the crime on the 21st anniversary of the murder, particularly since the girl had been 21 at the time of her death. *These things always make good stories*, he said when he gave me the assignment. *See if you can dig up something new, something shocking the other paper missed.*

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*Sure, I had said. Something the National Press and Propaganda Agency would shut us down for.*

The tattered article trembled in my hand as my cab rumbled over the unfortunate streets of Madrid. I thought perhaps I should take another look at it, but I had read it already five times. So I kept staring at it, trying to imagine the features and character of this mysterious doctor who had captured the imagination and horror of all of Spain, at precisely the wrong time in her history.

A few minutes later the taxi cab jolted to a stop. An imposing residence stood just across the street. *That must be it.* The driver happily exited and ran around to open the door for me. It was just another morning run for him.

I would have liked more time to imagine the doctor.

I stepped out of the car, catching my coat in the door—and dropped the article on the wet pavement.

Reaching down to pick it up, I suddenly remembered. In my haste to leave the office, I had forgotten my tape recorder. *No matter, I thought, I'll do without it just like in the good old days.*

I stood up and dug into my jacket for my notebook. There was the address the editorial assistant had written down for me. I looked up at the house I was now standing in front of, alone in the drizzling rain. My driver had wasted no time in getting back to the warm comfort of his seat.

If there were any sort of plate or sign with the number of the house to confirm the accuracy of my present location, I certainly couldn't find it. Centuries of ivy had consumed the heavy stone walls, ceding only to the enormous front door and the windows. My only hope was that my driver knew where he was going; if I couldn't locate the number on the house standing directly in front of it, I didn't quite grasp how he could have done so out of the windows of a moving taxi.

I turned around to call out to him, but he'd already gone. I stood there in the rain wondering if he'd remember he's due back in two hours. I never could tell with Spanish taxi drivers—especially now, after the war.

The drizzle was beginning to soak through my jacket, light but annoying just enough to push me toward the front door—and my assignment. There, in front of me, a solid iron door knocker hung in defiance. So adamant it could almost speak. I stood for a few moments more.

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The doctor had requested a special leave of absence from his cell for the interview, given that it would be, as he had assured my editor, his first and only interview to any paper since his incarceration. He refused to be interviewed in prison. Such a request would be impossible for most convicted criminals, but his reputation as a man of medicine far preceded him. They quietly made an exception.

This house was somehow chosen, by someone, as apparently discreet and secure enough to contain him.

Something moved. I shot a glance toward the corner of the residence. A shadow of a man in a heavy black suit slipped just out of sight. *Guards*, I thought. I thought it again, for peace of mind.

There was not a sign of life in the streets—as if everyone feared for the lives of their daughters...

Just then, the door pulled slowly open. A rather striking older woman, evidently the housekeeper of the place, stared at me accusingly, but let me in without a word. I stepped inside and hesitated, expecting her to lead me to the doctor's chambers, but she waited for me instead. Her dark olive complexion and jet-black hair despite her advanced years—I would have guessed early sixties—framed eyes not afraid to look right through you. She needed no words to express her will. But I was an American journalist with a mind of my own and an inbred habit of resisting implicit cultural nuances and expectations. My Spanish colleagues at the paper had a running bet on when I'd finally be apprehended by one authority or another.

I stared at her and she stared at me and I thought *by God if neither one of us moves we'll stand here forever*. So I took the first step, not out of capitulation but resolute determination, and walked head on into the darkness of the corridor, plunging into an odor of old rotting wood and dusty oil portraits and forgotten mold that had eaten into the crevices of antique knick knacks. My eyes not yet having adjusted to the utter blackness, my instinct told me to hold out my hand to guide me, but my ego dug in and I, unsure of my way, continued on with the woman of the house behind me, the two of us silently plodding along what seemed to be a corridor without end.

There was apparently a door somewhere ahead, for suddenly the housekeeper brushed past me and knocked on it. No answer came and none was needed; her knock was a mere formality. She led me inside. A solitary ray of light cut the room into pieces. In the far corner, a figure sat hunched over a desk.

There was no question who it was.

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The doctor turned around with the first step I took. And I, the most loquacious of journalists, found myself *sans mots*. Far from the unshaven, stark-eyed madman he had so often been painted to be in popular media, he was the epitome of the kind, wise family doctor you'd want to take all the kids in the neighborhood to see. Rich, jet-black hair that had resisted the stress of age and confinement, eyes warm with the compassion and knowing only true medical doctors possess, skin of rich olives ripened in the Spanish sun.

"Mr. ---," said the doctor. His voice was clear and sound and offered no evidence of latent insanity.

