



TLC SHOWCASE

ZAD EL BACHA

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Introduction to *Bedrooms*

In this magical-realist literary novel, Amar sits down to have coffee with their rapist. They want to find a way to justice and healing. This is impossible to do alone, so they call on the voices of Middle Eastern women and queer people to help them, from Babylonian goddesses to medieval Arab lesbians. As they navigate mental health struggles, romance, trade union strikes, and the internet, Amar has to face their past, bring their allies and enemies together, and act swiftly to create a better future.

Bedrooms brings together original translations of erotic poetry by Middle Eastern women and narrative non-fiction about them with a tender story of queer love, healing and transformative justice.

The TLC mentoring scheme, that I received as part of the Bridport Prize package, has helped me so much in crafting this book. People say writing is a lonely business. Personally, I have never been able to write alone. I write because I want to speak to people, and my ideas, the way I tell a story, are always informed by the people around me. I write sitting in cafes with my friend - shout out to Simran Uppal! - and I write responding to feedback. My writing group in the London Writers Awards shaped the initial version of this story, and the excellent mentorship I received from Anna-Jean Hughes at TLC helped it arrive at its final version. The novel keeps together many complex threads, moving between past and present narratives, and between prose and poetry. It's not always easy to bring all of this together into an accessible whole. I've also enjoyed experimenting with a strange narrative voice. AJ's feedback has been fundamental in helping me figure all this out!

Like every writer, I also struggle to prioritise the made-up worlds of my craft over the very real responsibilities of my very real life. The structure that the TLC mentoring scheme provides is a life-saver for helping me build a regular writing practice, another fundamental element to holding a complete draft.

Extract from *Bedrooms* by Zad El Bacha

Part 1: The coffee

1.

On a crisp October morning, Amar went for a coffee with the man who raped her.

2.

Whose fault was it?

That was the first question.

Some said it was the man, and wanted to punish the man.

Some said it was the woman, and wanted to punish the woman.

Some said the fault was beyond either of them, somewhere the darkness was so thick you could barely slip a finger in it. If you managed to get there, you'd be surprised to find the darkness full of feather-light shadows, you would wonder whether you'd gone anywhere at all. You'd think you could be walking in the shadows of your own room, scared of the dark outline of your everyday jacket. You would not be wrong, the dark place *is* in the shadows of your bedroom. Like everything that is scary, it is scarier when it is closest. Most bedrooms have this place, and most people, sensibly, avoid touching it. This story happened in one particular set of bedroom shadows.

We will call the owner of the bedroom shadows a woman, for now. Her mother had given her the name Amar at birth, because she was born at night, and her mother spoke Arabic, a language in which *amar* means moon. Her mother had seen the full moon on the night she was born. The name fit. Growing up, she often wrote her homework in the middle of the night, last minute. Ramadan was her favourite month because it was the month when everyone else loved the night too, and waited for it with the desperate anticipation of hunger. The night fell and the sweetness of the dates burst in the mouths of the whole Khaled family, and everyone on their street too. Amar loved the night when it was bursting with flavours, pushing against the seam of her jeans, making her belly as full as the moon.

Despite this, like every sensible person, she was also afraid of the dark place in her bedroom that turned the lines of her closet into heavy breathing murderers. She would have preferred not to explore it, and keep her night for herself, a clear darkness, full and calm, instead of a treacherous darkness she could not understand.

It was in the night that she found herself with the man. The night turned from one she loved to one she did not understand so quickly she could not be sure it had really happened. She wasn't sure the man knew it had happened either. The change had been so fleeting for her, and she considered herself an observant person. She didn't know if he considered himself observant. He may well not have noticed the turn of the night. Some people would say he is the one who turned the night. Amar didn't think that he had, not really.

It was a crisp October morning. She was about to finish her breakfast and she was thinking about the night and the man.

She texted him, 'Hey, I feel unhappy about what happened between us the other night. I'd like to have a conversation with you about consent sometime soon.' His answers came one after the other:

'I'm very concerned about this.'

'This is very very concerning.'

'I need to talk to you immediately.'

'I need to know what this is about now.'

'I am coming to meet you now.'

She really didn't want to meet him right then, but she didn't want him to be so stressed, so she said 'ok, see u in 10.'

