

# The Wife

Anne-Sophie Subilia

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Gaza, 1974: The wife of a Red Cross delegate makes attempts to combat her sense of inertia, and through her day-to-day encounters sees unlikely flowers bloom in arid landscapes. Her name is Piper, but the word barely appears in the story. This is what her brother Sam and her husband Vivian call her, but her proper name is lost in the narration in favour of her role: 'the wife', or 'the delegate's wife' ...

*"There is a slight scent of inertia in the air. She grabs the broom and sweeps the sand out of her house. It falls apart halfway through. She can't be bothered to patch it up and puts the two pieces, handle and brush, in a corner. Their bedroom is where the sand manages to infiltrate best. Mysterious winds, under doors and window frames – where there is wear there is a way through. Mysterious matter, in constant motion, just like dust."*

## Author

The Swiss-Belgian author Anne-Sophie Subilia lives in Lausanne (Switzerland), where she was born in 1982. She studied French literature and history at the University of Geneva. Moreover, she graduated from the Bern Academy of Arts in literary writing. She writes for joint publications, magazines, radio, as well as for the stage with the piece *Hyperborée*, a performance which was inspired by a navigation along the Greenlandic coasts. Poet and novelists, Subilia is the author of *L'Épouse* (Zoé, August 2022), *abrassé* (Empreintes, 2021, Pro Helvetia creation grant), *Neiges intérieures* (Zoé, 2020), *Les hôtes* (Paulette éditrice, 2018), *Qui-vive* (Paulette éditrice, 2016), *Parti voir les bêtes* (Zoé, 2016), and *Jours d'agrumes* (L'Aire 2013), which was awarded the 2014 ADELFF-AMOPA prize.

Photo: Romain Guélat

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Excerpt translated by Alexis Bernaut

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Gaza, January 1974

Enter a cart, pulled by a little brown donkey. It leaves Al-Rasheed Road which borders the sea, and drives through the opened gate into the house's roughly cemented driveway, and stops, closer to the wall than to the building, maybe not as to appear intrusive. The donkey understands that it must wait, and tramples. Its hoofs kick the cement to chase the flies away, but they come back. It finds a tuft of hay in the sand, and drags the cart closer to the house. The master lets it graze. Sitting cross-legged in his robe, on the wood planks, the man looks up to the sky.

The first thing he has been looking for, looking from the road, is the flag, attached to a flagpole in the middle of the rooftop terrace. A collective joke refers to it as the "big handkerchief out of a Swiss pocket." That day, the white cloth barely flaps and, sagging, hides the red cross. The man, who has been looking at that flag for a while, is probably thinking that the job could have been done better so as to prevent the cloth from creasing at off-peak times. He somehow feels disappointed and embarrassed for the newcomers. Their flag should never roll up. The whole cross should always be visible – even though most Gazans recognize this emblem immediately.

The white sunlight of January makes him squint. He keeps on waiting and doesn't dare walk down. Fortunately, animals are not bothered by such rules of etiquette. The donkey becomes agitated and starts to bray his own, timid braying. Three dromedary heads have just appeared from behind the wall, rubbing against one another, their muzzle stretching towards whatever could possibly be edible. The plot of land nearby is a wilderness of sorts where these animals graze peacefully. The donkey steps aside and drags the cart ever closer to the house. The master speaks in Arabic to his donkey and to the dromedaries.

Then the wife shows up on the front steps of a loggia. She quickly ties her hair, and puts on a suede jacket over her blouse. She is in the shadows; her gestures are swift, she grabs on to the colonnade, she slips her feet in a pair of moccasins. She witnesses quite an amusing and pathetic, somehow anarchic, dreamlike scene in her garden: a cart that turns upon itself, a donkey with a gray muzzle, an old man holding a whip, and three dromedaries looming from the neighborhood, pulling out as many weeds as possible. At that moment, the old man seems unable to control his animal, which turns about until eventually bringing the cart in front of the lady's legs. He looks at her, lowers his gaze. Is he a wise man? A Sufi? He wears one of these beautiful embroidered bonnets – a kufi. Royal blue crowns his old age. The hat almost covers his eyebrows, and seems to be resting upon them. His eyebrows are very big and bushy, gray and white, magnificent. His white temples make a fine contrast with his dark skin. He looks like a watcher, his wrinkles filled with shadows. One of those immortal princes with his blue hat for sole eccentricity. He touches his forehead, and introduces himself. Hadj.