"Pleasure to meet you, doctor," I said. The doctor rose and held out his hand. I must have seemed rude, for I stared at it an instant. I took it and found it exceptionally warm, kind—if hands can be kind—and somehow understanding. I strained to see his face.

"I'm very pleased you could come," said the doctor, inviting me to a chair by his desk. "Do you need paper?"

"No, that's fine, thank you." I was struck by his demeanor.

"I'm sorry about the light," he smiled, picking up on my squint. "I'm so used to low light, you know"—and he paused emphatically—"but here, let me open the shades a bit so you can write."

He moved to the window and pulled the curtains aside. But I did not want to see to write—I wanted to see to see *him*.

He sat into his chair with a sigh and gazed at me at length. Solitude had carved her sadness deep into his face, but his skin, the rich Spanish olive skin, refused to give up its flavors, and his eyes shone brilliantly at me, reigning victorious above the sentence imposed on him by Law.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea perhaps?"

"I'm sorry? Oh—yes of course." He had taken me unawares—I was still staring at his face, because he was so completely unlike what I had imagined that I did in fact need the hot tea to come to my cold, calculated—and clearly wrongly informed—journalistic senses.

Later it struck me... I never drank tea, and neither did the Spanish!

The door opened then and the housekeeper came in bringing a tea set for two on an old silver tray. I marveled how fast he had managed to summon her and surmised she must have had the hot water already waiting.

The doctor took his tea with a sprinkling of dark sugar; I opted for honey. It was mint tea, fresh, aromatic, mesmerizing, served in colorful glasses I remembered from my days as a

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war correspondent in Morocco. He watched me calmly, with no impatience or judgment, and I had the sensation he was looking far into my past, into who I had been and who I was then, and perhaps much more—I felt he knew more about me than I did.

The tea seared its molten traces through my torso and into my stomach. I put down my glass and picked up my pen. The doctor held silent. For the first time in my professional life I didn't know how to begin an interview. So I decided to explain the obvious.

"I'm not here to reopen the case, sir," I began. I paused, but the doctor politely waited for me, his eyes warm and understanding. "I think everyone remembers essentially what happened, but the years have covered the details in hearsay and legends and I—"

The doctor waved his hand in a rather singular horizontal motion.

"What do you know about it, my son?"

The "son" made me self-conscious. I was too old to be his son.

"What I know is that you were accused of murdering the daughter of a prominent lawyer here in Madrid, that you maintain the killer was someone else and you were framed, and that you were sentenced to life in prison without much of a trial. A sentence later commuted to 25 years. That's about it."

The doctor nodded gravely.

"Everything you say is true. I was accused, I do so maintain, and I was sentenced," he replied cryptically. "But before you ask me your questions, let me tell you the story from the beginning. Do you have time? Yes of course you do, you're a journalist."

I didn't have time precisely because I was a journalist, but I could hardly refuse.

"You don't wish to record?" asked the doctor. Dismayed at his having uncovered my absentmindedness, I nonchalantly replied, "I prefer the old-fashioned way, by hand."

"Very well. I shall start at the beginning. Twenty-one years ago I was practicing medicine in Cordoba," the good doctor began. "I was teaching at the University in Granada at the same time, because my medical practice did not bring in much. You see, I could never accept payment for the services I rendered. Medical service is a necessity in life, and those unlucky enough to need it should not be required to pay—especially in times of hardship, which we all saw plenty of then. But"—he waved his hand in that unique way of his—"that is simply irrelevant here. One day I received a phone call from a colleague of mine in Madrid. Well, a colleague only by profession, because you see I never met this man."

"Never?" I said.

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“Never. To this day I cannot tell you who this assumed physician was. He had a light accent that betrayed a foreign nationality. He asked me if I could come to Madrid right away on an urgent matter.

“I asked him, ‘What could be so urgent that you must summon me? Do you not have doctors in Madrid?’ He replied that I was being specifically asked for by Don ---. I had never heard the name and so could not pretend to be impressed. I told the man that I was sorry but that I simply could not get away from my work in Cordoba.

“He called again the next week, offering me large sums of money. I began to be annoyed with him and told him I don’t practice medicine for money. It was then that his tone changed. He warned me in no uncertain language that if I did not come to Madrid within the week, I would not be practicing at all. I told him I do not tolerate threats and he can do what he will, but my practice is my practice, and the only way to stop me is to put a bullet in my head.”

The doctor paused for a bit, the old memory of such an affront to his honor still capable of stirring his fury. I nodded respectfully, which seemed to relax him enough to go on.

“‘Dr. ---,’ the man said, ‘You will not be the one to pay for your indiscretion. Your family will.’ He then proceeded to offer certain details about members of my family to prove the seriousness of his threat. I was, as you can imagine, quite concerned; I had managed to elude the White Terror in Andalusia, surely you remember those days... several of my colleagues, rest their souls, had not been so lucky. All I knew at that moment is that I simply could not risk the safety of my family—not even for the medical profession, or any insufferable political cause.”

