Every era has a voice.

The night, silence, and longing take shares of you.

They surround and overcome you.

What’s going on with you and this singing of yours, Maryam? Why don’t you let on?

You wander the alleys trying to flee your own oppressive days. With an exhausted spirit you ask yourself, ‘Are you a wicked woman, or are these just wicked times? Or maybe you’re just betting on a losing horse for the thousandth time?’

You set out alone with heavy steps as the hours pound down upon your head—alone with the muddy sidewalks, the shops, the wash lines and dark balconies. Passing between the juice shop and the corner store you reached the old house overlooking a café. You flung yourself
down on the first chair that you saw, cast off your shoes, and stretched your legs out over the edge of the table.

Your mother always used to pride herself on repeating popular sayings. The veins in her neck bulged as she exclaimed, “By God it’s true!” You and the other kids would race around her until your endless prattle and mess provoked her into wielding her beaded slipper and chasing you all over the house. She was still uttering proverbs at the end, when strands of white hair had crept across her head, and the diabetes had stolen into her beautiful eyes, leaving its own black imprint. She used to say, “Listen girl, keep close what I say as though it was an earring on your ear. Life is give and take. If you help someone one day, they may help you out the next.”

You’ve betted all your life, Maryam, and there is no escape left for you—except for this house, your grandmother’s house.

Barefoot, you got up and began to move amidst the old furniture, and your grandmother’s spirit descended to accompany you. You stopped in front of her faded portrait and scrutinized her eyes. Suddenly a ray of light shone out from the picture. You walked past it and arrived at the bedroom where your grandmother’s chest stood in the corner, alone and silent.

You approached the chest. Opening it slowly, the ray vanished, and dust covered your face. You rummaged through its contents and unfolded between your hands a dress edged with Najafi-style embroidery. Dusting it off, you realized it was the dress your grandmother wore on her wedding night. You kept this all these years, Grandmother, despite its dingy color, and the holes that moths left in the fabric. And what is this? Grandfather’s tarboush...but where is its lustrous tassel?

Grandmother, I remember that you used to squat on the kilim in the hall, with the alcohol burner and the little coffee cups in front of you, and a container of snuff and glass jars containing
sugar, milk and ground cloves by your side. We used talk and laugh together, and I revealed to you my first pangs of love for the neighbor boy. I told you about our secret rendezvous in the courtyard and on the rooftop terraces. You turned over your coffee cup and said, “It’s just child’s play, you’ll forget all about him when you’re older.”

An absent minded expression had stolen over your face that day, Grandmother, as you told the story of your own first love. You were eleven years old and he was Hassan, your paternal cousin whom you had known all your life. You grew up together in the countryside, climbing trees and catching frogs and chasing gleefully through the fields.

You considered him the handsomest boy in the village. His mother always used to fear that he would be struck by the evil eye. But you, Grandmother, used to worry about the other girls and the evening walks along the bank of the canal, since an evil Nile nymph had taken up residence in the canal waters. She was a creature of enticing beauty, half human, and half jinni. If she took a liking to one of the youths she would snatch him on the spot and carry him off to her kingdom in the depths. As soon as she got him there, a wedding ceremony bound him to her, and no one would find so much as a trace of him. Nothing would remain of him at all, but over the course of time, his tale would be told.

What was destined came to pass one day, when the Nile Nymph saw Hassan swimming in the canal, naked as the day he was born. She praised God for his handsome form exclaiming, “Glory to God the Creator, this is a gift from heaven!” She let out a cry that frightened you, Grandmother, as you carried the clothes up the bank. Still just a young girl, you called, terrified, for your cousin. Upon hearing your screams, Hassan came charging out of the water, and the two of you raced, breathless, into the safety of the trees on the bank.
The moon contracted, the crows cawed, and a dark cloud descended between Hassan and the water. The Nymph struck her cheeks, rent her gown and howled over Hassan’s escape. But she never forgot him. As for his mother, she wandered the streets with the little ones trailing behind, banging pot tops and metal cups to ward off evil. Then she placed a piece of bread, a pair of scissors and an amulet under his pillow.
The family moved to the city and as they read the *Fatiha*\(^1\), they promised you and Hassan to each other, Grandmother. But the Nymph’s great passion did not subside, and she announced her feelings across the sky and throughout the city’s alleys and quarters. She pledged a pearl from her eye to the sun and a cherry from her breast to the moon hoping to win their cooperation in her search for Hassan.

And so it happened one evening at sunset, Grandmother. You were walking with your cousin in the long street leading to the river when you came upon a woman full of feminine charm. In that moment when the sun and moon met, the sky’s eye flashed and Hassan had disappeared into the bosom of the river with the Nile Nymph.

