

## PRELUDE

By Racha Mourtada

He was vacuuming her mattress. It had never occurred to her to do that. Her friend had recommended a professional cleaning service but it had seemed overpriced, so she had shelved the project.

'There's a lot of hair,' he yelled, lifting the nozzle to take a look.

The implied accusation was aimed at her. She was, after all, the one with long hair... on her head, anyway. His chest hair wasn't prone to shedding during the night, although, there was that one time he had shaved it before bed. The next morning it looked like his side was infested with ants.

'You're supposed to turn it off before you do that.'

'What?' he switched off the machine.

'It might suck your face off.'

He grinned, and she could see him toying with the idea of testing the suction of the thing for comic effect.

She turned her attention back to her show and set the television to mute. She couldn't hear a thing, anyway. It was one of the episodes she knew by heart, but she got a kick out of making up more scintillating dialogue for the characters. This evening, it also took her mind off the fact that her feet were starting to pinch. She had on the kind of shoes that pinched your feet just by looking at them. Impossible architectural feats that made your eyes tear up with admiration, and then with pain once you slipped them on. It was the type of relationship that was a metaphor for life, she had decided. At least that was how she had justified buying them.

They were supposed to have left an hour ago. She had turned the AC off, and now she was starting to sweat. Walking over to the switch would be agony, and she knew that if she took her shoes off she would never put them back on.

'Sweetie,' she yelled, 'can you turn the AC on?'

The apartment fell silent, and he bounded up to the AC controls in his bare feet. His face was flushed, and his toes wriggled in appreciation of the cool floor.

'You're going to need to shower again.'

'What?'

'They're staying on for drinks. We can still catch up with them.'

'I thought we weren't going.'

'Why would you...'

'Ok... ok... just let me finish.'

The sun began to set as Operation Cleanse continued in the bedroom. The light that had nestled into the rooms started to slink back out the windows like a stealthy lover who didn't want to stay the night. She stretched her legs and put her purse on the floor. She had purposely left her living room windows curtain-less, one perk of which was seeing birds nuzzling on her windowsill in the morning. They weren't pigeons, she was sure, but something more elegant. *Only you would romanticize dirty pigeons*, he'd said, giving her a kiss on the forehead. She had found a crude nest a week ago with a single egg, rounder than she thought it would be and closer to the edge of the sill than she would have liked. Her mother said it was a sign of good luck. The egg wasn't there this morning, or the birds.

'Maybe it hatched and they flew away,' he'd said. He was kind like that. He'd also said that he couldn't imagine life without her, but then again, by his own admission, he had a very good imagination.

'Are you done?' She was suddenly too tired to raise her voice, willing it to carry over the thundering vacuum cleaner. She hesitated for a second, then eased off her heels with a moan of satisfaction that brought the noisy machine to a halt.

'Are you ok?' his voice sounded concerned, but he stayed in the bedroom.

'Yes. I took my shoes off.'

She massaged the balls of her feet and smile-grimaced as sensation flooded her numb toes. She padded into the bedroom. It looked like what she imagined a forensic crime scene might after the cleaners had come in and exhumed the place. Her mattress was a blinding white. She was certain it had been a shade darker the day she bought it. In his zeal, he seemed to have stripped the 'off' in the off-white, along with any traces of human friction.

"Like brand new," he said, smiling at her from the center of the king size bed, where he was kneeling - legs and arms wide open - like a freeze frame of a footballer sliding to his knees after the winning goal.

He leapt off the bed and scooped the dirty linen off the floor.

"I'll wash these."

She nodded and let him squeeze past her. His elbow, coarse and pointy, grazed her side in one of her ticklish spots, just below bra level, and she flinched. She used to massage her body butter into his elbows after he showered. He would clasp his hands on top of his head and she would cup his protruding elbows with palmfuls of the lotion, first rubbing inwards, then outwards. She would then turn around and he would dig his softened elbows into her bare shoulders, grinding away the stubborn knots that had been resurfacing more of late.

It was her bedroom, but she felt strange in it now that he had stepped out, as though she was violating *his* privacy. As though he had whispered something into the walls, traced a message on the spotless dresser that she wasn't sure she was meant to find. She switched off the light and walked back to the kitchen. She could see him in the laundry room, leaning the small of his back against the stuttering washing machine with a sigh of contentment as her striped duvet tumbled and rattled inside. She'd always felt bad that her hands weren't strong enough to work the kinks out of his wiry frame.

She opened the fridge, took out an orange and touched the cool peel to her chapped lips. She had a bad habit of chewing them raw, and she hadn't been as good about applying her lip balm lately. The sting of the orange's acidity always reminded her - too late - so had she had taken to rubbing the peel like a numbing cream on her lips. She

couldn't stand the lingering smell on her hands, though. It never came off, no matter how much she scrubbed.

'It's an orange smell!' He had laughed at her the first time she'd made this revelation, 'what's wrong with that?' He had plucked the orange out of her hand, made a big show of really getting his fingers into as he tore off the peel, buffed the backs of his hands and his neck with it, and then presented her with the naked fruit, half kneeling.

'M'lady,' he had said, eyes downcast.

He had peeled her oranges ever since, and with much less sarcasm.

'Heads up!' she said, tossing the orange in his direction. He caught it, gave her a thin smile, and playfully tossed it back. It smacked into the side of her head and rolled onto the floor. She picked it up, shaking her head 'it's alright!' as he sprinted up to the kitchen counter, apologizing.

Her fingers tingled as she ripped into the citrus fruit, its stringy white fibers electrified like the hairs standing up on her arms. He was saying something, in earnest now; they were finally going to talk. He'd left the door to the laundry room open, and if she concentrated, if she really concentrated on the hum of the machine, she could drown out his voice a little and replace the words coming out of his mouth with gentler homonyms.