

# Forgive me Hajji ...

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I met you on one of my reporting assignments, an old frail woman with eyes that reached out to me, beseeching, imploring, questioning. Why I do not know ... or maybe I know, but I can do nothing ... what you ask is out of my reach .... Forgive me Hajji.

There you are, lying on a large bed with piles of pillow behind you, other women your age right beside you. Everything is white: the walls, the bedclothes, your nightgowns, even your face. The room reminds me of a guess game my sister once performed on me. She asked me what I thought of white rooms, and I said they were the symbol of life. She said it meant death, and I laughed at her. I look around ... perhaps my sister was right.

Nothing breaks the harmony of whiteness except your eyes ... yes it is the eyes ... eyes that have not had the taste of sleep for a long time. They say our eyes shrink with age. Yours have grown bigger. They encompass the whole area of your face, and the balls tinged with a spot of deep red ... almost like they're bleeding ... I know you're bleeding ... somewhere inside ... struggling to forget the truth. You want me to reassure you ... I do ... I tell you lies ... loads of lies. Sometimes a lie has to be the truth: you tell me he is your only child. You brought him up all by yourself after his father died ... he was such a tiny baby ... many a time you would wake up in the middle of the night ... to listen to his heartbeat ... always terrified that he wouldn't make it ... "He was such a tiny baby," you repeat. The other elders do not listen. Perhaps they have heard the tale a thousand times ... each is busy with her own memories ... only once in a while do your memories intertwine with theirs, and a tear finds its way down your cheek. You are unable to tell me what food he liked best. Hajji Oum Saed says he liked chocolate, but you disagree. You tell her it is her son who loved chocolate. Yours wouldn't eat a thing except maybe sweet potatoes. You describe the whole process: mashing the potatoes, making sure they

weren't too hot or too cold ... children are very fragile you say ... just like you Hajji ... yes just like you. You ask me if it's the season for sweet potatoes and do not wait for an answer. You ask the nurse to get you sweet potatoes ... just in case he comes for a visit ... wouldn't it be a wonderful surprise? I nod my head silently and you start to moan and curse the hospital: "They wouldn't let me go to visit my son," you say, between dry hiccups. You spot the question in my eyes: he is bedridden...he cannot come... you repeat the words ... no, not to convince me...to convince yourself.

My son has diabetes, he cannot come and visit me. You repeat ... he is divorced ... he has four children ... he is looking after them. You massage your heart and ask me to take permission from the hospital: "Maybe they'd let me visit him." You groan ... you massage your heart again ... I ask if something is wrong. You tell me your heart isn't working the same since you've come. You say no more, only your dry hiccups ... and the hand that continues to massage your heart ... say all.

I leave silently and I promise to secure permission. I promise to come and visit. I even promise to bring your son along ... I lie ... I know I cannot do so. How can I force a son to visit his mother?

I learn the truth from hospital administrators. The manager shakes his head: "We've gone to him a thousand times," he says, "he doesn't have diabetes," he refuses to come." Let her rot," your son told them. The manager says you have no place to go, no one even visits. You spend the time massaging your heart ... all day and all night. "She has been abandoned" he announces, like someone who has seen it happen before. I am shocked ... like you I find excuses ... he must be suffering ... he loves her ... he will come. And I will come, I'll visit you every week. I care, I won't forget, but once again I lie, and like your son, I leave and never come back. Forgive me Hajji ...