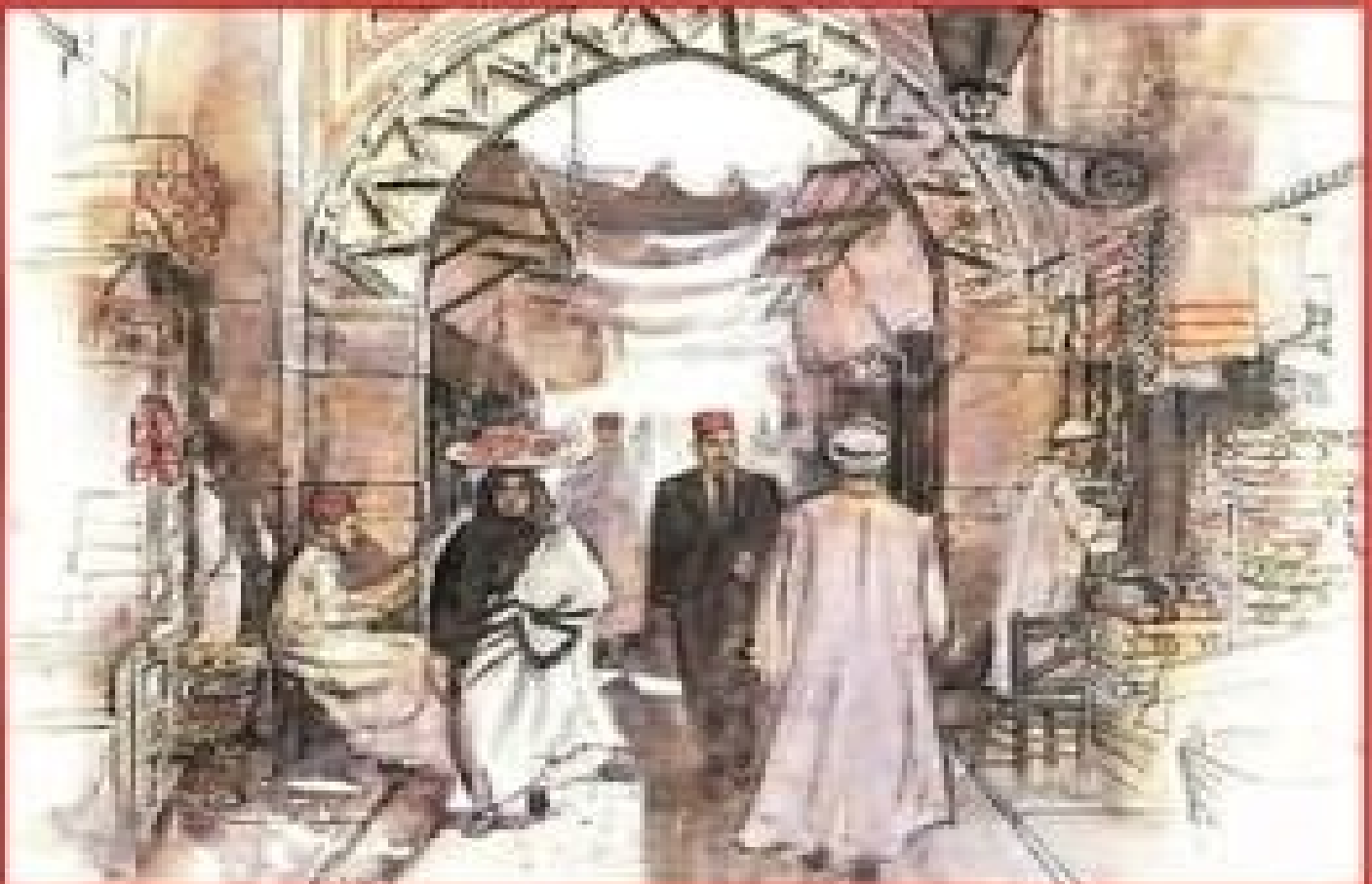




WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

# NAGUIB MAHFOUZ



## PALACE OF DESIRE

VOLUME TWO IN THE CAIRO TRILOGY

*'His masterpiece'* Sunday Times

Palace of Desire

The Cairo Trilogy: II

\_Translated by

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AL-SAYYID AHMAD ABD AL-JAWAD closed the door behind him and crossed the courtyard of his house by the pale light of the stars. His step was lethargic, and his walking stick sank into the dusty earth whenever he leaned on it wearily. He felt on fire and craved cold water so he could wash his face, head, and neck and escape, if only briefly, from the July heat and from the inferno in his belly and head. Cheered by the thought of cool water, he smiled. When he entered the door leading to the stairway, he could see a faint light coming from above. It flowed along the wall, revealing the motion of the hand that held the lamp. He climbed the steps with one hand on the railing and the other on his stick. Its successive taps had long ago acquired a special rhythm, which identified him as easily as his features. Amina was visible at the head of the stairs with the lamp in her hand. On reaching her, he stopped to regain his breath, for his chest was heaving. Then he greeted her in his customary way: "Good evening."

Preceding him with the lamp, Amina murmured, "Good evening, sir."

Once inside his room he rushed to the sofa and collapsed. Letting go of his stick and taking off his fez, he threw his head back and stretched out his legs. The sides of his cloak fell open, and the caftan underneath rode up to reveal the legs of his long underwear tucked into his socks. He shut his eyes and wiped his forehead, cheeks, and neck with a handkerchief.

After placing the lamp on a table, Amina waited for him to rise so she could help remove his clothes. She looked at him with anxious concern. She wished she had the courage to ask him not to stay out so late--now that his health could no longer shrug off excesses--but she did not know how to express her sad thoughts.

A few minutes passed before he opened his eyes. Then he extracted the gold watch from his caftan and took off his diamond ring to place them both in his fez. When he stood up to remove his cloak and caftan with Amina's assistance, his body seemed as tall, broad, and full as ever, although the hair at his temples had been assailed by gray. When he was putting his head in the neck of his white house

shirt, a smile suddenly got the better of him. He remembered how Mr. Ali Abd al-Rahim had vomited at their party that evening and had apologized for his weakness, attributing it to an upset stomach. They had all singled out their friend, upbraiding him and asserting that he could no longer tolerate alcohol, for only a special kind of man could keep on drinking to the end of his life, and so forth. He remembered the anger and vehemence of Mr. Ali in defending himself against this suspicion. How amazing that some people lent importance to such trivial matters. . . . But if it were not important, then why had he himself boasted in the merry hubbub that he could drink a whole tavern of wine without ill effects?

He sat down again and lifted his feet so that his wife could take off his shoes and socks. Then she disappeared briefly, returning with a basin and a pitcher. She poured the water for him while he washed his face and neck and rinsed out his mouth. Afterwards he sat with his legs folded beneath him, enjoying the gentle breeze flowing between the latticed balcony and the window overlooking the courtyard.

"What an atrocious summer we're having this year!"

Pulling the pallet out from under the bed and sitting cross-legged on it at his feet, Amina replied, "May our Lord be gracious to us." She sighed and continued: "The whole world's a blazing pyre, especially the oven room. The roof terrace is the only place you can breathe in summer--once the sun has set."

She sat there as usual, but time had changed her. She had grown thin, and her face seemed longer, not only because her cheeks were hollow. The locks of hair that escaped from her scarf were turning gray and made her seem older than she was. The beauty spot on her cheek had grown slightly larger. In addition to their customary look of submission, her eyes now revealed a mournful absent-mindedness. Her anguish over the changes that had befallen her was considerable, although at first she had welcomed them as an expression of her grief. Then she had begun to wonder anxiously if she might not need her health to get through the remainder of her life. Yes . . . and the others needed her to be healthy too, but how could everything be put back the way it was before? And she was older, if not old enough to warrant such a transformation. Still, her age had to make a difference.

Night after night she had stood on the balcony observing the street through the wooden grille. What she could see of the street had not altered, but change had crept through her.

The voice of the waiter at the coffeehouse echoed through their silent room. She smiled and stole a glance at al-Sayyid Ahmad.