You dusted off your grandmother’s kohl jar, Maryam—that ancient silver kohl jar whose cap was a hand engraved in the Islamic style. You used to watch your grandmother as she applied a line of kohl, drawing a fine black line along the edge of her eye. You had copied her, and even though your eyes began to water, you persevered in the attempt. You lifted the top of the kohl jar cautiously. An apparition emerged from the jar and presented itself to you saying, “Your wish is my command!”

You backed up, frightened, scrutinizing it. It was the apparition of your grandmother. Immediately you uttered formulas requesting the safety for which man and jinn have always

\(^1\) The opening chapter of the Qur’an, which is customarily read at the signing of a wedding contract.
been willing to exchange the treasures of the world. The apparition disappeared as though it had never been.

You returned to the box and lifted the edge of the shawl that your grandmother had knitted while you crouched at her feet holding the ball of yarn. Sometimes the ball would slip from your hands, and you would crawl after it, under the chairs, the table, and the silver cabinet. That cabinet was so beautiful, you used to stand in front of it for hours, gazing at its shiny glass, the small pieces of china painted with flowers and girls and boys, the teapot with the small neck, gleaming silver spoons and coffee and tea cups and fine utensils of different sizes.

Your grandmother inherited the silver cabinet from her mother, who had in turn inherited it from her own grandmother. And thus time continued to wait, resolutely, for your own long delayed wedding, Maryam. Ahhh, but when will that be? Only a few folks are still betting that you will settle down.

You sat between silence and longing. The winter night grew old and the nagging pain in your heart wouldn’t cease. Leaning your head against the back of your chair, you gulped down the stinging smoke from your cigarette and then slipped on your shoes and walked along the passageway leading to the bedroom. You closed the chest and stretched out on your grandmother’s brass bed. Melancholy lyrics came to mind… ‘I love you and I wish, if I were to forget you, I would forget my soul along with you’.²

You tossed and turned restlessly on the bed and were just about to start singing Abdel Halim’s song…but no, Grandmother, the thing with the neighbor boy Saeed was never just a matter of child’s play.

² Lines from Abdel Halim Hafez’s song “Ahwak” (I love you).
Your heart fled back to the old quarter, where you and Saeed used to live in the same building. It was an old, classically-styled building with high ceilings, spacious balconies and delicate Romanesque molding on the walls.

Umm Safeer, the Copt, was a tall woman whose kind, beautiful eyes set off her bronze complexion. Her husband was a slight man with receding hair and thick eyeglasses. He worked in a pharmacy located on the corner, and dispensed medical advice and the like to all the other residents of the building. Together they had two daughters, Buthayna, and Ahlam, and a son named Safeer. On the holidays you would always find Umm Safeer proudly dressed, her face elegantly made-up. She would send a tray of hot, spicy bean patties to your mother, and your mother would always dress you up and send you back to her with a tray of “balilat al-‘ashura”.

Then there was Umm Meena the Armenian, who had a dazzling white complexion and sea-blue eyes. Her son was one year older than you, and her daughter Theresa was two years your junior. Both were pale like their mother. Their father, Abu Meena, was a businessman whose motorcycle was the object of frequent fights, as the neighborhood boys vied to steal a ride on it. Abu Meena would hurl threats at them from his balcony, while his wife tossed her dirty washing water onto their heads.

Another neighbor, Umm Saeed, was a cheerful woman with a tawny face. She had two sons, Saeed and Ahmed. Saeed was your childhood friend, Maryam, your confidant in all your little secrets. You knew his whistle when it came from the courtyard of the building, and you

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3 A porridge dish usually served on the 10th of Muharram to commemorate the death of Hussayn at Karbala. Hussayn was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (626-680).
would hurry down to him to resume your gleeful play. The two of you used to carry on, talking, squabbling, then making up again. You would go to school together, and return home along the same street, buying hot, sweet potatoes and doum fruits. You used to throw your school bags onto the pavement and play in the street until weariness overcame you, and you became aware of the time you had stolen out of those innocent days. You slung on your bags, and raced off, betting on who would reach home first. Then, after slinking away to the roof, you sat and exchanged secrets. There was nothing between you but the transistor radio and your joy, as you hummed along to the songs of Abdel Halim and Nagat.\(^4\) Sometimes the two of you would make colored paper kites and you would launch them off—up…up…up they went—outstripping the neighbor kids’ kites. Your hearts soared with them, as though they were flying across the sky behind the migrating birds at the hour of sunset.

