Lilacs

by Saïdeh Pakravan

Lilacs in bloom, unmistakably. If ever there was a sweeter smell, she had yet to discover it. Walking along the Rue des Aulnes, she peeped into the tall-walled gardens through every opening, to find the tree.

Where the street veered to the left, a wooden gate stood half open. In the garden beyond, she saw the glorious branches laden with thick clusters of purple four-branched stars. Impossibly, she wished that she could hug the tree, fold that purple against her chest, breathe it into herself.

The garden appeared deserted, if not downright abandoned: tall weeds grew in the middle of the path leading to the house. She was wondering whether she could go in, to move closer to the source of the fragrance, when a woman's voice, a well-modulated contralto, called out, "You're quite welcome to come in, if you wish."

Taken as she was with the lilac tree, she hadn't noticed the table and chairs set beneath a trimmed weeping willow, and the woman seated there, sheets of paper spread before her.

"Hello. Come in, come in."

Yolanda hesitated, then walked in.

"I'm terribly sorry to intrude like this, but I couldn't resist the smell of the lilac."

The woman was middle-aged, dressed in an off-white dress with a lace bodice. Her shiny russet hair, in which ran silvery strands, was pinned up in a double chignon, one on the top of her head, the other just below, in the back, in a peculiar and becoming fashion. She looked oddly of another time. She smiled benignly at Yolanda.

"Ah, lilac. It goes to one's head, doesn't it, it's so lovely. But do come in and sit with me. It will give me an excuse for not working. Not that I need one," she added, the ring of her laughter in the same contralto as her voice.

It would have been rude to refuse. Yolanda thanked her and sat on a white wicker chair opposite the lady who must have looked formidable when standing, and who now made a show

of rearranging her papers. Yolanda apologized for interrupting her in her work.

"Not at all, not at all, these are just notes I'm taking for future reference. I wasn't really working on anything."

"Are you a writer?"

"Yes," she said, "or I fancy myself as one. I haven't published much, but one has to keep at it, sharpen the tools of the trade . . . "

She gave a self-deprecating laugh. Yolanda, who was working on Nietzsche's concept of the *Schauspieler*, knew a comedian when she saw one. On the stage of the world, larger than life actors are not common. She was intrigued by the magnetic personality of her unknown hostess.

The scene had a muffled, misty atmosphere. With its old-fashioned props, it took on sepia hues.

"Are you thirsty?" the writer asked.

"No, no thank you. I really must be on my way soon."

"Of course. I understand . . . . You're English, aren't you?"

"Yes, an English tourist."

"In Spa? How strange. Though I shouldn't say that. I make it sound as though I didn't care for the place. Actually, it's quite a pleasant little town. I live here with my son and daughter. Chouchou is my daughter, and Coucou my son."

Her laughter sounded affected, rusty, as if she lacked practice.

"Isn't it ridiculous?" she said. "Silly nicknames I gave them when they were babies, and that somehow stuck."

She grew serious. "You will see Chouchou soon. My little girl. She has gone for a walk with friends. She loves to go for long walks. She should be back shortly. Though I shouldn't call her a little girl really. She's twenty years old, hardly a little girl."

"No," Yolanda said, not knowing what comment was expected of her. The writer wore an expression of fervor. Clearly, her daughter was the very center of her life.

An awkward moment came and passed, then her hostess said, "Oh, but you must let me give you some lemonade. It's freshly made."

"Oh no, I wouldn't want to . . . "

"No bother, no bother," she said, pleased at the prospect of entertaining, and stood up. She was indeed tall and heavy. Yolanda followed with her eyes as the writer walked ponderously to the house with the half-shuttered windows, and disappeared inside.

"Are you waiting for my mother?" someone said beside her, making her jump.

The young woman who spoke to her had an aquiline nose, her hair knotted on her nape, and wore a cream-colored straight linen dress with a neat yellow collar. She was drenched, drops running from her wet hair in rivulets, making the dress cling to her body. At first, Yolanda thought she was sweating, but summer was almost over, and so was the heat wave which had hit the Belgian town a while back. The girl threw herself on a chair, deep in thought, and impatiently tapped with her fingers the papers spread on the table. Then she came back from whatever distant land she'd been wandering, and turned her immensely intelligent eyes on Yolanda.

"The smell of lilac . . . " she said. "There is none sweeter, is there?"

The writer returned, carrying a tray with a pitcher and glasses which she set on the table. She smiled at her daughter, then noticed the details of her appearance and started scolding.

"Chouchou, have you been swimming again? You know you're still far too weak! And in your clothes too! Really, you are too trying for words!"

Yolanda stood up. "I must be getting along," she said.

They paid no attention to her. The older woman ineffectually wiped her daughter's face with a lace handkerchief, then she let herself fall heavily to her knees. She unbuckled the girl's sandals, one after the other, drying her feet with the skirt of her light dress. Panting with exertion, she bent with difficulty and kissed them.

"My poor child! You're so cold! To think that I brought you back here to die! Here, in this country that you hate so much!"