And that was how, that October midday, Amar went to have a coffee with the man who raped her.

3.

She was going to discuss what had happened. She thought: 'I wasn't communicating clearly with him when it happened, he must have not realised I didn't want it. If I speak to him about it he will understand, and not do it again. He's not a bad man.'

She asked him to come to her favourite coffee shop, an Italian place with bright green walls peppered with black and white photos of a half-naked, but still elegant, Sophia Loren. She had an espresso. She didn't remember what he had, maybe he was too distressed to drink anything. She could drink, she was not too distressed to drink.

She ordered the coffee and sat down. He was already sitting there. He was wearing an excessive amount of gel in his hair, which glinted too brightly in the sun above his undercut. Her curls, in contrast, fell softly over her shoulders. She had scrunched out the gel from them so that they maintained a good level of definition but without holding an unnatural cast. She was thinking about the hair, because she was nervous to think about the conversation itself. The fact that she had a normal amount of shine in her hair, and he did not, comforted her. She was normal and doing a normal thing.

She giggled as she sat down, because she was tense and she wanted the tension to dissipate as soon as possible. She was about to start speaking when her eyes met his eyes. His eyes, less beautiful than hers, were filled with tears. A hot wave of emotion flushed her chest, and then: nothing.

'I'm not saying this is your fault,' she said. Maybe she meant it, maybe she just wanted him to be less tearful. 'This is not the first time this has happened to me. We just don't live in a society that teaches us about these things properly, which is why I wanted to talk to you about it, so you don't do it again, that's all I'm asking.'

He was so nervous he could barely speak. His silence wrapped her like a thick, heavy blanket under which she struggled to breathe.

'Can you tell me specifically what I did wrong?' He was shaking.

She didn't want to. Thinking of that night made her feel more and more numb. She could barely recognise her feet as her feet, her hands as her hands. She didn't taste the coffee on her tongue. She was tired. She didn't know whether she could even speak. But she had asked him to have a conversation, he was in front of her now, and his eyes were so tearful. She did want him to understand. 'It's a lot of things.' She was so embarrassed about how long it took her to find the words, 'You choked me without asking if I wanted that. I didn't want that. You could have just asked.'

'I didn't realise I was actually choking you.'

'It's quick to ask. Just keep it in mind for the future to ask.'

'Yes, yes, I will.'

‘But it’s the whole thing. And I’m not trying to say I don’t have any responsibility here, I could have definitely told you more clearly.’ She felt so tired. She wanted to stop speaking. The words came out slower than she normally spoke, and then suddenly too fast. ‘But it can be hard to speak at times in these situations. I said many times I was sleepy, I really wanted to sleep. I meant that, and you ignored it. And then when you started touching me I just froze, I couldn’t do anything. And you didn’t notice.’

He was crying now. Her feelings were lying like a pile of dirty laundry at the bottom of her heart. She couldn’t bear to look at them. He had thought that what had happened that night was good. Maybe he had been right. How could a man who was so upset by the thought of assaulting someone actually do it? And if she had not been assaulted, she had no right to cry. The numbness was all she had a right to.

4.

When she had first met him, they had sung together. Their voices had fused into one, a full, complex voice. Only an expert ear could have told the different elements apart. When she thought of him, she always thought of the voices fusing, and of straining her ears to tell different voices apart from her own, as they threaded themselves with her.

5.

She walked away from the café. She was exhausted. So she just went back to her bedroom. Her eyes glazed over as she looked at the dust on the bed sheet she had not changed in too long. She laid her head down. Her shoulders were still tight.

Amar’s bedroom is where much of this story happens. It starts with Amar in bed, heavy, barely feeling her own head. With the shadows of her bedroom thicker and thicker.

About the Writer

Zad is a writer and community organiser. They were born in Lebanon, grew up in Italy, and now live in London. They were one of the winners of the 2019 Spread the Word London Writers Awards, and have written on migration, feminism and colonialism for VICE, Red Pepper, The Vision and AZ-magazine. They have written theatre shows preserving oral family histories of war for the Camden People's Theatre and the North Wall. They were commissioned by Poet in the City and their poetry was published in Bad Betty Press' *Field Notes on Survival* and *the other side of hope*. They are currently writing their first novel, an extract from which won the Peggy Chapman-Andrews First Novel Award 2022.