She dearly loved this street, which stayed awake all night keeping her heart company. It was a friend but ignorant of the heart that loved it through the shutters of the enclosed balcony. Its features filled her mind, and its evening inhabitants were live voices inhabiting her ears--like this waiter who never stopped talking, the person with the hoarse voice who commented on the events of the day without getting tired or annoyed, the man with the nervous voice trying his luck at cards with the seven of diamonds and the jack, and the father of Haniya--the little girl with whooping cough--who night after night would reply when asked about her, "Our Lord will be able to cure her." Oh . . . the balcony seemed to be her special corner of the coffeehouse. Memories of the street paraded before her imagination while her eyes remained fixed on the man's head, which was leaning against the back of the sofa. When the flow of remembered images stopped, she concentrated her attention on her

husband. She noticed that the sides of his face were bright red, the way she had grown accustomed to seeing them of late when he returned home. She was uncomfortable about it and asked him apprehensively, "Sir, are you well?"

He held his head up and muttered, "Well, praise God." Then he added, "But the weather's atrocious

Clear raisin liqueur was the best drink in summer. That was what they had repeatedly told him, but he could not stand it. For him it was whiskey or nothing. Thus every day he had to put up with summer hangovers, and it was a ferocious summer. He had really laughed hard that evening. He had laughed until the veins of his neck were sore. But what had all the laughter been about? He could hardly remember. There seemed to be nothing to relate or repeat. Yet the atmosphere of their party had been charged with such a sympathetic electricity that a touch had sufficed to set off a flash. The moment Mr. Ibrahim al-Far had said, "Alexandria set sail from Sa'd Zaghlul Pasha today heading for Paris," reversing his words, they had all burst out laughing, since they considered the remark an exquisite example of a slip of the tongue caused by intoxication.

They had been quick to add, "He will continue negotiating until he regains his health, when he will set sail for the invitation in response to the London he received from" or "He will receive Ramsay MacDonald from the independence of the agreement" and "He will return with Egypt for independence." They had begun to discuss the anticipated negotiations, larding their comments with whatever jests they saw fit.

Vast as his world of friends was, it really boiled down to three: Muhammad Iffat, Ali Abd al-Rahim, and Ibrahim al-Far. Could he imagine the world's existence without them? The way their faces lit up with genuine joy when they saw him made him happier than anything else could. His dreamy eyes met Amina's inquisitive ones. As though to remind her of something extremely important, he said, "Tomorrow."

With a beaming face she replied, "How could I forget?"

He did not attempt to conceal his pride when he commented, "It's said that the baccalaureate results were awful this year."

She smiled once more to share in his pride and said, "May our Lord make his efforts successful and let us live long enough to see him obtain his degree."

"Did you go to Sugar Street today?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, "and I invited everyone. They'll all come except the old lady, who excused herself because she's so tired. Her two sons will congratulate Kamal on her behalf."

Gesturing toward his cloak with his chin, al-Sayyid Ahmad said, "Today Shaykh Mutawalli Abd al-Samad brought me amulets for the children of Khadija and Aisha. His wish for me was: 'God willing, I'll make you amulets for your grandchildren's children.'"

Shaking his head, he smiled and continued, "Nothing's impossible for God. Shaykh Mutawalli himself is like iron even though he's in his eighties."

"May our Lord grant you health and strength."

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He reflected for a time while he counted on his fingers. Then he observed, "If my father had lived, may God be compassionate to him, he would not have been much older than the shaykh."

"May God have mercy on all those who have departed this life."

Silence reigned until the impact of the reference to the dead had dissipated. As though remembering something important, the man said, "Zaynab's gotten engaged!"

Amina's eyes grew wide. She raised her head and asked, "Really?"

"Yes, Muhammad Iffat told me tonight."

"Who is it?"

"A civil servant named Muhammad Hasan, who is head of the records office in the Ministry of Education."

She commented despondently, "It sounds as though he's advanced in years."

"Not at all," he objected. "He's in his thirties, thirty-five, thirty-six, forty at the most." He continued sarcastically, "She tried her luck with young men and failed. I mean young men with no backbone. Let her try her luck with mature men."

Amina said sorrowfully, "Yasin would have been better for her, if only because of their son."

Al-Sayyid Ahmad shared her opinion, which he had defended for a long time with Muhammad Iffat. In order to conceal his failure, he did not mention that he agreed and said with annoyance, "Her father no longer trusts Yasin, and in truth he's not trustworthy. That's why I didn't insist on it. I was unwilling to exploit our friendship and make her father accept something that would end badly."

Amina mumbled sympathetically, "A youthful mistake can be forgiven."

Her husband felt he could acknowledge some portion of his unsuccessful effort and remarked, "I didn't neglect Yasin's rights but met with no encouragement. Muhammad Iffat told me, 'My first reason for refusing is my concern that our friendship might be exposed to discord.' He also said, 'I would not be able to refuse a request from you, but our friendship is dearer to me than your request.' So I stopped talking about it."

Muhammad Iffat had actually said that, but only to fend off al-Sayyid Ahmad's insistent urging. Because of his friend's high standing with him and in society, al-Sayyid Ahmad had been very keen to restore his bond with Muhammad Iffat, which was severed when their children were divorced. Although he could not hope to find a better wife for Yasin than Zaynab, he was forced to accept the calamity of divorce and remarriage, especially after his friend had told him bluntly at least part of what he knew of Yasin's private life. Muhammad Iffat had even remarked, "Don't tell me we're the same as Yasin. We differ in several respects, and the fact is that I have higher standards for my daughter Zaynab's husband than for her mother's."

Amina inquired, "Does Yasin know what's happened?"

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"He'll learn tomorrow or the next day. Do you think he'll mind? He's the last person to be concerned about honor in marriage."

Maim shook her head sadly and asked, "What about Ridwan?"

Al-Sayyid Ahmad replied with a frown, "He'll stay with his grandfather or go with his mother, if he can't bear to be separated from her. May God embarrass those who have caused the boy this embarrassment."

"My Lord, the poor child--his mother one place and his father another. . . . Can Zaynab really bear to be parted from him?"

Her husband replied with apparent disdain, "Necessity has its own laws." Then he asked, "When will he be old enough to come to his father? Do you remember?"

Amina thought for a bit and said, "He's a little younger than Na'ima, Aisha's daughter, and a little older than Khadija's son Abd al-Muni'm. So he must be five, and his father can claim custody in two years. Isn't that right, sir?"

Yawning, al-Sayyid Ahmad replied, "We'll see when the time comes." Then he went on: "He's been married before. I mean her new husband."

"Does he have children?"

"No. His first wife didn't bear any."

"Perhaps that helped endear him to Mr. Muhammad Iffat."

The man retorted angrily, "Don't forget his rank!"

Amina protested, "If it was merely a question of social status no one could match your son, if only for your sake."

He felt indignant and secretly cursed Muhammad Iffat, despite his love for the man. But then he reiterated the point that consoled him: "Don't forget that had it not been for his desire to safeguard our friendship, he would not have hesitated to honor my request."

Amina echoed this sentiment: "Of course, naturally, sir. It's a lifelong friendship and not something to be trifled with or taken lightly."

He began yawning once more and muttered, "Take the lamp."

She rose to carry out his order. He closed his eyes for a moment before rising in a single bound, as though to overcome his inertia. He headed for his bed to stretch out. Now he felt fine. How good it was to lie down when exhausted. Yes, his head pulsed and throbbed, but he almost always had some kind of headache. Let him praise God in any case. Being totally at ease was a thing of the past.

"When we are by ourselves," he reflected, "we become conscious of something missing that will never return. It looms up out of the past in a pale memory, like the faint light from the little window the door."

In any case he should praise God. He would enjoy his life, which others envied. The best thing was to reach a decision about whether to accept his friends' invitation or not. Or should he leave tomorrow's problem till the morrow?

Yasin was a problem not only for tomorrow but for yesterday and today. . . . He was no longer a child, since he was twenty-eight. It would not be difficult to find him another wife, but "God does not change people until they change themselves" (Qur'an, 13:11). When would God's guidance shine forth and encompass the earth so that its light dazzled the eye? Then he would cry out from the depths of his soul: "Praise the Lord." But what had Muhammad Iffat said? That Yasin prowled and patrolled the Ezbekiya entertainment district from top to bottom. . . . Ezbekiya had been another kind of place where he had prowled and patrolled it himself. He was shaken by longing at times to return to its watering holes and revive some memories. Praise God that he had learned Yasin's secret before setting out. Otherwise Satan would have laughed at his embarrassment from the bottom of his mocking heart.