Umm Rachel was the extremely heavy widow who lived on the ground floor. Her late husband Zaki had been a well-known bag merchant in the neighborhood, and she inherited both his money and his cleverness. She was also a seamstress, and the sound of her machine could be heard throughout the building, day and night, as she stitched all types of clothes; for summer and winter, for feasts and for holidays. Her daughter Rachel was an introverted child, afraid of

\(^4\) Salem refers here to the songs of Abdel Halim Hafez (1929-77) and Nagat al-Sagheera or al-Sughayyera (b. 1939). Hafez became famous for his patriotic songs in the 1950s and 60s and crowds again sang these songs during the Egyptian revolution of 2011. His romantic songs also became iconic in Egyptian culture. Sagheera was also famous for romantic songs. (“Remembering Abdel Halim Hafez, the voice of revolution”, al-Masry al-youm Online, June 21, 2011, accessed December 1, 2011).
playing with the other children. She contented herself by helping with the housework and sewing until she became just as skillful as her mother. Despite the fact that she was Jewish, Umm Rachel used to say that she was proud of being Egyptian and she repeated over and over that she would always live in Egypt, and be buried in its soil.

Every Friday, you would look down from the back window, Maryam, as you waited for Saeed’s whistle. The moment you heard it, you would charge down the stairs, your feet hardly able to restrain themselves. Then he would count up all of the few piasters that you had between you and you would take off like two little birds, heading for the park with the swings, the carousel, the pianola and the ‘box of the world’. Together you would jump onto one swing, Saeed pumping his legs with joy and vigor and you pumped along with him, the two of you clinging with your slender hands to the chain. Higher…higher! You clung together in the air, screaming with fear-tinged elation. Whirling around you was the carousel–and with it the sky, the earth, and the people.

You heard the call…Come! Come see the ‘box of the world’, a world of wonders in a box of wonders! You raced each other as you followed the call, and perched upon a small bench behind a large wooden box with a black cover. On one side was a metal crank turned by the contraption’s operator, a man with dyed hair, colored pants and a purple shirt. You stuck your heads into the box and a black curtain descended over your heads. Your eyes widened as they gazed at the pictures that flashed before them, pictures of the prince and princess, the evil magician and the beautiful woman, the dwarves and the man with the scepter, Abu Zayd and
As the man turned the crank, the pictures whirled by. “Click, Clack” went the crank…

*Here is the gallant prince riding his horse and wielding his sword and shouting with determination in his voice: “Come out of your houses, I am Abu Zayd al-Hilali, hero of heroes, prince of princes. I come in disguise but my sword is drawn. I have traversed the cities and the countryside on my horse, pounced on the necks of the enemies, and I have given freedom to the oppressed.”*

Click, clack... “And my goodness, here is ‘The Lady of Goodness and Beauty’ running happily through the fields. The sun sings to her and the birds guard her, but... poor thing... here comes Umm al-Dawahi creeping along, disguised as a peddler. She tempts the Lady with an apple and then the Lady falls unconscious. And here is the handsome prince – see him? He beheld her beauty and called upon God the Merciful, and as soon as he came near her, the magic curse was undone and her spirit returned to her. She lived with her Prince happily ever after and they had many sons and daughters.

Click, clack. “And here is the ugly daughter of the Sultan. No one but a young Arab lad was brave enough to lay eyes upon her as she passed with her retinue. From that day on she was in love with him but when he refused to return her affections, she cast an evil spell upon him. In the end, the Sultan’s daughter was defeated by a trick and she fled, and no one knew what became of her.”

Your heads were pressed together, you and Saeed, under the black cover of the ‘Box of the World’, gazing at the pictures and listening carefully to the stories until the box went

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5 Heroes of medieval Arabic oral literature who were both known for their justice and efforts to help the poor.
completely dark and the crank stopped turning. Then you ran off to another spot in the festival grounds, each of you hiding a little box of memories deep within your little soul.

Tee tara tee tara...

After filling your heads with stories, you made your way towards the sound of the pianola…

Tee tara tee...

Clapping and dancing to the melodies, you whirled around the pianola player. He struck an odd figure with his powdered face and cap; fitted out with loose clothes and a walking stick. He turned the pianola crank, and hummed and danced to the tunes, enjoying himself along with the children spinning around him.

When the music finished, you and Saeed returned to your meandering, hands interlocked. You stopped in front of a target shooting game. Small firecrackers dangled from strings and everyone—young and old—tried his luck. The one who made the target got a toy, a doll, a stuffed bear, a wooden flute, a ball or perhaps a toy rabbit or horse.

You grasped your rifle, Maryam. You were aiming for the doll with the red dress, white shoes and orange ribbon, and Saeed was aiming for the toy bear. You put your hand on the trigger and took aim—but the shots missed the mark, flying off into the air. You threw yourself onto the ground in anger, your eyes choked with tears. Said grasped the rifle and hit one of the crackers. Jumping around joyfully, he requested the doll instead of the bear and gave it to you, Maryam. You smiled, ready to succeed this time. You grasped the rifle firmly and confidently, took aim and hit the mark, and presented the bear to Saeed.