Hadj? The woman seems to be searching her memory. She notices he has cataracts.

He says: "Muhammad, garden."

As she stares at the old man's opaque lens, it comes back to her.

The landlord, Muhammad, had offered them to call someone to tend the garden.

– Oh! Welcome!

She looks for the man's hands. One of them is hidden by the kaftan, but the other is visible. At the end of a narrow wrist, an elegant hand – obviously carefully looked after – spreads out with five juvenile fingers, the phalanx of which are darker. His fingernails are pink.

Pointing to the wedding ring which she wears on her ring finger, he asks where her husband is.

– Sinai.

He could come back some other time, he says.

– Why? Stay!

She holds him back. Beckoning him to come in for a drink, she shows him a sheltered space for the donkey and heads for the kitchen. In the darkness, she hastily makes coffee. Then she changes her mind and cuts three huge lemons which she squeezes, and adds water and cane sugar. She looks for biscuits to go with the juice. But there are cockroaches in the packet which she shakes over the sink. She grabs a bunch of dates. When she returns to the garden with her tray, the metal gate to the garden is shut. The courtyard is empty. She spots the cart which is moving away in the distance, turning at the crossroads in a cloud of sand and dust. From behind, the clear spot of the gown which doesn't turn around. The prints of the hoofs in the garden are the only evidence that this visit wasn't a dream. Half-moons which, at sundown, the wind returns and starts erasing.

They found their home with the help from of the ICRC office.

Upon the delegate's arrival in November, everything had been organized: the tenancy agreement, keys, insurance, and a makeshift inventory. Prices suited to expats.

The lodgings weren't quite ready yet. They had had to wait until January 10th to move in.

It is a somewhat cubic, ochre building, on the south end of Gaza city, one kilometer away from the center. It is quite remote. There are only five or six more buildings, more or less inhabited – and these abandoned plots of land, seemingly unanimated, which the sand has regained, but where camels are sometimes penned.

On the loggia's ceiling, Muhammad has set a rattan swing seat, from where one has a view of the sea over the surrounding wall. The house itself looks as if it has grown from the sand as a cube and had naturally hardened in the open air. It is made of sand, and the sand comes in from everywhere. There is sand in the stitches of the rug, under the rug, in between the teeth, inside the fruits when you cut them. It crunches under the teeth – and one eats it like salt.

The house is a rammed earth pottery. It looks somewhat massive, like a sand castle or a cone. That's what the wife said when she first arrived – a pottery. Then, she said: a castle made of sand.

One of the walls is pistachio-green, with a white meringue frieze. There are a few original details here and there, for instance these folded wooden shutters and the finely wrought iron grids which guard the windows. One either feels like in a miniature fortress, or in a wealthy person's abode. The central item is the Red Cross flag, on the rooftop terrace – a landmark of conflict zones. Its mere presence changes the place. The wife is proud of that flag on her temporary home.

In the early days of their stay, Muhammad, the landlord, comes to help them almost every day. The house, which is rented "furnished," is almost empty. A bed, a cupboard, a big table with extension leaves, a few chairs. At the end of the day, the former tenants have taken almost everything with them. The bathroom is being renovated and smells of plaster. Protected with a tarpaulin, the tiles, which unfortunately are damaged, shows interlaced birds and grapes. Through a strange diamond-shaped window, you have a view of the Mediterranean Sea. Muhammad is busy organizing several rides to Gaza merchants. He introduces the European couple to the weaver, the potter, and to the basket maker. And so, their home slowly fills up with all kinds of furniture, rugs, objects, baskets, and textiles.

One day, he shows up in his car; old Hadj is with him. Hadj wears a gray flannel suit mended with a pretty pink thread which shows every now and then on the stitching. They walk through the land. The old man moves around with his long whip as a cane, which he digs into the sand. With each step, he pauses and looks at the unfinished terraces of the garden around him, and nods as if he had a thousand ideas at the same time – which he would approve of. His bushy and spiky eyebrows enhance the astonished look on his face, and makes him look sympathetic and sweet. He limps – or maybe his hips are the cause of his limping –, which arouses compassion. Muhammed and he walk up the four front steps, knock on the door, and wait. The landlord makes both questions

and answers: Hadj, have you seen my brand-new walls? He taps on that part of the facade which has been painted in pistachio green. The old man, joined hands on his belly, just smiles. The landlord walks around the house, and knocks once more. The keys are in his pocket but he wouldn't dare walk in uninvited, and that is not the point anyway. And so they leave, unsuccessful.