"Clear the way for the next generation," he told himself. "They've grown up. The Australians kept you away from there once. Now it's this Australian mule of a son who does."

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THE EARLY-MORNING silence was broken by the repeated thumps of dough being kneaded in the oven room and by the crowing of a rooster. Umm Hanafi's corpulent body was bent over the bread bowl. Her face looked full by the light of a lamp atop the oven. Age had not affected her hair or her plumpness, but her appearance had taken on an air of gloom and her features seemed coarser. On a kitchen chair to her right sat Amina, who was spreading bran on the breadboards. They continued their work in silence until Umm Hanafi finished kneading the dough, took her hand from the bowl, and wiped her sweaty brow with her forearm. Then the servant waved her fist, which was covered with dough and looked like a white boxing glove, as she observed, "It'll be a hard day for you, ma'am, but a delightful one. May God grant us many happy days."

Without raising her head from her work, Amina murmured, "We've got to make sure the food's delicious."

Umm Hanafi smiled, gestured toward her mistress with her chin, and said, "Your skill will take care of that." She planted her hands in the bowl once more to resume punching the dough.

"I wish we had contented ourselves with distributing stew to the needy around al-Husayn Mosque."

Umm Hanafi gently scolded her mistress: "No one present will be an outsider."

Amina muttered somewhat nervously, "But there'll be a banquet and a lot of commotion. Fuad,

Jamil al-Hamzawi's son, has also earned the baccalaureate--without anyone seeing or hearing anything about it."

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But Umm Hanafi kept up her scolding: "It's just an opportunity for us to get together with our loved ones."

How could joy be free from reproach or forebodings? In former times she had reckoned up the years, discovering that Kamal would receive his school certificate at the same time Fahmy received his law degree. That celebration would never take place, and her pious vow could never be honored. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four . . . the prime of his young life, which she had been prevented from witnessing. Instead, it had been earth's lot to embrace him. How heartbreaking what they termed sorrow was!

"Mrs. Aisha will be delighted by the baklava. It will remind her of the old days, my lady."

Aisha would be delighted. So would Amina, her mother, who experienced the succession of night and day, satiation and hunger, wakefulness and sleep, as though nothing had changed.

"Forget your claim to be unable to live on a single day after he died," she thought. "You have lived on to swear by his grave. When a heart is turned upside down, that does not mean the world is too. He seems totally forgotten, until it's time to visit the cemetery. You filled my eye and soul, son. Now they only think of you during the holidays. What has come over them? Everyone's busy with his own affairs, except for you, Khadija. You have your mother's heart and spirit. I even have had to admonish you to be strong. Aisha's not like that. But not so fast! It's not right for me to find fault with her. She's mourned quite enough. And Kamal can't be blamed either. Have pity on their young hearts. Fahmy was everything to me. Your hair has turned gray, Amina, and you look like a ghost. That's what Umm Hanafi says. You'll never be young and healthy again. You're going on fifty and he wasn't twenty yet. Pregnancy with all its cravings, childbirth, breast-feeding, love, hopes . . . and then nothing. I wonder if my husband's head is free of such thoughts. Leave him out of it! 'The grief of men is not like that of women.' That was what you said, Mother, may God make paradise your abode. It tears me apart, Mother, that he's gone back to his old habits, as though Fahmy had never died or all memories of him had evaporated. He's even critical when grief overwhelms me. Isn't he the father as much as I'm the mother? My mother said, 'Poor dear Amina, don't allow such thoughts into your heart. If we could judge people's hearts by comparison with a mother's, all others would seem to be stones. He's a man, and the grief of men is not like that of women. If men gave way to sorrow, they would collapse from the weight of their burdens. It's your duty to cheer him up if you notice he's sad. My poor daughter, he's your bulwark.'"

That affectionate voice had vanished. Its loss had come when their hearts were already filled with grief, so that hardly anyone had mourned for the old lady. Her mother's wisdom had been demonstrated late one night when he had come home drunk and had thrown himself sobbing on the sofa.

"Then you wanted him to recover, even if he forgot his dead son forever. You yourself, don't you forget sometimes? And there's something even more atrocious. It's your enjoyment of life and desire for it. That's what the world is like, so they say. You repeat what they say and believe it. Then how could you have allowed yourself once to resent Yasin's recovery and continuation of his former way of life? Not so fast . . . rely on your faith and forbearance. Submit to God's will and to whatever He sends."



you. You'll always be Fahmy's mother and be called Umm Fahmy. So long as I live I'll continue to be your mother, son, and you'll be my child."

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The beats of the dough being kneaded continued as al-Sayyid Ahmad opened his eyes to the early-morning light. He stretched and yawned in a loud, prolonged way--the sound rising like a complaint or a protest. Then he sat up in bed, leaning on hands that rested on outstretched legs. His back seemed curved, and the upper part of his white house shirt was damp with sweat. He began to shake his head right and left, as though to clear the weight of drowsiness from his head. He slipped his feet to the floor and made his way to the bath for a cold shower, which was the only remedy he used to restore balance to his mind and poise to his body. He took off his clothes. As the spray of water hit him, he remembered the invitation he had received the day before. His heart pounded from the combined impact of the memory and the invigorating sensation of the cold water.

Ali Abd al-Rahim had said, "Look again at your former sweethearts. Life can't go on like this forever. I know you better than anyone else."

Should he take this final step? For five years he had resisted it. Had his repentance been merely that of an afflicted Believer? Had it been kept hidden because he feared making it public? Had it been in good faith, even though he had not committed himself fully to it? He did not remember. He did not want to remember. A man going on fifty-five was no youngster. What was there to disturb and upset his thoughts so? He had felt the same way when he had been invited to return to their drinking parties and had agreed, as well as the time he had been asked to rejoin their musical evenings and had accepted. Would he answer this plea on behalf of his former sweethearts in the same way? When had grief ever brought a dead man back to life?

"Did God order us to slay ourselves when those we love depart?"

Grief had almost killed him during the long year of mourning and self-denial. He had drunk no alcohol and listened to no music. Not a single witty remark had escaped from his mouth, and his hair had turned gray. Yes . . . that year had been the first time that gray had appeared in his hair. Then he had reverted to drinking and music, out of consideration for his close friends who had renounced their entertainments to honor his grief, or at least that had been how he rationalized it. He had started drinking again both because he could not do without it any longer and because he felt sorry for his three friends. They had not been like the others.

"The others are not to be blamed. They shared in your grief, but then they began to divide their evenings between your sober soirees and their drinking sessions. What was wrong with that? But your three best friends refused to allow themselves more of life than you did. Slowly you returned to everything except the women, since you thought adultery a major sin. At first they did not press you. How you resisted and how you grieved! Zubayda's emissary made no impression on you. You rejected Maryam's mother with sad and resolute dignity. You endured unprecedented pains. You were certain you would never go back. Time after time you asked yourself, 'How can I return to the arms of women entertainers when Fahmy's embraced by the earth?' Oh . . . we are so weak and wretched that we desperately need God's compassion.

"Let him continue to grieve who can be sure he will not die tomorrow.' Who came up with this pithy saying? It was either Ali Abd al-Rahim or Ibrahim al-Far. Muhammad Iffat Bey's not good at wise sayings. He rejected my request and married his daughter to a stranger. Then he tried to take me

in with his display of affection. He did not renounce his anger but took care not to let me observe it again. But what a man he is! What loyalty and affection! Do you remember how his tears mixed with yours at the cemetery? Yet he's the one who later said, 'I'm afraid you'll become senile if you don't do anything. . . . Come to the houseboat.' When he sensed my hesitation, he said, 'Let it be an innocent visit. . . . No one's going to rip your clothes off and toss you on a woman.' God knows my grief has lasted a long time. When Fahmy passed away, a great part of me died. My best hope in this world vanished. Who can blame me if I'm able to achieve some peace of mind and consolation? Even if it laughs, my heart's still wounded. I wonder what the women are like now? How have five years, five long years, changed them?"