In a trance, Yolanda watched the two women. She went cold as she realized—though she didn't know where the absolute certainty came from—that the scene she saw had taken

place a long time ago. Stifling the scream which rose in her throat, she turned to the house for help, but there was none to be had, just an empty house with a banging shutter, an abandoned garden, and, before her, two ghosts in light summer dresses.

The mother was sobbing now, long-drawn, dreadful sobs, mingled with unintelligible words.

Chouchou, eyes closed, rested her head against the back of her chair. Her unnaturally red hair, henna-dyed perhaps, made her face seem pale and set as if cut in marble.

Then the spell broke. The breeze stopped weaving braids in the willow, the two women, the garden furniture, the papers, the pitcher and glasses, vanished.

Yolanda fled, down the path overgrown with weeds, past the gate, into the street where cars slid by and people strolled. She ran smack against the chest of someone who instinctively held out his arms.

"*Hola, attention.*"

She stood shaking, her eyes closed tight, then opened them to find herself against an elderly man in a natty blazer.

She muttered, "I'm so sorry . . . please . . ." She didn't know what she wanted to say. He answered in a heavily accented but quite proper English.

"That's all right, *mon enfant.*" He motioned toward the half open gate. "So, you've seen them. The mother and daughter . . . "

Yolanda, defenses down, started crying. "Yes . . . Oh my God, it was terrible!"

He held her by the arm and started walking.

"You have had quite a shock. A cup of tea, perhaps? I live nearby. Then my son can drive you home. Are you a tourist? Are you staying at a hotel?"

Still crying, she nodded yes to his questions, then stopped and looked at the old man.

"Please, Monsieur, no games. I cannot stand it. You are alive, aren't you? Not a ghost?"

He chuckled. "Alive, yes, for the time being. But I am old and not too well, so . . . "

The study in his villa was comfortable, lined with books.

He waved at them as he offered her a seat.

"My hobby. I collect bindings. The best artisans in Europe have crafted these. Each is unique. Are you at all familiar with books? Or bindings?"

"Not much with bindings, I'm afraid."

He pulled out a book, ran his finger on the dark orange leather, a window with a surrealist motif on the cover.

"This is a first edition of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, by Pierre Louÿs. The engravings are very good. The binding was made in Paris by a great master, some fifty years ago. A museum piece, you know. You can look at it while I fetch tea."

Calmer now, she admired the perfection of the artisan's craft and looked at the illustrations until the old gentleman came back with tea and a plate of cookies.

"So, you want to hear about those poor women, don't you?"

Yolanda set the book down. "Please."

"I saw them once myself, when I went into the garden, in search of my past, you might say. Others have seen them too. I never went back, I couldn't bear to see them again. It breaks one's heart."

"Quite," she said. "Strange, I wasn't really scared. At least, not out of my wits, as you imagine you'd be if you saw ghosts. It wasn't a terrifying experience. What shocked me was the pain, the sorrow. It was palpable, unbearable to watch. As you say, it breaks one's heart."

He nodded, and silence fell. Although it was still light outside, he got up and turned on a green-shaded lamp, its base made of three brass candles, set on the tidy desk.

"I knew them well," he said, looking at the window which opened on the silent street where few cars passed. "They lived here several years, in the house you saw."

"The one with the lilac tree."

"Yes. That lady, the mother, she was Austrian, married to an Iranian diplomat. My own parents were Russian. They had fled the revolution, and they lived near them. Oh I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I am Dimitri Moitsev. My parents and these neighbors became good friends. The mother, the daughter Chouchou, and the son Hassan. They lived here until

Chouchou was about nineteen. She was an intense girl, well-read, highly intelligent. In the whole world, it seemed that there were never enough books, enough friends, enough activities to feed her. She was insatiable, burning with life. Her mother, Emineh, who herself was a "*force de la nature*," was in awe of Chouchou and doted on her.

Chouchou fell in love. Inevitable, I suppose, given her passionate nature. Nikita was a white Russian like us, a very handsome man who talked of overthrowing the Bolsheviks. He had a Belgian wife, much older than himself, but that didn't prevent him from carrying on with Chouchou. Perhaps he gave her false hopes, I don't know. I had other interests, so I didn't follow all this too closely. I think Nikita genuinely cared for her. Gossip had it that his wife was wealthy, and he had only married her to get his hands on her money for the counterrevolution. Don't forget this was, oh, some twelve, fourteen years after the Russian revolution. Nikita was a dreamer. Highstrung, too. At some point he darkly hinted at foul play, insisting that his wife fed him ground glass in his soup. I must say, I would have understood it if she had. After all, he was plotting against her, didn't have a franc to his name, and was frolicking on top of that.

Chouchou confided in my sister Elena, who was about the same age. Later, when Chouchou had died, Elena told me that she kept remonstrating with her, telling her to forget Nikita, that he would never make her happy. According to Elena, Chouchou had replied that happiness didn't count, that one had to elevate one's soul. Can you imagine? Of course, people were much more exalted then, and didn't balk at sentimentality, but still, such a young girl . . . . Elevate one's soul, I ask you! Come, let me pour you some more tea before it gets cold."

