

The Climbing Vine by Entissar Hajali

I am Entissar. 'Entissar' means victory.

I wish my name were a reflection of my life. But not every wish comes true. They named me Entissar after their victory in a battle. But I'm not going to tell you the story of that battle...Today, I am going to tell you my story.

This story of mine... is also your story. I see it written in your eyes. I wrote it with the tears and pain of separation and exile, painted it the colour of my wounds, weaved it from the threads of my triumphs...to heal my wounds...to return to my house, the house I grew up in. I will return. We will return. I will put out the fire of longing and nostalgia.

In a house built atop a hill of memories...surrounded by the Jasmine that was witness to my childhood and gave shelter to neighbouring children on summer nights, whose flowers adorned maidens' necks, whose scent revived lovers. The Jasmine shared the space with the Dalia, the climbing vine, which crept stealthily into our windows... staring at us with confusion, staring at us strangely. Time and again I wondered about that stare, only to understand it once I had left my country. The climbing vine had been staring at the future.

On a stormy foggy day. The wind was howling. I was exhausted. I was done. I decided to leave. Before leaving, I beseeched my neighbour: Visit my house often, tell it about the past, walk around caressing its walls...may it open its doors again, may it clear the fog of exile.

One day during my travels, as I leaned against my bedroom window, a calm scented breeze swept over me. A warmth I hadn't felt in years enveloped me, breathing life back into my exhausted body. I followed the breeze to a beautiful garden nearby. I walked side by side with the butterflies, to the rhythm of its creek, and arrived at a towering old tree...as old as my pain. I sat in its shade, looking up at its high branches, at its leaves whispering to one another. I wondered: Could these leaves know my story? Could they have heard similar stories? 'Of course. Many of them,' answered the markings on its trunk. Do you know the Jasmine that lives in my house? Do you know where my house is? It's in Salkhad. Do you know Salkhad? Salkhad is in Sweida. Do you know Sweida? Sweida is a governorate in Syria. You do know Syria, right? What do you know then? You know only London? Fine, I'll tell you about me in London.

One day I was at the Wax Museum, admiring everything in awe. I passed a bald man who was sitting down and completely still, maybe he was tired, the poor man. I placed my hand on his head and called to my friend to come and admire how lifelike he was. I gave him a good fright, he jumped up. I was so startled; I screamed and fell to the ground. Everyone was looking at me, I was so embarrassed and apologised to him. Sometimes people speak very fast, and I don't like that because I can't understand them. I have been going to English classes but I don't enjoy the commute. The streets are too narrow so there is always traffic. You know, neighbours here don't visit or even talk to one another. But I like get-togethers, especially in the mornings. When friends meet for a meal or for coffee here, they ask to split the bill. I don't like the fancy, expensive stores in London because I can't afford to shop there. Even those who have lived here forever, even those born here, can't shop in them either. I have started buying tomatoes and cucumbers by the unit, just like Londoners do.

London's Thames divides the city in two. London's spring is full of hope, its spacious and beautiful gardens full of flowers and trees in bloom. London's winter snow is pure white. London's grand museums, surrounded by old, magnificent buildings, tell stories and histories in many languages. When I go on walks, I see how much people care about animals here. I like animals, they are more loyal than some humans. Londoners like to help their guests. Every person is free here, their rights are respected. When I used to hear about Big Ben, I would immediately imagine London, as if Big Ben were the symbol of London. London is my new city.

I closed my eyes and thought about my Jasmine. I imagined picking one of its flowers and tucking it in my ribs...because I know this jasmine, and it knows me. I heard myself telling her: I've missed you dearly, I've missed your stories.

Remember our morning gatherings with herbal yerba mate tea and coffee...I will never forget them. My most vivid memories are of my mother rising early to prepare the tea and summon the neighbours. Those were the days, when a glass of tea brought us together, and love and friendship was all around us. I will never forget those days. They remind me of those dearest to my heart: my father, my mother, Raed, Hiyam, Najwa, Sawsan, Taghrid, Samar, Randa, Fida, the neighbours Umm Tamer and Umm Haitham, and my friends Siham and Elham. Remember how we were happy?

Remember when I was a 20-year-old student in Baghdad? I loved the River Tigris that splits Baghdad in two, into Karkh and Rasafa. I loved the bridge hanging over the river. I would look forward to the end of the month when I would meet my friends for lunch on the Abu Nuwas boardwalk, and we would enjoy the sight of the Masgoof fish cooking over coal. I would visit Al Rasheed Street, and see the girl in the hijab strutting down the street with her friend in the 'I love Baghdad' t-shirt.

I would visit your museums and try to decipher the Epic of Gilgamesh, he who was searching for immortality and never found it, so many journeys later. Just like your children, searching for you everywhere, finding you nowhere. Before I left you, I went one last time to Al Mutanabbi Street, to find a gift for my father who loved books. He left this world and left me with all the books I had given him, all still there in a room in my house.

My house, my neighbour...the neighbour I had asked to look after the house. Later she would answer: During one of the nostalgia-filled nights, the Jasmine leaned over the fence to listen to the neighbours' stories and the lovers' whispers, to hug the weeping climbing vine and whisper in its ear that the winds of return would bring back the green to its leaves, would sweeten its sour grapes. Then, its tears turned into clusters of grapes and garlands made of jasmine draped the maidens' necks. The traveling leaves will return to their branches, to paint a portrait of a family exhausted from travel. And the walls will break into joyful applause as they fill with photographs, memories and testimonies. And the dead of night will be replaced by the light of hope for a better and brighter future."

CREDITS

Written and performed by:

Entissar Hajali was born in Sweida and grew up in Salkhad, Syria. She studied Arabic at the University of Baghdad and was an Arabic teacher for fifteen years in Sweida and the UAE. During her time in the UAE, she discovered playwriting and won national competitions. On April 2nd, 2017, Entissar moved to the UK. She is currently a student at Southall college and a key member of Scheherazade Initiatives where she uses drama as a tool to learn English. During her time with the group, she has co-written and performed in three short plays reflecting on personal experiences of migration. In the Summer of 2019, Entissar featured in Hela Ammar's *Becoming* for Shubbak Festival. Over the past year, she has been a key member of Rand Abdul Jabbar's *Memories from Home* workshop series. This is her first solo performance.

Co-directed by:

Chrystèle Khodr is a theatre performer, writer and director. Her work springs from the emergency to reconstitute a collective memory from personal stories. She created “*Bayt Byout*”, “*2007 or how I smashed my bubble envelopes*” and “*Beirut Sepia*”. In the framework of her collaboration with Zoukak, she has performed in the company’s devised productions: “*Death comes through the eyes*”, “*He who saw everything*” and “*The Battle Scene*”. In 2016 she starts a collaboration with theater director Waël Ali with whom she created “*Titre Provisoire*” and the installation “*I once entered a garden*” alongside set designer and installation artist Bissane Al Charif. Her latest production “*Augurs*” premiered in May 2021 in Beirut

Lara Sawalha is a British/Jordanian actor, graduating from Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts She recently appeared as a semi series regular in *Doctors* and as a guest star in *Casualty* both for the BBC. Prior to this she performed in *Why It’s Kicking off Everywhere* at The Young Vic Theatre which was aired as part of theatre live for BBC2. Some of her other theatre credits include, *Oil* at the Almeida Theatre; *Another World* at The National Theatre; *Semites* at the Bunker Theatre and *Nahda* at the Bush Theatre. Lara has voiced multiple radio dramas, video games and audiobooks. Some of her notable credits include: *Cyberpunk 2077*; *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Lullaby* and *Girls of Riyadh*.