Yasin's snoring was the first thing Kamal noticed when he woke up. He could not keep himself from calling to his older brother, more from a desire to pester him than to awaken him on time. He kept after him persistently until Yasin responded in a complaining and scolding voice like a death cry and turned his huge body over, making the bed creak as though it was groaning with pain. He sighed and opened his red eyes.

In his opinion there was no need for this haste, since neither of them could venture to the bathroom until their father had left it. It was no longer an easy matter to get the first turn in the bathroom. A new regime had been established in the house five years before, when--except for the reception room and the adjacent sitting room furnished with simple furniture as a vestibule--everything from the lower floor had been moved upstairs. Although Yasin and Kamal had hardly welcomed the notion of sharing a floor with their father, they had been forced to comply with his wish to vacate the lower level, where no one set foot, except to entertain a visitor.

Yasin closed his eyes but did not go back to sleep, not merely because it would have been futile but also because an image had flashed through his mind, setting his emotions on fire . . . a round face with black eyes at the center of its ivory surface. Maryam! He answered the call of his daydreams and abandoned himself to a spell even stronger than that of sleep.

A few months back she had meant nothing to him and might just as well have never existed. Then he had heard Umm Hanafi tell his stepmother one evening, "Have you heard the news, my lady? Mrs. Maryam's gotten divorced and returned to her mother." At that time he had remembered Maryam, Fahmy, and the English soldier who had been Kamal's friend, although the soldier's name had escaped him. Then he had remembered in turn how lively his own interest in her had been after the scandal. Before he had realized what was happening, a signboard had suddenly lit up inside him. It was like a billboard illuminated at night with the message: "Maryam . . . your neighbor . . . separated from you by only a wall . . . divorced . . . and with quite a history behind her . . . Rejoice!" He had tried at once to discourage himself. Her link to Fahmy had deterred and troubled him, prompting him to close the door firmly and repent, if possible, for this passing thought he kept secret.

Later he had run into her and her mother in the Muski. Their eyes had accidentally met, but she had immediately granted him a smiling look of recognition, which could scarcely have been accidental. His heart had been stirred--initially by nothing more than the look but subsequently by the pleasant impression made on him by her ivory complexion, Kohl-enhanced eyes, and body pulsing with youth and vitality. She made him think of Zaynab at her prime. He had proceeded on his way with pensive excitement, although after a few steps, as he descended to Ahmad Abduh's subterranean coffeehouse, sad memory had come to mind and distressed his heart. He recalled Fahmy--what he had looked like

and his characteristic ways of speaking and moving. Yasin's passion had subsided and abated, and he had been overcome by a heavy sorrow. He would need to bring everything to a halt . . . but why?

An hour later, after several days, or whenever he asked himself this question, the answer was: Fahmy. But what relation was there between the two of them? He had wanted to get engaged to her once. Why had he not done so? "Your father would not agree. Was that all? It was the initial reason. Then what? Next came the scandal with the Englishman when the faint trace of affection remaining in Fahmy's soul had been erased. Faint trace? Yes, because most probably he had forgotten her. So he forgot her first and spurned her afterwards. . . . Yes, so what relationship was there then between them? None. But! . . . But what? I mean, what about my feelings as his brother? Is there any doubt concerning the sincerity of your feelings for him? Of course not! A thousand times no! Is the girl worth it? Yes! Both her face and her body? Yes! So what are you waiting for?"

From time to time he would catch a glimpse of her at the window and then on the roof . . . repeatedly on the roof.

"Why had she gotten divorced?" Yasin asked himself. "If it was because of some defect in her husband's character, then she was lucky to be divorced. If it was occasioned by some fault of hers, then you're the lucky one."

"Get up, or you'll fall asleep again."

Yasin yawned as he combed his untidy hair with his thick fingers. Then he remarked: "You're fortunate to have that long school vacation."

"Didn't I wake up before you?"

"But you could have kept on sleeping if you'd wanted to."

"As you can see, I didn't want to."

Yasin laughed for no particular reason. Then he asked, "What was the name of the English soldier who was your friend long ago?"

"Oh . . . Julian."

"Yes, Julian."

"What made you ask about him?"

"Nothing!"

Nothing? What ridiculous things we say! Was he not superior to Julian? At any rate Julian had been a transient, and Yasin was a permanent resident. "There's always a hint of a smile in her face for you. Hasn't she noticed how frequently you appear on the roof? Certainly! Remember Julian. She's not a woman who would miss the significance of such a gesture. She responded to your greeting. . . . The first time she turned her smiling face. The second time she laughed. What a beautiful laugh she has! The third time she gestured to the roofs of the other houses to caution you. 'I'll come back once the sun has set,' that's what I daringly said. Didn't Julian accost her from the street?"

"I really loved the English when I was young. But see how I hate them now."

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"Your hero Sa'd Zaghlul has set off to court their friendship."

Kamal exclaimed sharply, "By God, I'll detest them even if I'm the only one who does."

They exchanged a sad look. They could hear the clatter of their father's clogs as he returned to his room, reciting, "In the name of God" and "There is no power or might save with God." Yasin slipped out of bed and left the room yawning.

Kamal rolled over on his side and then stretched out on his back, relaxing. He folded his arms and clasped his hands together under his head. He gazed at his surroundings with eyes that saw nothing.

"Let the summer resort of Ra's al-Barr be happy to have you. Your angelic complexion was not made to roast in the heat of Cairo. Let the sand enjoy the tread of your feet. Let the water and air rejoice in seeing you. You celebrate your summer resort and praise its beauty. Your eyes show your delight and longing for it. I look at them sadly with a yearning heart and an inquisitive eye. What is this place that has enchanted you and proved worthy of your satisfaction? . . . But when will you return and when will your magical voice fill my ears? What's the resort like? I wish I knew. It's said that people there are free as the air, that they meet in the arms of the waves, and that there are as many love affairs as grains of sand on the beach. Many there will get to see your face, but I'm a person whose heartbeats make the walls groan with complaints, since I'm consumed by an inferno of waiting. How impossible it is to forget your face shining with joy when you murmured, 'We're leaving tomorrow. . . . How beautiful Ra's al-Barr is!' How can I forget my dejection at receiving the warning of separation from a mouth sparkling with radiant happiness, as though I was being administered poison in a bouquet of fragrant flowers. Why shouldn't I be jealous of inanimate objects that make you happy when I can't? They win your affection, which is denied to me. Didn't you notice my dejection when you said farewell? Of course not. You noticed nothing . . . not because I was one among many, but, darling, because you didn't notice . . . as though nothing caught your attention or as though you were an exotic and unusual creature hovering over ordinary life and observing us from above with eyes that roam through a divine realm beyond our ken. So we stood there face to face--you a torch of dazzling happiness and I ashes of despondent dejection. You enjoy absolute freedom or yield only to laws beyond our comprehension, while I am compelled by an overwhelming force to revolve in orbit around you as though you were the sun and I the earth. Have you found some freedom at the seashore that you do not savor in the villas of al-Abbasiya? Of course not! By the truth of everything you mean to me, you're not like the others. In the garden of the mansion and on the street your feet leave fragrant prints. In the heart of each friend you leave memories and hopes. A young lady welcoming yet inaccessible, you pass between us but remain aloof--as though the East had requested you as a gift from the West on the anniversary of the Night of Destiny, at the end of Ramadan, when prayers are sure to be answered. I wonder what new favor you might grant where the coast is long, the horizon distant, and the beach packed with admirers. What would it be, my hope and my despair?"