They come back on a Saturday. This time – thank God – everybody is home. The landlord Muhammad, old Hadj, his donkey, the delegate, and his wife.

– Here is Hadj. He is a farmer.

Muhammad immediately trusts the lady with the big blue. She dashes to the kitchen to get them drinks. They sit under the pergola.

Hadj has brought his two younger sons, Samir and Jad, along with him. The boys are waiting near the gates to be beckoned to approach. For them to be seated, they get a wooden plank and two hollow concrete bricks – there are lots of them, scattered about the garden. The wife brings a cushion for Old Hadj, but he doesn't want it. On these makeshift benches which are sinking in the sand, all six of them have their knees to their chins, but they look happy. The winter light russets the bare, unpruned vineyard which twists around their improvised sunset community. They could have moved in – in the living room, for instance, but it was preferable to be in the garden, which was the main topic.

Both younger brothers snicker – the woman who is looking at them intimidates them. Their father, Old Hadj, scolds them in Arabic. The delegate's wife has noticed that she is the object of much attention. Her husband glances at her. From his chest pocket, he draws a pack of cigarettes for everyone. Hadj taps the back of the hand of one of his sons who was about to take one. The boy puts his hands under his bottom. He and his brother look at the wife as she smokes. She smokes her own cigarettes, which she keeps in a little suede case. She drags long puffs on the filter as she lifts her chin toward the vineyard arbor, then exhales, staring into space. The two boys have seen such scenes in American movies. They are possibly impressed. At first, she

pretends not to notice, and then stubs her cigarette out before it is over. Seen from behind, her dress with its round flannel collar and her hair ribbon highlight her strong, hollow neck. Full-face, she has, just like Samir and Jad, the green eyes of Abyssinian cats.

The evening sets. After the drinks, cans of tuna, capers, anchovies and fresh cheese sprinkled with zaatar are served. The landlord drinks lukewarm tea from his gourd, then passes it on to the three other adults.

The delegate asks the landlord what Hadj intends to do with the garden.

– He's going to plant things, answers Muhammad in English.

The delegate replies that, if it is possible, they would like flowers.

As drinks are served, the boys are already busy clearing one of the more hoarded terraces, filled with rubble from the works. They play football in the sand with a small moss ball, among the palm trees.

Under the arbor, voices get muffled. The wife puts on a woolen pull-over which her husband has gotten her inside the house. He wants to know when Hadj will begin.

– He doesn't know, Muhammad translates.

It depends. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week. But, rest assured, he will come often. They have not yet reached an agreement, as money hasn't yet been mentioned. The wife is the one to ask, and she rubs her fingers to raise the issue.

– How much does he want per month?

Hadj understands and shakes his head.

– First and foremost, he wants to be useful to you, insists Muhammad, turning to Old Hadj so as to remind him of what they have agreed upon. The matter must be discussed. You must feed your family, Hadj. You must dress your grandchildren. Your farm needs urgent tending.

The delegate comes up with a monthly offer. The schedule would be free and without constraint, he says. Hadj

could come alone or bring reinforcements. *But, would you please, for God's sake, plant whatever you can in that sand,* his eyes say.

Old Hadj seems embarrassed but accepts the offer. That evening, under the early stars of Palestine, as both kids play football, the party shakes hands.

The wife gets out of her house as soon as she hears the sound of the hooves trotting on the road. She sees the cart which the little brown donkey pulls. They stop nearby the property, by the low wall. She walks toward the animal, which lets her get close. Seldom has she seen such a sweet face. The thin taupe skin, the ears. Two protruding veins, which effort has thickened. The laden donkey stays still in between its wooden harnesses. Only his ears move – shivering organs, that respond to the slightest gush of wind, to a voice. The harness rubs against his gray, sparsely white-haired muzzle. The leather yoke around his neck has, too, whitened with time. Besides, all the leather parts are faded and hardened. Its face arouses tenderness and pity, especially his almond-shaped eyes. Two white halos enhance his tired eyes. one would want to release it from its load and push him in the shade of a barn.

The old man, still sitting on his cart, overlooks the scene with intrigued and tired eyes. He eventually lets himself glide from the wooden plank, dragging along an avalanche of rags and tarpaulins which fall to the ground and which he more or less manages to pick up.

