

## *Prologue*

She invited some friends over after the funeral. Not that she was in the mood for company, but she thought that if she'd been the one to die, he'd probably have had people over. He liked foreign customs. Maybe that's why he kept asking friends over regularly after they got married. Not for a night of take-away pizza and telly, but to mix mojitos and dance to his favourite tunes. That's how he'd wanted to spend his forties, dancing them away.

Their friends were scattered all over the house – from the kitchen to the living room, all the way to the billiard room – and she thought how he was probably watching them at that very moment. Happy at the sight of his friends gathered around his suddenly widowed wife. But because there was food and drink, or maybe because they'd always associated that place with nights of fun and laughter, it didn't take long for someone to lose sight of the reason for the gathering and turn the conversation to that American woman who'd just given birth to octuplets. Or the brigadier who'd slipped in the rain while reviewing the troops. Seeing where the evening was going, she felt her heart

break a bit more and ran to their bedroom, which had now become only hers. At first she got down on her knees by the bed and sobbed, but she gradually slipped further down and lay on the white rug, curled up like a fetus. It was from that position, eyes level with the floor, that she noticed something small and shiny in the far corner under the bed. She stretched out to reach it. An earring, quite elegant, and nothing like any she'd ever worn or bought in her life. And because it had so much dust on it, she found herself thinking that the maid quite obviously never bothered to mop that far in.

Later, as she dutifully shook hands with everyone once they got the message and left, she held the earring tightly in her left hand, her back barely leaning against the doorjamb. Her eyes scanned the ear of every woman who kissed her goodbye. And so every ear became a story she longed for someone to tell her during the long nights that awaited, on a bed that had no intention of disclosing any secrets.

# The ironing board

Il-mejda tal-moghdija

It was time to get rid of it. Maybe if he left it out in the street, some passer-by would come along and pick it up. On his way home some evenings he'd notice a piece of furniture abandoned on the corner and it would be gone by morning. He threw on a light coat and headed downstairs and outside to lean the ironing board against the wall. But just as he stepped out onto the pavement, he caught sight of his downstairs neighbour carefully parking his Fiat Panda. His neighbour waved. Damn it. What now? If he went back inside, the neighbour would think he was crazy. Who would ever step outside at nine o'clock on a Sunday evening with an ironing board under his arm, only to carry it back inside again? Now that his neighbour had spotted him, he obviously couldn't just leave the thing leaning against the wall. So he quickly decided to walk to the end of the street and leave it there. He waved back at his neighbour, who was still trying to get his car in, and hurried off as if carrying not an ironing board, but a book, under his arm.

At the end of the road he turned the corner, strode

a few metres down rue de la Source and rested the ironing board against a building with no windows or doors. Yet as he was about to turn back home, he noticed that there were at least ten apartments across the road with their lights on, and the chances of someone seeing him from behind a curtain were pretty high. What if someone took a photo or a video with their mobile and showed it to the police? He improvised a plan: he'd kneel down to tie his laces. And so he did, only to realise that he had no laces to tie, having stepped outside in his pyjama bottoms and slippers. He stood up, grabbed the ironing board and made his way down the street towards the lake, where he'd find the large skip used to collect glass bottles for recycling. When his wife was still herself, they'd walk there together every few weeks and empty one or two bags. He could easily leave the ironing board there.

But cars were passing by in quick succession not far from the skip – what if one of them happened to be a police car? What then? A tall black man in a fluffy jacket walked past him, nodding and smiling. Not a neighbourly, nice-to-see-you kind of smile; more the smirk you'd flash at an old nutcase unaware he'd stepped out of the house with an ironing board under his arm. He wished he could turn round and smash the ironing board over the guy's head and leave them both there, right by the skip. Instead, he tightened his grip on the ironing board, and continued towards the lake.

We'll be there soon, he murmured to the ironing board.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd taken this stroll with his wife, and somehow, the closer he got to the lake, the closer he felt to the ironing board. An hour earlier, when it had fallen on him and the iron had scalded his hand, he couldn't stand the sight of it. Disjointed and dumb, it stared at him as his wife had. His wife now gone. So, for the sake of consistency, the ironing board had to go too. And yet now the thing seemed to be holding on to him in fear and he began to feel sorry for it. Not only was it broken – with one leg out of joint – but it was well on its way to kicking the bucket for good. He felt like a man on his last trip to the vet, with the dog that had kept him company for years and years sadly on its way to be put down.