"Without you, Cairo's a wasteland exuding melancholy desolation and consisting of only the dregs of life and living creatures. Of course it has sights and features, but none that speak to the emotions or stir the heart, for they seem antiquities, memories of an unopened pharaonic tomb. No place in Cairo offers me any solace, distraction, or entertainment. I imagine myself at different times as choking, imprisoned, lost, or wandering aimlessly. How amazing! Did your presence provide me with a hope that separation has banished? Certainly not, my destiny and my doom, but like that aspiration, so long

as I remain under your wing, I feel fresh and safe, even if my hope is groundless. Of what use to a person eagerly searching the dark sky is his knowledge that the full moon is shining on the earth somewhere else? None, even if he does not seek any control over the moon. Yet I desire life to its most profound and intoxicating degree, even if that hurts. If you are present as my heart beats, it's because of that fabulous creature, the memory. Before I knew you, I never realized what a miracle it is. Today, tomorrow, or after a lifetime, in al-Abbasiya, Ra's al-Barr, or at the ends of the earth, my imagination will never lose sight of your dark black eyes, your eyebrows which join in the middle, your elegant straight nose, your face like a bronze moon, your long neck, and your slender figure. Your enchantment defies description but is as intoxicating as the fragrance of a bouquet of jasmine blossoms. I will hold on to this image as long as I live. When I die, may it overcome all obstacles and hindrances to become my destiny and mine alone, since I have loved you so deeply. If that is out of the question, tell me what meaning life has for us to seek or what delight there is to yearn for after death.

"Don't claim to have fathomed the essence of life unless you're in love. Hearing, seeing, tasting, and being serious, playful, affectionate, or victorious are trivial pleasures to a person whose heart is filled with love--and from the first look, my heart. Even before my eyes left her, I was certain that this was to be permanent, not transitory. It was one of those fleeting but decisive moments like conception or an earthquake. Oh Lord, I was no longer the same person. My heart collided with the walls of my chest as the secrets of the enchantment revealed themselves. My intellect raced so fast it courted insanity. The pleasure was so intense that it verged on pain. The strings of existence and of my soul vibrated with a hidden melody. My blood screamed out for help without knowing where assistance could be found. The blind man could see, the cripple walked, and the dead man came back to life. I entreated you by everything you hold dear never to leave . . . You, my God, in heaven and she on earth.

"I believe that all my past life has been in preparation for the glad tidings of love. The fact that I did not die young and went to Fuad I School and not some other one, that the first pupil I befriended was her brother Husayn, and . . . and that . . . all of that was just so I would be invited to the mansion of the Shaddad family. What a memory! My heart is almost torn out by the impact of it. Husayn, Isma'il, Hasan, and I were busy discussing various issues when there came to our ears a melodious voice saluting us. I turned around, totally astounded. Who could be approaching? How could a girl intrude on a gathering of young men to whom she was not related? But I quickly abandoned my questions and decided to set aside traditional mores. I found myself with a creature who could not possibly have originated on this earth. She seemed to know everyone but me. So Husayn introduced us: 'My friend Kamal . . . my sister, Aida.' That evening I learned why I had been created, why I had not died, and why the fates had driven me to al-Abbasiya, to Husayn and the Shaddad family mansion. When did that take place? Unfortunately the date has been forgotten but not the day. It was Sunday, a regular holiday at her French school which coincided with a governmental holiday for state schools, possibly the Prophet's birthday. In any case it was a day of birth for me.

"Of what importance is the date? The calendar has a magic that makes us imagine a memory can be resurrected and revived, but nothing returns. You'll keep on searching for the date, repeating: the beginning of the second year at school, October or November, during Sa'd Zaghlul's journey to Upper Egypt, and before he was exiled for the second time. No matter how much you consult your memory, the evidence, and events of the day, you'll simply end up clinging desperately to your attempt to rediscover that lost happiness and a time that has disappeared forever. If only you had held out your hand when you were introduced, as you almost did, she would have shaken it and you would have

experienced her touch. Now you imagine it repeatedly with feelings of both skepticism and ecstasy, for she seems to be a creature with no physical body. Thus a dreamlike opportunity was lost, which--along with that moment--will never return. Then she directed her attention to your two friends, conversing freely with them while you crouched in your seat in the gazebo, racked by the anxiety of a person fully imbued with the traditions of the Husayn district. At last you asked yourself whether there might not be special rules of etiquette for mansions. Perhaps it was a breath of perfumed air originating in Paris, where the beloved creature had grown up. Then you submerged yourself in the melody of her voice, savoring its tones, becoming intoxicated by its music, and soaking up every syllable that slipped out. Perhaps you did not understand, you poor dear, that you were being born again at that very moment and that like a newborn baby you had to greet your new world with alarm and tears.

"The girl's melodious voice remarked, 'We're going this evening to see The Coquette.' With a smile, Isma'il asked her, 'Do you like the star, Munira al-Mahdiya?' She hesitated a moment as was fitting for a half-Parisian girl. Then she replied, 'Mama likes her.' Husayn, Isma'il, and Hasan all got involved in a conversation about the outstanding musicians of the day: Munira al-Mahdiya, Sayyid Darwish, Salih Abd al-Hayy, and Abd al-Latif al-Banna.

"Suddenly I was taken by surprise to hear the melodious voice ask, 'What about you, Kamal? Don't you like Munira?'

"Do you recall this revelation that descended on you so unexpectedly? I mean do you recall the natural harmony of it? It was not a phrase but a magical tune that came to rest deep inside you where it sings on silently to an attentive heart, which experiences a heavenly happiness unknown to anyone but you. How astounded you were when greeted by it. It was like a voice from the heavens singling you out to address you by name. In a single draft you imbibed unparalleled glory, bliss, and grace. Immediately afterwards you would have liked to echo the Prophet's words when he would feel a revelation coming and cry out for help: 'Wrap me up! Cover me with my cloak!'

"Then you answered her, although I don't remember how. She stayed a few minutes longer before saying goodbye and departing. The charming look of her black eyes added to her fascinating beauty by revealing an agreeable candor--a daring that arose from self-confidence, not from licentiousness or wantonness--as well as an alarming arrogance, which seemed to attract and repel you at the same time.

"Her beauty has a fatal attraction. I don't understand its essence and I know nothing comparable. I often wonder if it's not the shadow of a much greater magic concealed within her. Which of these two forms of enchantment makes me love her? They're both puzzles. The third puzzle is my love. Although that moment fades farther into the past every day, its memories are eternally planted in my heart because of its associations with place, time, names, company, and remarks. My intoxicated heart circles through them until it imagines they are life itself, wondering somewhat skeptically whether any life exists beyond them. Had there really been a time when my heart was empty of love and my soul devoid of that divine image? At times you were so ecstatically happy that you grieved over the barrenness of your past. At other times you were so stung by pain that you pined for the peace that had fled. Caught between these two emotions, your heart could find no repose. It proceeded to search for relief from various spiritual opiates, finding them at different times in nature, science, and art, but most frequently in worship. From the innermost reaches of your awakened heart there flared up a passionate desire for divine delights. . . . 'People, you must love or die.' That was what your situation

seemed to imply as you proudly and grandly strode along bearing the light of love and its secrets inside you, ~~boasting of your elevation over life and other living creatures. A bridge strewn with the roses of happiness linked you to the heavens.~~ Yet at times, when alone, you fell victim to a painful, sick, conscious reckoning of your shortcomings and to merciless brooding about them. These confine you to your little self, your modest world, and the mortal level of well-being.

"Oh Lord, how can a person re-create himself afresh? This love is a tyrant. It flies in the face of other values, but in its wake your beloved glistens. Normal virtues do not improve it and ordinary defects of character do not diminish it. Such contrasts appear beautiful in its crown of pearls and fill you with awe. In your opinion, was it in any way demeaning for her to have disregarded the customs most people observe? Of course not . . . in fact it would have been more demeaning if she had observed them. Occasionally you like to ask yourself: What is it you want from her love? I answer simply that I want to love her. When life is gushing through a soul, is it right to question what the point is? There's no ulterior motive for it. It's only tradition that has linked the two words: 'love' and 'marriage.' It is not merely the differences of age and class that make marriage an impossible goal for someone in my situation. It is marriage itself, for it seeks to bring love down from its heaven to the earth of contractual relationships and sweaty exertion.

"Someone insists on making you account for your actions and asks what you have gained from falling in love with her. Without any hesitation I reply, 'A fascinating smile, the invaluable gift of hearing her say my name, her visits to the garden on rare blissful occasions, catching a glimpse of her on a dewy morning when the school bus is carrying her off, and the way she teases my imagination in ecstatic daydreams or drowsy interludes of sleep.' Then your madly yearning soul asks, 'Is it absolutely out of the question that the beloved might take some interest in her lover?' Don't give in to false hopes. Tell your soul, 'It is more than enough if the beloved will remember your name when we meet again.'"

