



FICTION

A. EL BARAKA

The Care Flow

You begin. You give me your hand and we stroll through the Vienna municipal park, close by the Art History Museum. We drink coffee in a glass pavilion. We go cycling. I sit behind. You cycle slowly and safely, so safely that I don't need to cling to you and my hands are free to feel that it's autumn. A leaf flutters down from a nearby tree. I close my hands and eyes and hold on to this happiness, which feels like money found on the street.

The stories of A. el Baraka are surprising and compelling, with a light absurdist tone. In a few evocative sentences El Baraka presents her characters and employs simple but powerful words to bring her principal protagonists to life.

With each story she creates a small and realistic universe which picks you up and sweeps you away, and in which people are sucked in by worries and problems. Others try to help them, but the help seems to fall by the wayside without effect or meaning.

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Mrs. Gong

In a way she was like most women in her neighbourhood. Married a couple of years, full of fear of infertility or worse, producing only descendants of the female sex. Mrs. Gong was not a patient of his and he had never seen her before that day when he found her sitting in his waiting room. He called out names of patient after patient, but she never rose. Around four o'clock he found the waiting room empty, but she still remained sitting there. She finally stood up and introduced herself with her first name. Only her Christian name as if she had been cut off from a surname. She could not cry, she said. That was her complaint.

The both of them walked to his examination room. There he started asking her the standard questions. How long had she had the symptoms? What had caused them? What had she done so far to relieve herself of them?

He looked at her hands. He could smell fish. Then she started to talk. She told him everything as though she was a key witness and he the judge.

It lasted for over an hour. Then he gave a diagnosis of her illness. He said she was suffering from dry eyes, told her it was a very common complaint among his female patients and wrote her a prescription for eye drops which he described as artificial tears.

Mrs. Gong had a masters degree in English literature. She worked at the harbour. Without taking a break, without chatting to other workers, she peeled the shells of shrimps until his hand rested on her shoulder. In that moment she was saved. It was only then that her day came to an end and his was started. Then she stood up and examined him from top till toe. She looked for scrapes on his hands, tearing in his clothes, missing teeth in his mouth. She turned his head away from the water, made his eyes move away from his obsession. Then she took his hand and pulled him away to their house which was filled with pictures of the sea.

Mr. Gong worked in the army, as a shoemaker. Every evening, sitting by the kitchen table he explained war to her. War sounded like lightening, he said. Bodies were buried in a hurry, in a messy manner. Never cross a bullet's way. Never stand in anyone's way. That's how you can survive it. War gains nothing, he said, it only leads to ghastly graves. It doesn't change anything. He stared at the wall in front of him, shook his head, spooned the meal into his mouth and put his hand on her belly. Nothing changed. He saw it every morning when he watched the breakfast news. Those empty, greyish streets. Collapsed buildings, gapes of mortars and grenades.

Mr. Gong had witnessed all of it for too long, he said to her. The general sat in front of him during breakfast. He patted him on the shoulder as if Mr. Gong was a dog. It was of no use to turn of the television, he said. The general was there, standing in the doorway, when Mr. Gong

was teeing his shoe laces. Mr. Gong gave him a salute in the hall way and he stood up for him in the tube.

Mr. Gong was not allowed to drive and as far as his wife knew he also did not own a bike. Yet, today he placed a bicycle against a tree. A bicycle he had truly ridden. He felt the heat in his cheeks. On the way here a feeling of shame mixed with excitement had risen in his face. Touching the handles of the bicycle felt perverted in some way. This was yet again a stolen moment. He had lied. Told his superior he had an appointment to see his GP. Told his wife that he was working today. He felt like a liar, but to worsen it by feeling guilty over something he had longed for all of these weeks, that he could not bring himself to do.

He had ridden his bicycle so hard that it made the tires float over the road. Now and then he even forgot to breath.

It was one of those beautiful afternoons in May. The sky was blue with patches of soft orange. When he reached his destination, he immediately kicked off his shoes, unbuttoned his uniform and beneath it red swimming trunks appeared.

He ran bare-chested, slipped down the shore, his toes full of mud and sand and he said to himself: "I am a dolphin and this lake is my sea."