The doctor’s jaw tightened as he spoke. I knew all too well the massacres he was referring to. I’d covered them.

“I arrived in Madrid the next day. I settled in at the hotel they had secured for me, a rather luxurious affair that may have impressed another man, but I was indifferent. Before dawn on the day following, I was taken to an estate somewhere in the north of the city.”

“You said you never met the man who originally called you.”

“No. There was only one other person in the car with me—the driver, and he never let me see his face. In all of the time I spent on this miserable engagement, he spoke to me only once, and acknowledged my daily greetings to him with nothing more than a light nod.”

I thought drily of my driver. The two should get together for a drink.

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“But to continue: it was just before dawn. As soon as the car came to a stop, my door was immediately and briskly opened and I was ushered out of the car and into the imposing residence. Inside, I found myself in a large foyer, with a marble floor, richly decorated walls, and a rather elegant staircase leading somewhere to the upper level.

“The man who had shown me in—and uttered only a short greeting, I should add—indicated I should head upstairs. Oh, how often I have thought of that flight of stairs!” The doctor trembled suddenly. “That cursed staircase that I thought breathtakingly beautiful the first time! It’s as if I never descended. I was to climb that staircase many times, every day, just before dawn.

“At the top of the staircase was a door. It was a lovely wooden door, painted white. I assumed I was to open it—I was given no instructions, and so I relied on my own instincts to guide me.

“I opened the door without knocking. Inside was a plain whitewashed room with two French windows, also whitewashed. I stood in the doorway, waiting for my eyes to adjust, but presently there was no need. A shaft of light broke through the darkness then, for the sun had risen. Slowly the room began surrendering its secrets to me. One of those secrets was to be my end. Never was there a curse more beautiful than this..”—here the doctor lost his voice momentarily—“on a white feather bed lay a young girl—she couldn’t have been more than twenty or perhaps twenty-one—apparently asleep. She was breathtaking. She had luxurious dark brown hair, skin like sun-ripe olives, her eyelashes the shape of angel’s wings. Her breathing was nervous and short, as if she were suffering at that moment from some terrifying nightmare. But she was pale, very pale, too pale for someone of her age. I immediately knew this was the reason I had been summoned, and I knelt down to open my medical bag.”

“ ‘The only child of a prominent Spanish lawyer, whose mysterious illness stupefied every doctor in Madrid,’ ” I quoted from memory from the newspaper article.

The doctor shook his head adamantly, gesturing with his hand in that characteristic horizontal motion of his.

“I have my own theories as to whether or not the family itself was Spanish. Who knows? Perhaps. I have conjured up thousands of theories since then, but in the end, none of them matters but the one that sets you free. Perhaps you know more than I about these matters.” He paused for a bit. “Journalists usually do.”

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He looked searchingly at me, as if I could put an end to 21 years of questions thrown to the wind, 21 years of empty injustice never explained. Before I could respond, the doctor smiled. Something in his smile betrayed he knew more than he was telling.

“No matter. It is as it is. I did not wish to startle the girl, as she seemed to be wavering on that erratic edge between sleep and wakefulness; and so I sat down on a chair nearby and waited. The sun rose outside, filling the room with an overwhelming and brilliant light. I looked around the room and noticed that everything, from the walls to the furniture to the minimal decorations, was white or of a very muted, neutral color, and quite suddenly I felt an indescribable sense of calm, a profound tranquility, you know, the kind that hovers above the altars of churches and among the pews just after mass, when everyone has gone to return to their daily lives in that loud busy world outside, but you stay, you stay and you just listen to the old stone walls that have been consecrated to the Lord...”

The doctor’s face had unconsciously relaxed, and his eyes, I saw, looked off into the distant past, a past that only he knew and that had saved him from losing his brilliant mind while his body languished in his cell.

*A medical doctor and a pious man to boot*, I thought. *Jailed for murder*. I held my judgment.

“I must have sat there on that chair for over an hour—I cannot be sure precisely how long, but I finally stood when I could no longer feel my legs. I walked to the window and looked outside. A splendid garden stretched on away from the house for nearly a city block. The roses alone could have filled the Royal Palace. In the distance I could discern a stone wall, and it appeared to be the same wall that I had passed through earlier—it evidently encircled the estate. I could not see much more than that—beyond the garden must have been a street, for there I could see the rooftops of houses.