Yolanda silently held out her cup, hanging onto the old man's words. He took his time, lost in the golden dust of memories, until she prompted gently, "And then?"

"Then . . . the father came to visit. I believe the parents were estranged. For a reason that I cannot remember, probably because of Chouchou's sentimental involvement, he packed them all off to Iran. We corresponded for a while. Chouchou wrote regularly to Elena, telling her how much she hated it,

how grandiose the natural scenery was and how devious the people. She cried out her nostalgia of European civilization in witty, anguished letters. I have never seen a handwriting like hers, the letters not so much formed as powerfully slashed, as if she were writing with a sharp knife. Then, we heard that she had died, carried off in a few days by pneumonia. Emineh wrote me later, a letter of subdued but raw grief. After that, our correspondence dwindled and stopped altogether. Hassan came to visit in the sixties, on a pilgrimage as he called it. He told me that his mother had also died, some years back. His face closed with pain when I mentioned Chouchou. I was surprised at how vivid her loss still was to him, after such a long time. He remarked that there were no antibiotics at the time Chouchou had been taken ill, and that sulfamids existed in Europe, but not in Iran, or the doctors could have saved her. I never heard from them again, until the Iranian revolution, when I saw his name in the papers, among the very first executions. Such a tragedy, such a tragic family."

The door opened on a thick-set, middle-aged man whom Moitsev introduced as his son.

"Pierre," he said, "I was telling Mademoiselle about the Iranian ladies in the Villa des Aulnes. Do you know, she saw them this afternoon."

Pierre picked up a cookie and examined it.

"Did you, now? Tell me about them. I have never seen them myself, but I've always heard, ever since I was a child."

Yolanda shook her head. "As I told your father, the funny thing is that I was not really frightened, as much as shocked by the sadness in those women. They were so forlorn, so lost. I had a sense of tragic destinies, and your father just told me that they were."

Dimitri Moitsev reflected aloud. "I wonder if one can say that events have a different intensity according to who lives them. In a little life, there can only be little losses. But take someone like Emineh. You don't have to sing the opera to be a diva, and she undoubtedly was one. So everything that happened to her was fraught with tremendous meaning and importance."

"Elitist thinking," Yolanda said, only half joking. "The

more cultural references we have, the more intensely we live life . . . "

She turned to Pierre. "But to go back to what I was saying, I don't even have the impression, now, that anything out of the ordinary has occurred. Though I suppose an apparition is nothing common, don't you think?"

Pierre laughed. "Definitely. But I have heard the story so often that I'm not impressed any more, only envious. Well, what happened? The mother offered you lemonade, and Chouchou was drenched?"

"Yes. You do know. Is it always the same scene?"

The Moitsevs nodded in unison.

"I wonder why they're here, in Spa," Yolanda said. "They died in Iran, didn't they?"

"Yes, indeed, but Chouchou had a marked preference for Europe. She probably didn't want to stay in Iran, even in disembodied form, and her mother followed."

"Aren't lost spirits supposed to move on to their final destination after a while? It's been all of fifty years, even more, hasn't it?"

Moitsev was pensive. "I'll tell you something," he said. "Old agnostic I may be, but I believe Emineh, Chouchou, and now Hassan, are at peace, they are resting. What everyone sees in the garden of the Villa des Aulnes is not so much their spirits but a memory of what they suffered. Grief so boundless, despair so deep, that it has to bridge time and remain there, suspended. It appears before us, lest we forget that there was a dear child who died before her time, and a mother who loved as no mother did. When Hassan came to visit, he told me that in the twenty-four years his mother lived after Chouchou, whenever she laughed, her laughter would end on a strange questioning note, as if she always remembered her loss, and wondered at her ability to laugh."

Pierre knocked his pipe against the coffee table, and started filling it. "Papa has a theory, that the women are not what we usually call ghosts but wisps of memories which, in a way, solidify before the eyes of the deserving spectator."

"Only figments of our imagination, then?"

"Something like that," Pierre said.

"There had been some satisfactions in their lives, though," said Dimitri Moitsev. "From what Hassan told me, Emineh had become quite a well-known writer, writing historical novels set in Iran but published in France as she wrote in French."

Moitsev indicated a shelf behind Yolanda who turned and saw several volumes bound in dark green leather stamped in gold. "Hassan sent me those when he went back to Iran," Moitsev said. "I had them bound here."

"May I?" Yolanda asked.

"Certainly."

She pulled out a volume entitled *Le Prince sans Histoire*. The smell of pipe tobacco filled the room, mixed with another. Yolanda glanced up from the book and looked at the street outside, quite dark now.

"Do you have a garden?" she asked Moitsev.

"A small one, in the back."

"With a lilac tree?"

He was surprised. "No. Why? Do you smell lilac?"

"I thought I did," she said, "but it's gone now."