He made a big splash when he jumped into the water. Without a life vest. Without a swimming certificate. He rolled through the water on his belly and on his back. He curled his chest above the surface. He blew little water fountains from his lips. He laughed even though he was alone. He roared with laughter as though he had company. He climbed up the tree where his bicycle stood, walked over a branch as if he was walking a tight rope and dove back into the water. He did everything that was forbidden to him. All afternoon long he played in his imaginary sea with the killer whales, the penguins, the sea horses and other fishes. It was better than anything else he knew. More important to him than anyone else. His mother, his wife, even his own life.

Mr. and Mrs. Gong had met each other at the local library. Two days later she moved in. There were paintings of Alexander the Great, Julius Cesar and Napoleon in the hall way of his flat. She carried three boxes with her and a couple of poetry books by Andrew Marvell.

That same night Mr. Gong carried a heavy book to the kitchen table. Then he started flipping over the thick blue coloured pages and stared at them with his head bowed, his chin resting on his fist. Mrs. Gong walked over to him, leaned over his shoulder and saw that he was looking at oceans. He was so quiet. She wondered what kind of sea travelling he was doing in his mind.

He heard nothing anymore. Mr. Gong set sail on his sailing boat through the Caribbean.

His boat was blue. He heard the wind in the white sails. He jumped of his boat and let it rock against the waves. He swallowed the salty water. He took a deep breath and dove under where he heard his own heart beating. He came up again for air and swam after a turtle towards the coastline. There in the surf he lay on his back. Calm, fully relaxed until he felt the sun burning in his face. He opened his eyes, looked up and met with the disapproving expression on the face of Mrs. Gong.

A few weeks after Mrs. Gong had moved in, she wrote her parents, informing them that she had changed her surname in case they ever intended to come search for her in the city. First she had distanced herself from their proximity and now from their name. Sometimes she would stretch her legs out on the ground, bow her head down and try to cry as someone else would try to puke. At best he nose would start to run, but no tears ever came.

No honeymoon followed. Mrs. Gong learned how to adapt. She never quarrelled with him to get her way. She answered all of his questions with a firm : “Yes!”. She never turned her back to him in bed and never wondered if her arms were too broad or her eyes too narrow.

Thirty ‘till forty percent of all falling accidents can be avoided. That fact gave Mrs. Gong hope. She was convinced that the flickering light from the television caused him to fall. But Mr. Gong said that turning off the telly wouldn’t help. Sometimes right in the middle of a film, when she could see his body shaking with excitement, she would turn the television off for his own good. Enough! She would then say to him. She made sure he slept enough, forbade him to exercise and when the two of them would walk in the city park, along the pond, she would turn away his face if she saw that in his mind he was secretly skipping stones across the water.

But his fall was a long one with a slow pace. She tried to find its structure as if looking for the rhythm in a line of verse. She carefully laid him on his back, loosened his collar and made sure to remove any sharp objects near him. But she didn’t hold his arms and legs, even though he was shaking like a fish on land. There was nothing to do. It would pass. She stayed near him until it was over. Then she helped him to a kitchen chair, made him a sandwich and stroked his hair while he ate.

It was a first. Ever since their wedding day he had always picked her up after work. They always walked home together. Hand in hand, he a step behind her following her like a dog. Wouldn’t he also come today? She asked herself. She kept sitting there as though she waited for a guest that hadn’t shown up. Never would. She didn’t stop working. She couldn’t know what she did. She couldn’t go home, because without him there wasn’t a home to go to.

She couldn’t, but had to.

She opened the door of their flat. His army coat was still hanging on its hook. There was

a letter on the kitchen table.

I have left, he wrote. She saw a hurry in his hand writing. Had he left her in such a haste?

After he left it snowed without stopping. The sea froze in a day. All of her dreams began with his laughter. They ice-skated across the frozen sea.

For the first time she wasn't worried about him. She felt his warm hand, heard him laughing and saw how their ice skates drew lines in the ice as chalk on a blackboard. She turned and gave him a smile. They were skating faster and faster. Suddenly she was pulled back. She lost grip of his hand. She fell on her knees in front of the broken ice.