The full noon makes both man and animal foggy – but the wife keeps on exploring the donkey's fur, as if fascinated. She puts her hand under the nostrils. The hairy lips pinch and tickle her skin. She gets close to one of the cheeks, whispers. The cast shadow of the donkey's eyelashes is neatly drawn on his fur. She chases a fly and her fingers resume the exploration, as if the animal were the only creature left alive. She strokes the hairy, veined ear, like a relief she would like to probe, within the living miniature, within the animal's pulse. Then, her forefinger runs along the tip of the two protruding veins, to the collar, under the sweat-drenched straps, and massages the

lower jaw and the bridge of the nose, alternatively, until the donkey almost closes its eyes.

– Come, says the woman, guiding the animal towards a shady part of the garden.

She goes inside the house, walks out again almost immediately, a bucket of water in her hand, and is annoyed to notice that Hadj hasn't unloaded the animal in the meantime.

The old man has kneeled in the sand, under the arbor of the pergola. He looks at the vineyard, holding a stock as black as a piece of charcoal. The fickle bark is falling to bits; the four poles that were meant to support it are askew and rusted. This is late January. And yet this crumbling arbor has a charm to itself. This little garden-shed seems to have been built before any other building was – as one digs a well before digging the foundations of a house. Its attractiveness is perhaps due to this antique condition – a structure which both time and the winding wine have partially eaten. This turns this part of the garden into the most enigmatic one – the one that will be the obvious choice for all the parties and soirees to come, as well as any informal drink.

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March 8th.

Vivian comes home after three days' leave.

When he pushes the door, she immediately notices the rings under his eyes, the pit stains on his shirt, his tiredness. He puts his travel bag down in the hall, and collapses on a couch. She gets her a drink, pours a glass of beer but as she offers it, he nods his head. Breaking news. He doesn't want anything. His lips are dry and he is struggling to keep his eyes open. She touches his forehead.

– You have a fever.

She gets him an aspirin pill and a glass of water.

– Where did you go this time?

– Beer Sheva.

The name is unfamiliar. She repeats it but doesn't insist. There will be time, later, to discuss this.

He moans; she dabs a wet towel on his temples.

– Go take a nap.

He drags himself in the other room and rolls on their bed.

– I'm sorry, darling.

She knows how he hates being sick. It makes him shameful. To become powerless.

She had been thinking: if he returns early enough, we could go take a walk before we meet the others at the Beach Club. She had hoped to stroll downtown, in the commercial street. It is 5pm, he's been asleep for two hours now. Should she wake him up?

His bag is still in the hall where he left it – he hasn't unpacked. She sees to it, lifting the bag using the long straps. The leather bag is heavy. She opens the zipper. Pulls out another business shirt, the dirty underwear; haphazardly finds a notebook, a pencil box, a big sand-colored pebble, and, wrapped in his denim jacket, a menorah, the Jewish seven-branch candelabra. She grabs it. That's what's heavy. She sets it on a window sill, and continues to empty the bag carefully. A towel, his wet swimsuit, smells of mold, an ICRC file, his tobacco, and a bottle of gin.

She opens the file, and finds the picture of a prison, stapled on the flyleaf, and entitled Beer Sheva, Winter/Spring 1974. It's a huge quadrilateral, set in the middle of nowhere. Watchtowers at each corner, and nothing around. Sand. She looks for more pictures – of the inside, the cells, faces, the courtyard, but there aren't any. The file contains pages, dirty typescripts, and carbon paper. With the palm of her hand, she strokes Vivan's notebook – his working material with the ICRC logo – and eventually decides to open it. There are the dates that match his departures. She reads as slowly as possible, forcing herself not to let impatience take over and make her miss something. For each one of the

prisons – Gaza, Beer Sheva, Nablus, Hebron, Jenin... –, he has recorded his feelings. She is horrified by the stories she reads.

It's almost nighttime when she hears the noise of bedsheets creased in the bedroom. She gets a hold of herself but doesn't have the gut to hide what she's doing. All the papers are scattered around her legs, and the notebook is on her thigh. It's best he knows she's found his notes. She hears bare feet on the tiles. The noise she senses is that made by someone who cannot lift his legs anymore.

– Aren't you feeling any better? She asks, still sitting on the couch.

He shows up in the doorframe and comes toward her. She makes him space. He buries his head between her folded thighs and his arms around her waist. He holds her as tight as he can, and falls asleep.

She waits.