"Quick. To the bathroom. Aren't you late?"

Registering his surprise, Kamal's eyes looked at Yasin, who had returned to the room and was drying his head with a towel. Kamal jumped out of bed. His body looked long and thin. He cast a glance in the mirror as though to examine his huge head, protruding forehead, and a nose that appeared to have been hewn from granite, it was so large and commanding. He took his towel from the bed frame and headed for the bathroom.

AJ-Sayyid Ahmad had finished praying. Now he lifted his powerful voice in his customary supplications for his children and himself, asking God for guidance and protection in this world and the next. At the same time Amina was setting out the breakfast. Then she went to invite him in her meek voice to have breakfast. Going to the room shared by Yasin and Kamal, she repeated her invitation.

The three men took their places around the breakfast tray. The father invoked the name of God before taking some bread to mark the beginning of the meal. Yasin and then Kamal followed his lead. Meanwhile the mother stood in her traditional spot next to the tray with the water jugs. Although the two brothers appeared polite and submissive, their hearts were almost free of the fear that had afflicted them in former times in their father's presence. For Yasin it was a question of his twenty-eight years, which had bestowed on him some of the distinctions of manhood and served to protect him from abusive insults and miserable attacks. Kamal's seventeen years and success in school also

afforded him some security, if not as much as Yasin. At least his minor lapses would be excused and tolerated. ~~During the last few years he had become accustomed to a less brutal and terrifying style of~~ treatment from his father. Now it was not uncommon for a brief conversation to take place between them. An intimidating silence had previously dominated their time together, except when the father had asked one of them a question and the son would hastily answer as best he could, even if his mouth was full of food.

Yes, it was no longer out of the ordinary for Yasin to address his father. He might say, for example "I visited Ridwan at his grandfather's house yesterday. He sends you his greetings and kisses your hand."

Al-Sayyid Ahmad would not consider such a statement to be impudent or out of line and would answer simply, "May our Lord preserve him and watch over him."

It was not out of the question at such a moment for Kamal to ask his father politely, "When will custody of Ridwan revert to his father, Papa?" In that way he demonstrated the dramatic transformation of his relationship to his father.

Al-Sayyid Ahmad had replied, "When he turns seven," instead of screaming, "Shut up, you son of a bitch."

One day Kamal had attempted to establish the last time his father had insulted him. He had finally recalled that it had been about two years before, or a year after he had fallen in love, for he had begun to date events from that moment. At the time, he had felt that his friendship with young men like Husayn Shaddad, Hasan Salim, and Isma'il Latif demanded a large increase in his pocket money, so that he could keep up with them in their innocent amusements. He had complained to his mother, asking her to request the desired increase from his father. Although it was not easy for the mother to raise such an issue with the father, it was less difficult than it had once been, because of the change that had occurred in his treatment of her after Fahmy's death. Commending the new ties of friendship to important families with which her son had been honored, she had mentioned the request to her husband. Al-Sayyid Ahmad had then summoned Kamal and poured out his anger on the boy, yelling, "Do you think I'm at the beck and call of you and your friends? Cursed be your father and their father too."

Thinking the matter at an end, Kamal had left disappointed. To his surprise, the following day at the breakfast table the man had asked about his friends. On hearing the name Husayn Abd al-Hamid Shaddad, he had inquired with interest, "Is your friend from al-Abbasiya?"

Kamal had answered in the affirmative, his heart pounding.

Al-Sayyid Ahmad had said, "I used to know his grandfather Shaddad Bey. I know that his father Abd al-Hamid Bey was exiled, because of his ties to the Khedive Abbas. . . . Isn't that so?"

Kamal had replied in the affirmative once more, while contending with the strong emotion aroused by this reference to the father of his beloved. He had remembered immediately what he knew of the years her family had spent in Paris. His beloved had grown up in the brilliance of the City of Light. He had been seized by a feeling of renewed respect and admiration for his father along with redoubled affection. He had considered his father's acquaintance with the grandfather of his beloved to be a



magical charm linking him, however distantly, to the home from which his inspiration flowed and to the source of everything splendid. Shortly thereafter his mother had brought him the good news that his father had agreed to double his allowance. Since that day Kamal had not been cursed by his father again, either because he had done nothing to merit it or because his father had decided to spare him further insults.

Kamal stood beside his mother on the balcony, which was enclosed with latticework. They were watching al-Sayyid Ahmad walk along the street and respond with dignity and grace to the greetings of Uncle Hasanayn the barber, al-Hajj Darwish, who sold beans, al-Fuli the milkman, Bayumi the drinks vendor, and Abu Sari' who sold seeds and other snacks.

When Kamal returned to his room, he found Yasin standing in front of the mirror, grooming himself patiently and carefully. The boy sat on a sofa between the two beds and studied his older brother's body, which was tall and full, and his plump, ruddy face with its enigmatic smile. He harbored sincere fraternal affection for Yasin, although when he scrutinized his brother visually or mentally he was never able to overcome the sense of being in the presence of a handsome domestic animal. Although Yasin had been the first person to make his ears resound with the harmonies of poetry and the effusions of stories, Kamal, who now thought that love was the essence of life and the spirit, would wonder whether it was possible to imagine Yasin in love. The response would be a laugh, whether voiced or internal. Yes, what relationship could there be between love and this full belly? What could this beefy body know of love? What love was there in this sensual, mocking look? He could not help feeling disdain, softened by love and affection. There were times, though, when he admired or even envied Yasin, especially when his love was troubled by a spasm of pain.

Yasin, who had once personified culture for him, now seemed almost totally lacking in it. In the old days Kamal had considered him a scholar with magical powers over the arts of poetry and storytelling. What little knowledge Yasin had was based on superficial reading confined to the coffee hour, or a portion of it, as he went back and forth, without subjecting himself to effort and strain, between *al-Hamasa*, which was a medieval anthology of poetry, and some story or other, before he rushed off to Ahmad Abduh's coffeehouse. His life lacked the radiance of love and any yearnings for genuine knowledge. Yet Kamal's fraternal affection for his brother was in no way diminished by such realizations.

Fahmy had not been like that. He was Kamal's ideal, both romantically and intellectually, but eventually Kamal's aspirations had reached beyond Fahmy's. He was afflicted by a compelling doubt that a girl like Maryam could inspire genuine love of the sort illuminating his own soul. He was also skeptical that the legal training his late brother had chosen was really equivalent to the humanities he was so eager to study.

Kamal uninhibitedly considered those around him with an attentive and critical eye but stopped short when it came to his father. The man appeared to him to be above any criticism, a formidable figure mounted on a throne.

"You're like a bridegroom today. We're going to celebrate your academic achievements. Isn't that so? If you weren't so skinny, I could find nothing to criticize."

Smiling, Kamal replied, "I'm content to be thin."

Yasin cast a last glance at himself in the mirror. Then he placed the fez on his head and carefully tilted it to the right, so it almost touched his eyebrow. He belched and commented, "You're a big donkey with a baccalaureate. Relax and take time to enjoy your food. This is your vacation. How can you feel tempted to read twice as much during your school holiday as you do during the academic year? My God, I'm not guilty of slenderness or of association with it." As He left the room with his ivory fly whisk in his hand, he added, "Don't forget to pick out a good story for me. Something easy like 'Pardaillan' or 'Fausta' by Michel Zévaco. Okay? In the old days you'd beg me for a chapter from a novel. Now I'm asking you to provide me with stories."

Kamal rejoiced at being left to his own devices. He rose, muttering to himself, "How can I put on weight when my heart never slumbers?"

He did not like to pray except when he was alone. Prayer for him was a sacred struggle in which heart, intellect, and spirit all participated. It was the battle of a person who would spare no effort to achieve a clear conscience, even if he had to chastise himself time and again for a minor slip or a thought. His supplications after the prescribed prayer ritual were devoted entirely to his beloved.

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ABD AL-MUNI'M: "The courtyard's bigger than the roof. We've got to take the cover off the well to see what's in it."

Na'ima: "You'll make Mama, Auntie, and Grandma angry."

Uthman: "No one will see us."

Ahmad: "The well's disgusting. Anyone who looks in it will die."

Abd al-Muni'm: "We'll get the cover off, but look at it from a distance." Then he continued in a low voice, "Come on. Let's go."