She sat straight up in her bed before the alarm clock went off. She wondered how she could have prevented his fall. How, never if.

It was still dark outside. She dragged herself to the kitchen and clicked on the radio. She heard a newsreader saying that the economy was flourishing. More and more people from the country side were moving to the cities to study at universities. They were catapulting themselves upwards.

In the weeks that followed a slow flu took hold of Mrs. Gong. She drew waves on the windows before heading to work. She got lost many times on her way back. Often she would run into students from her collage days. She would answer their questions as a routine job. "English literature," she would say, followed by, "fish harbour." She never told anyone she was married now.

Every evening she would iron his shirts again and again. She counted the stripes on his uniforms, one, two, three.

She reread his letter when she was in bed. *I have left*, he wrote. She wanted to fold herself, put herself in an envelop and sent it to where he was. The snow fell and a postman would walk through it to the house with the lights on, blow his hands against the cold, knock at the door and deliver her to him.

The winter went and the months of spring and summer came without invitation. There were weddings, festivals and tourists in the city and the shop owners experienced a peak in their sales. Mrs. Gong had left her job at the harbour and had taken up a position working as a chambermaid in a hotel. She cleaned twelve rooms in three hours. Fifteen minutes per room. Enough time to change the sheets, the pillowcases, covers, dust off the night stands, phone, television, chest of drawers. Vacuum. She rinsed the glasses of the mini bar in her bucket of soapy water and then rubbed them dry with a cloth. Put down fresh paper and a pen. Then the bath room. She put the towels in the linen bag, threw away the used mini soaps, empty shampoo bottles, emptied the trash can, scrubbed the bath, cleaned the water tap, the mirror, the sink until

they were shiny. Then she put the bucket on the ground and knelt down to clean the bathroom floor. She hung a new roll of toilet paper and folded the edges into a triangle, checked to see if there were any hairs in the bath. Clean towels and then she was finished.

After three hours of work she took an unpaid break of thirty minutes and then she started a new shift. She filled her cart with mini soaps, pens, towels, linen and took the escalator up to the rooms that were waiting for her to clean, there she greeted the boys whose job it was to constantly refill the mini bars with little bottles of vodka and orange juice. She knocked on a room door and announced herself with the word "housekeeping."

Since he left, she had not received a letter from the army. None of his superiors had contacted her.

After the incident Mr. Gong had been put to work as a shoe maker. It was not a harmful occupation, the chairman of the commission said. What could go wrong with cleaning shoes? Ever since his childhood Mr. Gong had wanted to join the army. He had always wanted to work in the navy, but again and again he hadn't passed the physical examination. As a child the doctors had advised his parents to never let him swim or bathe by himself. The watchful eyes of his father and mother were always with him in the bathroom and after he married there were those of his wife.

That day in the summer Mr. Gong had stopped after work to talk to the two soldiers that guarded the entrance of the army base where he had found an administrative job. One of them had given him his gun and had teased him about not having one of his own. Mr. Gong hadn't fallen for years and he hadn't felt an attack coming.

Mrs. Gong took the tub to the north, out of the city. She was the only remaining passenger at the last stop. She crossed train rails, mud and stones until she reached the mobile stand where the tickets were sold, which in a few weeks from now would be standing in another city. She bought a ticket and walked to the red and yellow striped tent. Inside the show had already begun.

This was the circus show she had seen on a poster in the tub station a couple of weeks earlier. She had almost walked by it, but luckily her eyes had seen it even within the crowd of commuters. She stood frozen. No one could have pushed her from her place. Her arms went back and forth in the crowd like tree branches, but her legs were like its trunk.

Now, inside the tent, in the dark, she saw him sitting in the front row. She wanted to sit behind him, to lean forward and whisper something foolish in his ears.

She walked towards him, sat next to him in the empty seat and kept staring at his face in profile until he looked at her.

“Hello,” he play backed.

He smelled like the sea.

She crossed her hands over one another and let them rest on her lap. Together they looked up at the acrobats, watched them as they fell with such beauty.