Vivian's breath is so slow that she gets worried and, on several occasions, gets closer and listens carefully. She moves a cushion behind her back and tries to read the end of a paper over her husband's body.

She slowly pulls away. He sighs with disappointment.

She covers him with a blanket, and has him drink a cup of herbal tea.

And thus, minutes slowly pass.

She wouldn't mind changing her mind.

This is Friday night.

She has been waiting three days for him.

She doesn't picture herself going to the Beach Club to join the others on her own.

Night is falling. The moon crescent above barely glimmers on the surface of the sea. Wavelets leave some foam on the crests. Her eyesight trick her into spotting countless dolphins, and in the distance, she sees the lights of trawlers, which she guesses to be Egyptian. These dots of light have her hum an English children's rhyme,

a sailor's wife's song. Can one escape fatality? She murmurs: all in all, we're all sailors' wives. Her melancholy is palpable; she fights it with cigarettes. She pours herself a glass of gin and delves back into some of Vivian's notes – stories of concealed mistreating, and an inmate's quote, translated: "The food [is] dreadful, only suitable to an animal."

Images explode in her mind. All prisons collide – including Gaza's, the most decrepit one, about half a mile from their home. Stroboscopic effect. How could she not have nightmares now? Bodies on the ground. Cockroaches, stink bugs. The winter cold. Darkness. About forty inmates per cell. Their little knit cap – the only item of their dignity – absorbs the light coming from the grid. Sanitary facilities date back to the English times. Hunger strikes are frequent. Inmates knocking their metal mugs against the railings during mass protests. The racket when one cell incites the next. She pictures Vivian and his partner in poorly soundproofed hearing rooms, binders at their feet, registering complaints and requirements, handing out letters from families, trying to take messages.

Delegates have listened, copied out testimonies, provided Korans, blankets, some chess boards or checkers. And went away in the sand.

She closes the notebook. Keeps it pressed between her palms and slides it on the coffee table. Vivian's silhouette, huddled up in the couch, could be that of a desert man sleeping fully dressed under a Bedouin tent. But these walls are made of concrete. And there is a flag which protects both of them, here. The international community watches over them.

She has goosebumps up to her cheeks. She rubs her arms and puts on her pull-over. It takes a while for her to get warm under the thick yellow stitches. But the liquor has woken her up completely. There she is, standing up, her bladder full. There is a fresh wind coming through the kitchen window. The lozenge-shaped window in the tiny bathroom has remained open as well, which helps the air to circulate inside the house.

She will undoubtedly remember that night in Gaza.

A night in March, infected by the delegate's fever. The sound of the garden at night, the shivers that seep in through the tiniest opening. That constant whistling in the palm tree leaves. It seems that the bushes are more alive than in the daytime. She hits the button that turns on all three light bulbs outside – she would henceforth do it every night.

Just before she locks the door, she is standing on the front steps, all ears, hoping to hear the neighbor's dromedaries breathe and pant. A halter jingles behind the wall. They are still grazing, still breathing, their muzzles in the sand. It moves her to listen to them live. Opposite her, the garden, the rustle. Insects are digging in the sand a bed for the night. She only hears a faint, muffled echo of the city. Vivian is in the room nearby but she feels like she is on her own, the sole guardian of the place.

She looks at the company Peugeot car, parked in the courtyard. She is almost baffled to have a car to herself tonight.

She must make pastimes and find a purpose.

They are into this together – but he's a little more involved than she is.

Still, she cannot complain.

She loves the atmosphere of the Beach Club, the smell of the skewers.

She rejoices several days in advance in anticipation of each one of those Friday evenings.

In these times, she often wears mules, canvas pants, wrap skirts, linen, all in parrot colors. Necklaces of thick wooden pearls. She very seldom goes for a walk alone; some days are therefore longer than others. Expats lend each other books. She is a quick reader; she reads novels in one go. She gets whatever she wants from Europe. If the weather is nice, she gets out a moss mattress, cushions, her big straw hat, and settles outside to read. Sometimes, she has lunch around four.

The vine flowers, unbeknownst to her. Foliation begins. Leaves, gathered in bow knots, unfurl and grow visibly

- translucent, shining, almost hairy.

He finds her in the same position he had left her in, on the mattress, under the grenade tree. The derelict paper book in her hands. Her face is torn by a huge yawn which she makes no effort to conceal.

He grabs her wrists and lifts her up:

- Let's go eat some skewers.

Such impromptus are worth the long, passive hours she spends.