Blocking the door to the stairway, Umm Hanafi protested, "I don't have any strength left to keep going up and down. You said, 'Let's go up on the roof,' so we did. You said, 'Let's go down to the courtyard,' and we did. 'Let's go up to the roof.' So we came up another time. What do you want with the courtyard? . . . The air's hot down there. Up here we have a breeze, and soon the sun will set."

Na'ima: "They're going to take the cover off the well to look in it."

Umm Hanafi: "I'll call Mrs. Khadija and Mrs. Aisha."

Abd al-Muni'm: "Na'ima's a liar. We won't raise the lid. We won't go anywhere near it. We'll play the courtyard a little and then come back. You stay here till we return."

Umm Hanafi: "Stay here! . . . I have to follow your every step, may God guide you. There's no place in the whole house more beautiful than the roof terrace. Look at this garden!"

Muhammad: "Lie down so I can ride on you."

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Umm Hanafi: "There's been enough riding. Pick some other game, by God. God . . . look at the jasmine and the hyacinth vines. Look at the pigeons."

Uthman: "You're as ugly as a water buffalo, and you stink."

Umm Hanafi: "May God forgive you. I've gotten sweaty chasing after you."

Uthman: "Let us see the well, if only for a moment."

Umm Hanafi: "The well is full of jinn. That's why we closed it."

Abd al-Muni'm: "You're a liar. Mama and Auntie didn't say that."

Umm Hanafi: "I'm the one who's right, me and the lady of the house. We've seen them with our own eyes. We waited until they entered it. Then we threw a wooden cover over the opening of the well and weighted it down with stones. Don't talk about the well. Repeat with me: 'In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful.'"

Muhammad: "Lie down so I can ride on you."

Umm Hanafi: "Look at the hyacinth beans and the jasmine! Don't you wish you had something like that? All you've got on your roof are chickens and the two sheep you're fattening up for the Feast of the Sacrifice."

Ahmad: "Baa . . . baa . . . baa."

Abd al-Muni'm: "Fetch a ladder so we can climb up it."

Umm Hanafi: "May God preserve us. The boy takes after his uncle. Play on the ground, not in the sky."

Ridwan: "At our house we have pots of carnations and of red and white roses on the balcony and in the men's reception room."

Uthman: "We have two sheep and some chickens."

Ahmad: "Baa . . . baa . . . baa."

Abd al-Muni'm: "I'm going to religious kindergarten. What about all of you?"

Ridwan: "I've memorized 'Praise to God . . .'"

Abd al-Muni'm: "Praise to God for lamps and meatballs."

Ridwan: "For shame! You're a heathen."

Abd al-Muni'm: "That's what the teacher's assistant chants when he's walking in the street."

Na'ima: "We've told you a thousand times not to repeat it."

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Turning to Ridwan, Abd al-Muni'm asked, "Why don't you live with Uncle Yasin, your father?"

Ridwan: "I'm with Mama."

Ahmad: "Where's Mama?"

Ridwan: "With my other grandfather."

Uthman: "Where's your other grandfather?"

Ridwan: "In al-Gamaliya . . . in a big house with a special reception room for men only."

Abd al-Muni'm: "Why does your mother live in one house and your father in another?"

Ridwan: "Mama's with my grandfather there and Papa's with my grandfather here."

Uthman: "Why aren't they in one house like my papa and mama?"

Ridwan: "Fate and destiny. That's what my other grandmother says."

Umm Hanafi: "You've pestered him until he's confessed. There's no power or might save God's. Have mercy on him and go play."

Ahmad: "The water buffalo knows how to talk."

Muhammad: "Get down so I can ride on you."

Ridwan: "Look at the sparrow on the hyacinth vine."

Abd al-Muni'm: "Fetch a ladder so I can grab it."

Ahmad: "Don't raise your voice. It's looking at us and hears every word you say."

Na'ima: "How beautiful she is! I know her! She's the sparrow I saw yesterday on our clothesline."

Ahmad: "The other one was on Sugar Street. How could it find its way to my grandfather's house?"

Abd al-Muni'm: "You donkey. The sparrow can fly here from Sugar Street and return before nightfall."

Uthman: "Her family is there, but she has relatives here."

Muhammad: "Get down so I can ride you. Otherwise I'll cry till Mama hears me."

Na'ima: "Why don't we play hopscotch?"

Abd al-Muni'm: "No, let's have a race."

Umm Hanafi: "Without any quarreling between the winner and the loser."

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Abd al-Muni'm: "Shut up, water buffalo."

Uthman: "Moo . . . moo."

Ahmad: "Baa . . . baa."

Muhammad: "I'll ride in this race. Get down so I can ride you."

Abd al-Muni'm: "One, two, three . . ."

Al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad welcomed the guests, for whom he had set aside the whole first part of the day. He took his place in the center at the banquet, surrounded by Ibrahim Shawkat, Khali Shawkat, Yasin, and Kamal. After the meal, he invited the two guests to his bedroom, where they conversed in an atmosphere of affection and friendship, marked by a certain reserve on the host's part and a special politeness on the part of his sons-in-law, stemming from the etiquette the father observed in his relations with his family, even those who did not reside with him, despite the fact that al-Sayyid Ahmad and Ibrahim Shawkat, Khadija's spouse, were of nearly the same age.

The children were invited to their grandfather's room to kiss his hand and receive precious gifts of chocolate and Turkish delight. They presented themselves in order of seniority: Aisha's daughter Na'ima first, then Yasin's son Ridwan, followed by Khadija's son Abd al-Muni'm, Aisha's son Uthman, Khadija's son Ahmad, and Aisha's son Muhammad. Al-Sayyid Ahmad observed strict impartiality in distributing affection and smiles to his grandchildren but took advantage of the absence of observers, except for Ibrahim and Khalil, to relax his customary reserve. He shook the little hands warmly, pinched their rosy cheeks affectionately, and kissed their brows, while teasing this one and joking with that one. He was always careful not to show favoritism, even with Ridwan, whom he loved best.

When alone with one of them he would examine the child with passionate interest, motivated by paternal feelings and additional ones like curiosity. He took great pleasure in tracing the features of grandparents and parents in the boisterous new generation, who had scarcely learned to respect him, let alone fear him. He was captivated by the beauty of Na'ima, who with her golden hair and blue eyes surpassed even her mother's good looks. She graced the family with her beautiful features, some inherited from her mother and others from the Shawkat family. Her brothers Uthman and Muhammad were also handsome but looked more like their father, Khalil Shawkat. They clearly had his large, protruding eyes with the calm, languid look.

By way of contrast, Khadija's sons Abd al-Muni'm and Ahmad had their mother's and maternal grandmother's beautiful small eyes, although they shared the Shawkat complexion. Their noses were exceptionally similar to their mother's or, to be more precise, their maternal grandfather's.

Ridwan could not help but be handsome. His eyes were identical to his father's and therefore like the black, kohl-enhanced ones of Haniya, Yasin's mother. He had the ivory complexion of his mother's family, the Iffats, and his father's straight nose. Indeed, a captivating grace shone in his face.

It had been a long time since al-Sayyid Ahmad's children had been able to cling to him the way his grandchildren did now, without fear on their part or reserve on his. Oh, what days they had been! Wh

memories! Yasin, Khadija . . . and Fahmy, then Aisha and Kamal. He had tickled every one of them under the arms and carried each on his shoulders. Would they remember that? He himself had almost forgotten.

Na'ima, her bright smile notwithstanding, seemed shy and polite. Ahmad would not stop asking for more chocolates and Turkish delight. Uthman stood waiting impatiently for the response to Ahmad's request. Muhammad rushed to the gold watch and the diamond ring inside the fez and grabbed hold of them. Khalil Shawkat had to use force to pry them from his grip. Al-Sayyid Ahmad spent a few moments beset by confusion and anxiety, not knowing what to do, for he was surrounded and even under attack from every side by his beloved grandchildren.