He considered climbing over the low fence around the lake and hurling the ironing board into the water with all his might. If it sinks, perfect – if not, he'd avoid the place in future so as never to have to see it again. He walked along the fence looking for the lowest part, familiar from when he strolled there with his wife on Sunday mornings after buying the paper, bread and flowers. A dog biting at something in the dark began to bark violently, startling him. Terrified, he made a quick about-turn, like an actor fleeing a bullet, and the ironing board hit the door of a Peugeot parked just behind him. The car alarm immediately went off and began to echo across the lake. The racket threw him into a state of confusion. Overcome by a

strange panic, he felt as if he'd just robbed a bank and needed to find a quick hideaway before he got caught. A lanky young man jogging around the lake bumped into him, gave him an angry stare, and swore at him in no uncertain terms. The old man stammered an apology, and with the ironing board now no longer under one arm but resting in both – like Jesus in the arms of Our Lady of Sorrows – he crossed the road and circled back home, just hoping he could find a dark spot to abandon the ironing board along the second leg of his walk.

As was usual in his city, the rain began to fall with no warning and by the time he'd turned the corner and escaped the aggressive din of the alarm behind him, it was pelting down. From his drenched head, a subtle chill flowed down the length of his body. He began to sense a stench following his steps. He looked back – no one. Nobody in front of him either. He stood still to see if the stench would stop when he did. When he confirmed that the stench was still following along, he looked down and saw that his slippers were not only soaked, but the soles were all covered with dogshit. He must have stepped in it while fleeing the dog's fierce barking, the car's strident alarm and the angry jogger. It was probably the same dog's shit, too.

He tried to wipe the muck off on the edge of the pavement, but with each pull the slipper would come off and turn upside down. He walked a few metres up the street to rinse the slipper in some water in a hole between two missing cobblestones in the pavement,

and bending down he noticed a half-demolished house on the other side of the road. They were probably going to put up a new building. A green-tiled bathroom on the upper floor could be seen from the street and he wondered how many people must have washed in there, and how strange it was that a room that had been hidden away for so many years could now appear so clumsily exposed. Again, he thought of his wife. Perhaps right now they'd be helping her have a bath, just as he used to – or could they be leaving her to bathe on her own, not realising she couldn't cope? And would they make the bath warm enough for her, or just wash her in cold water and be done with it? Perhaps that's just what they wanted, to let her fade away slowly. No doubt there were other pensioners hoping to get into that home. No restaurant wants people coming in at six and hanging around until midnight. And if she were to die, wouldn't he feel for the rest of his life the crushing weight of guilt for having left his wife to walk the last stretch of her long journey lost and alone?

He should've kept her at home. He shouldn't have said anything, when the doctor came to visit, about her wanting to go to her grandfather's house and how he found her trying to unlock the door in the middle of the night. Perhaps he was too scared. Perhaps, that time she pushed him into the ironing board, he felt that the line between patience and the unacceptable had been crossed once and for all and that there could be no turning back. Yes, that's it, he thought. No one

had ever pushed him before. And he wanted to show her that he wasn't going to put up with any pushing. Yet now, with his eyes on the green striped tiles of the half-demolished house, he realised that he should've kept her. After all, he'd crossed many lines himself, and she'd never said a word. He should've kept her. At least, in those moments of lucid thought – rare as they were – she would've been home, amid her own things, with a man she loved and who loved her, and the scent of melted butter on toast and tea with milk. Not that soulless, colourless room, where he'd now visit her, hoping she'd recognise him.

Last time he went to see her, she mistook him for the postman. She told him she'd been waiting for him for a month. But when she saw him sitting at the edge of the bed and he asked her how she was, she began muttering to herself and gazed distractedly out the window, somewhere above the roofs, somewhere amid the chimneys, bleak as upside-down plant pots. And on his way home, he thought about how much more difficult it would be if he were to find her lucid for once, her eyes pleading with him, asking what she'd ever done wrong.

Two lightning bolts whitened the sky and the rain grew heavier. He shuffled towards a wall lit up by a bright bulb, and tried to take cover by lifting the ironing board over his head, like a short, decrepit Samson with his hands pushing up at the temple roof. But the disjointed leg of the ironing board, which wouldn't click back in, fell with a metallic blow on his