



BLACK DRESS
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On a warm and windy afternoon in Villa Walther, a black dress dislodged itself from the washing line on the balcony of a third-floor, lake-facing apartment. When we found the dress, it had floated a bit and made its home on the highest branches of the tallest tree in Villa Walther. Now we stood under the tree and we – eminent historians, a crack biologist, a very learned thoughtful anthropologist – looked up and shook our heads. We picked up little stones and hurled them at the tree hoping to retrieve the dress. Our arms were heavy with knowledge, our stone throwing cautious as we didn't want to disturb another anthropologist or a Classics professor. We were a bunch of polite cautious people with limited outdoor skills and we wanted to bring that black dress down without causing any harm to our environment.

Whenever faced with challenges that yet another research paper with footnotes couldn't solve, we always turned to Nouri, teenager son of a literary historian. Like all serious-minded superheroes, Nouri brought his gear with him; his climbing rope with hooks and pulleys.

I am sure there were those who felt old and exhausted just looking at Nouri's teenage spirit. He had turned the compound of Villa Walther into his own adventure land. He put up a swing for younger children, improvised a seesaw and then, between two trees, Nouri put up a hammock he made not just his own. He was welcoming, never discriminating between older Fellows and their much younger children. He spoke four languages and could be polite and courteous and practical in all of them. All the other kids swooned over him, pined for his attention. If Nouri had a football, everyone was a footballer; if he brought out his skateboard, everyone turned into a skateboarder; he picked up some thick sticks and painted them like light sabres and for weeks we were all living in Star Wars. If one of our young ones strayed, Nouri was requested to bring them back. Nouri would disappear behind the bush and rescue a very distressed Spiderman, lift him up like a gentle Hulk and deliver him into your arms. I always felt safer when Nouri was out on the prowl: we knew no thieves would emerge from the lake, no hailstorm would destroy us, our children would return home safe. I desperately wished our governments were more like Nouri, powerful, yet gentle, and polite and always resourceful.

Nouri looked up at the black dress at the top of the tree for a while and didn't make fun of learned grownups shaking our heads in hopelessness or giggling at the absurdity of the situation. He wanted to climb up the tree but we pleaded that the tree was too high. Nouri hurled the rope toward the top branches, it wouldn't reach there. Our crack biologist climbed onto his balcony, held a branch and shook the tree like a madman. The black dress shifted from one branch to a slightly lower branch, still entangled, still stubborn. Then Nouri did his magic and the dress was dislodged from the tree and floated down like black dresses do on windy afternoons. As the black dress floated towards the ground, we all knew that if we put our heads together, despite our various histories and different tastes in wine and books, if we all submitted to the wise and gentle leadership of Nouri, we could achieve anything.