Shortly before the afternoon prayer, the patriarch left the house for his store. His departure allowed the sitting room, where the remaining members of the family were gathered, to enjoy total freedom. It had inherited the role of the abandoned one downstairs and was furnished with the same mat, sofas, and large ceiling lantern. It had become the lounge and coffeehouse for those of the family still living in the old house. No matter how crowded, it had remained tranquil all day long. Now that the only trace of their father was the fragrance of his cologne, it could breathe freely. Their talk grew louder and so did their laughter. Everyone became more animated. The coffee hour once more seemed just like the old days. Amina was sitting cross-legged on a sofa by the coffee utensils. On another couch facing her sat Khadija and Aisha. On a third to the side, Yasin and Kamal were ensconced. Once al-Sayyid Ahmad had left, Ibrahim and Khalil Shawkat joined the party. Ibrahim took a place to the right of their mother-in-law and Khalil one to her left.

Ibrahim had hardly settled there when he addressed Amina affectionately: "God bless the hands that prepared such appetizing and delicious food for us." Then he glanced around the assembly with his languid, protruding eyes as though delivering an oration and continued: "Those casseroles . . . what casseroles! They're marvelous in this house. It's not the ingredients, no matter how delicious and excellent, it's the way they're allowed to cook down, more than anything else. It's an art. It's a miracle. Find me another casserole as delicious as those we had today."

Khadija followed his comments attentively. She was torn between applauding his recognition of her mother's skill and arguing against him, because he was ignoring hers. When he paused to allow his listeners an opportunity to agree with him, she could not restrain herself from saying, "No one would contest that verdict. No one needs to testify on its behalf. But I remember and think it worth consideration that you've filled your belly in your own home repeatedly with casseroles no less skillfully prepared than those we ate today."

Aisha, Yasin, and Kamal all smiled knowingly. Their mother was clearly attempting to overcome her embarrassment and say something that would express her thanks to Ibrahim without offending Khadija. But Khalil Shawkat burst out: "Khadija's right. Her casseroles are a blessing to all of us. You better not forget that, brother."

Ibrahim looked back and forth between his wife and his mother-in-law, smiling apologetically. Then he said, "God forbid that I should fail to acknowledge my indebtedness to my wife, but I was discussing the senior chef." Then he laughed and said, "In any case I was praising the merits of your mother, not mine."

He waited until the laughter provoked by his last remark died down. Then turning toward his

mother-in-law, he continued lauding her: "Let's return to the casseroles, although why should we confine our remarks to them? In fact all the other dishes were just as delicious and sumptuous. Take, for example, the stuffed potatoes, the mallow greens, the fried rice with giblets, and the assorted stuffed vegetables. God Almighty, what chickens! How meaty! Tell me, what do you feed them?"

Khadija answered sarcastically, "Casseroles! That's what!"

"I'll have to do penance for a long time and give credit where it is due, but God is forgiving and compassionate. In any case, let's pray that God grants us many more days of celebration. Congratulations on your baccalaureate, Kamal. God willing, you'll have the same good success with your university degree."

Blushing with embarrassment and happiness, Amina said gratefully, "May our Lord give you reason to celebrate for Abd al-Muni'm and Ahmad, for Mr. Khalil to rejoice for Na'ima, Uthman, and Muhammad"--then turning to Yasin--"and for Yasin to rejoice for Ridwan."

Kamal was glancing stealthily at Ibrahim and Khalil. On his lips he had the fixed smile with which he normally concealed his lack of interest in a conversation he did not find to his taste, whenever he felt he ought to participate, if only by paying attention.

The man was talking about food as though still at the table, intoxicated by greed. Food, food, food . . . why did it deserve all this attention? These two strange men did not appear to have changed with time, as though beyond its reach. Ibrahim today was the same as he had been. He was almost fifty, but the only signs of age were the scarcely noticeable wrinkles under his eyes and at the corners of his mouth or his sedate, serious air, which did not give him the appearance of dignity so much as of lethargy. Not a single hair of his head or of his twisted mustache had gone gray. His full body was still powerful, firm, and free of flab. The resemblance between the two brothers in appearance, state of health, and their languid gaze was great enough to be comical or a subject for mockery. There were only inconsequential differences, like the cut of their hair. Khalil's was long and smooth while Ibrahim's was short. They were both wearing white silk suits, and each had removed his jacket to reveal a silk shirt with gold cuff links gleaming through the buttonholes. Their elite status was obvious from their appearance, but nothing else.

In the course of the seven years during which their two families had been joined by marriage, Kamal had been alone with one or the other of the brothers for periods of time but had never had a conversation of any substance with either of them. But what reason was there for criticism? If they had not been like that, would there have been this successful harmony between them and his two sisters? Fortunately scorn was not incompatible with affection, benevolence, and fondness.

Oh . . . it seemed that the conversation about the casseroles had not ended yet. Here was Mr. Khalil Shawkat preparing to have his say: "My brother Ibrahim did not exceed the truth in what he said. May we never be deprived of those hands. The food was certainly worth boasting about."

Amina secretly loved praise and had suffered bitterly because she was so often deprived of it. She was conscious of her tireless exertions, lovingly and voluntarily expended in the service of her household and family. She had often longed to hear a kind word from her husband, but he was not accustomed to bestowing praise on her. If he did, it was brief and limited to a few exceptional occurrences scarcely worth mentioning. With Ibrahim and Khalil on either side of her, she found herself in a pleasant and

unusual situation. It truly delighted her but also embarrassed her so much that she felt uncomfortable. To hide her feelings she said, "Don't exaggerate, Mr. Khalil. You have a mother whose cooking would make anyone familiar with it steer clear of all other food."

While Khalil proceeded to reiterate his praise, Ibrahim involuntarily turned his eyes toward Khadija, where they met hers. She was staring at him as though she had expected him to look her way and was prepared for it. He smiled victoriously and told his mother-in-law, "Some people would not concede that to you."

Yasin understood this allusion and laughed out loud. The gathering was quickly engulfed in laughter. Even Amina smiled broadly as her torso shook with suppressed giggles. She concealed her mirth by bowing her head as though to look at her lap. Khadija was the only one whose face remained rigid. She waited until the storm calmed down and then said defiantly, "Our disagreement was not about food and how to cook it. It concerned my right to look after my household myself. And I'm not to be blamed for that."

Those present were reminded of the ancient battle that had flared up during the first year of Khadija's marriage. It had pitted her against her mother-in-law and concerned the kitchen. The issue had been whether there would be a single kitchen for the entire household under the supervision of the Widow Shawkat or whether Khadija would have her own kitchen as she wanted. It had been a serious quarrel threatening the unity of the Shawkat family. News of it had reached her parents' home on Palace Walk, so that everyone knew about it, except al-Sayyid Ahmad. No one dared tell him about it or any of the other disputes that broke out afterwards between the old lady and her daughter-in-law. Khadija had soon realized that she would need to rely on herself alone in the struggle. Her husband was, as she put it, "a slugabed," who was neither for her nor against her. Whenever she prodded him to stand up for her rights, he would entreat her almost playfully, "Lady, spare me the headache." Although he did not come to her defense, he did not silence her either. So she had ventured alone onto the field of battle to oppose the venerable old lady with unexpected daring and stubbornness, which did not disappoint her even in those delicate circumstances.

The old lady had been amazed by the audacity of this girl at whose birth she had assisted. Soon the battle had been joined, and anger had flared up. She had proceeded to remind the girl that had it not been for her own generous interest, Khadija could never have hoped in her wildest dreams to win a husband from the Shawkat family. Although in open rebellion, the daughter-in-law had muzzled her rage and insisted on obtaining what she considered her right, without utilizing her notoriously sharp tongue, for she was restrained by respect for the old lady and by fear that her mother-in-law would complain to al-Sayyid Ahmad.

Her cunning had prompted her to incite Aisha to rebel, but she had found that her lazy sister was cowardly and unwilling to become involved, not from love for their mother-in-law but because she preferred the calm and peace she enjoyed to her heart's content under the tyrannical supervision the old lady imposed on everyone. Khadija had poured out her anger on her sister and accused her of being weak and lazy. Galvanized by her own stubbornness, Khadija had continued her crusade relentlessly and persistently, until the older woman had gotten fed up and grudgingly granted her "gypsy" daughter-in-law an independent kitchen, telling her elder son, "So much for you. You're a weak man, powerless to discipline your wife. You're getting your just reward, which is to be deprived of my cooking forever."



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