“I stood gazing out the window for a few moments, and thought to open it, for the air was very stale and unhealthy—particularly for the girl. I carefully slid the latch up and turned it to open the window. At first it would not give; I wondered if perhaps it was because the room had been recently painted, or because it had never been opened. I had to employ a certain degree of force to break it open. The latch made a sharp crack, and immediately afterward there came a sudden sigh from the girl. Afraid I had caused her to waken suddenly, I quickly turned around, but she had merely moved her head.

“I pushed the window wide open to let the fresh air in and approached her bedside. She had turned her head toward the wall, her blanket falling aside a bit to reveal a number of marks on the inside of her arm that alarmed me. Faint, but unmistakable puncture wounds,

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as those of a medical needle, but one clearly handled by inexperienced hands. A light pink color betrayed slight inflammation around the entry points.

“Sufficiently alarmed, I decided not to wait any longer. I took out my customary medical equipment and made a few preliminary tests, taking care not to disturb her too much. Her vital signs were acceptable, but something was clearly wrong, to my sense very wrong indeed. I would need more time, and I would need to speak to her.

“Just at that moment the door opened and a man entered the room. I recognized him as the same man who had ushered me into the house. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a thick head of raven black hair, an olive skin, and exuded power and authority. Perhaps his most outstanding feature was his well-trimmed moustache. I thought perhaps he was the mysterious caller who had summoned me here, but was soon proven wrong when he spoke—for it was not the same voice.

“‘Good morning, doctor. Thank you for coming on such short notice,’” he said.

“‘Good morning,’ I said, not sure if I should be so bold as to ask his name since he had not offered it. But before I could say another word, he said, “‘I am sorry but you must go now. She must rest.’

“I protested that I had just begun my examination, whereupon he insisted, ‘You will continue tomorrow.’ I protested again: this girl was evidently in need of a thorough examination and proper treatment for whatever it was that was ailing her—moreover, I had been summoned, I told the man, under threat to my own family, something I did not take lightly.

“At this point the man came close to the bedside where I stood and looked sternly at me. ‘You will continue tomorrow,’ he repeated, his voice cold and hard. He then saw that the window had been opened and his eyes flittered with rage. He briskly stepped over to the window, closed it with a sudden gentleness and caution, and said, ‘Do not ever touch anything in this room that you do not require for your examination.’

“I once again protested that the air in the room was very stale and that the girl needed fresh air, but the man ushered me rather impolitely out of the room. He closed the door firmly behind us and I, blocked by him, was forced to descend. He remained standing at the top of the stairs as if to make certain I would not attempt to reenter the room.

“I was so shaken by the morning’s events that it did not occur to me to try to get a good idea of the rest of the house. I found myself outside somehow, remembered the front gate, and there, as if by clockwork, I found the car waiting. Just then I came back to my senses. What sort of father—or family member, or whatever sort of responsible guardian—was a

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man who turns away a doctor his family had gone to so much trouble to secure for their daughter?

“I turned back around, firmly intending to go back to the girl’s room and demand to see her, but the front door had already been locked! I looked for a doorbell but there was none. Nor a door knocker of any kind. I resorted to knocking as loudly as I could with my knuckles, then my fists. The house remained obstinately silent. I expected the man to come bounding out of the house with a pack of hunting dogs for all the noise I made, but nothing. The driver, who was waiting in the car, did not react, did not come out and what is more, never seemed to take any notice of anything I did, not that first morning or any other thereafter.

“The next day I was driven to the house again under cover of night. Again the driver said nothing, again I was ushered hurriedly into the house, up the elegant staircase and through the door painted white. Again the day dawned white and brilliant, filling the room with an angelic aura; the girl was sleeping soundly. I earnestly desired to bring her back to health, but above all to protect her from the demons that inhabited her house. I could only assume the broad-shouldered man was somehow related to her, for I had no reason to assume otherwise.”

The doctor paused for a moment, allowing himself the memory of that angelic aura he spoke of, as if it might break the nightmare and bring him back to his youth—and his freedom, which I imagined he valued even more.

“I could not make this man—whom I shall call ‘master of the house’ if you will allow me, as I never did learn his name—understand that I needed to examine the girl while she was awake. He seemed to be possessed by a violent desire to bring her back to health—and fast—and yet he interfered with the very process necessary to do so! I fought him as well as I knew how, used every psychological device, every tactic, threat, and trick, but nothing moved this man. He was deaf to everything except requests for specific medical supplies.

“I had two hours every morning starting with the first light of dawn, and not a second more. I could not know whether she was awake during the day and simply slept long in the mornings, or whether her sleep had been artificially induced to prevent me from speaking to her. Despite the pain it caused me, I was forced to conclude that I could do nothing for the girl, given the extremely restrictive conditions of my examination.

“I determined to submit a medical report and return home at the end of the week. I considered this situation, this game this man or this family played, unusually cruel and without logic, and wanted no part in it. I did not, of course, tell them of my design. I