As you continued walking, you called out to the man selling fortunes, and bought pieces of candy wrapped in cellophane paper. You ran to the corner of the sidewalk, put the bear and
doll aside and unfolded the papers. Words appeared in small, delicate letters on Saeed’s fortune, and he read, “Your love is fire.” He laughed. You opened your fortune, Maryam, to find the lyric: “Me, my suffering, and your love.” Together you giggled and ate the candies and tucked your fortunes into your pockets.

You stopped tossing and turning on the bed, Maryam, got up and headed for the bathroom. Slipping off your clothes, you inched your body into the shower. As you worked the drops of water into your steaming skin, you suddenly felt like singing one of those old songs by Abdel Halim.

“Be true to me once
Turn away from me another time
But don’t ever forget me
Be true to me once...”

You relaxed a little bit after showering, Maryam, and then stretched out on the bed to enjoy a few moments of tranquility.

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6 The title of well-known song by Mohammad Abdel Wahhab (1907-1991) in which the singer describes the suffering involved in love. Love in Arabic songs is often associated with suffering (for both men and women).
He called out to you from the heart of the square. Turning around, you found yourself facing a tall, darkly-handsome youth, whose honey-colored eyes gleamed with intensity.

“Saeed!”

Recovering from your surprise, you shook hands and crossed the street, dodging the speeding cars as you headed for the nearest sidewalk. Hands interlinked, it was as if the years had never separated you, as though that fateful day had never occurred.

Your father had suddenly announced his decision to move the family to a distant house in the suburbs of the city, near his new job. On moving day you had clung to the railing of the stairs, while Saeed stood with his back against the wall. When the moving van arrived, he hid in the courtyard of the building, alone, his eyes choked with tears.

You walked to a nearby park and sat down under a luxuriant green tree, barely containing your questions. “Do you still live in the old neighborhood?”

He stretched his body out on the grass. “Where else would we go?”

You raised your head to the sky and drew a deep breath. “Ahhh...it’s a small world.”

He smiled, “And beautiful just like your eyes.”

As you both laughed heartily, the dimples showed in your cheeks, Maryam. Saeed stood up and brushed the grass off his clothes. “Let’s go!”

He stretched out his hand to help you up.

You asked, “Where are we going?”

“Home...mother will be so happy to see you!”

You welcomed this idea, and walked proudly through the streets hand in hand with Saeed.
Ahhh…Maryam, every place has its distinctive scent, and the old quarter has a smell of familiarity and love. But a strange feeling overcame you as you got nearer and you thought you must be lost. You said, “Are you sure this is our old street?”

“Yes.”

“But…?”

Unfamiliar sights struck your eyes. Gone were the verdant trees that used to stretch across the street, providing an umbrella of shade. A multi-level shopping center had been erected in the place where the old corner store and small wares shop used to stand. More than one apartment building stood in the place of the old low-standing houses and even the cinema had vanished, a tourist café having sprouted up in its place.

Your heart is no longer warmed by sight of the old houses and the tall, shady trees. Gone are the cinema, the swings, the carousel, the ‘box of the world’ and even the fragrance of fresh flowers. As the two of you approached the house, a stooped old man came into view, but the two trees that used to stand on either side of his doorway had disappeared.

Silenced reigned over the building’s foyer. Where was the clamor of the children in the courtyard, or the sound of Umm Rachel’s sewing machine or the unintelligible shouts of Umm Meena with that foreign accent of hers?

Saeed interrupted your wandering thoughts. “Be careful, there is a broken step here.”

You leaned on the banister watching out for the broken step. Ohhh…Umm Saeed no longer opens her door to anyone passing by as she always used to do—Umm Saeed, you were a peasant woman with a loving heart and a stalwart spirit that saw no need for stories or excuses, and when it came time for justice, there were no favorites.

You called out to her in the way that she always liked, “Auntie Umm Saeed!”
She appeared in front of you immediately, Maryam, her arms stretched out towards you. She drew you into a powerful and loving embrace. Eyes overflowing, she said:

“Come in my girl, a thousand welcomes! You’ve brought light to this house!”

Your eyes roamed around the place. The walls had been painted white instead of the old yellow. But where was the old Egyptian-style sofa in the entryway? In its place sat a gilded French parlor set. And the parlor itself was bigger, perhaps because a wall had been removed. Now a large picture with a black border dominated the room’s central wall—it was a picture of Abu Saeed.

You uttered, “The deceased will continue to live through you Auntie, may you continue to live and remember.”

She shook her head. “May your own life be long, my dear...my how time has passed!”

You replied, “Thanks, Auntie.”

The old lady winked her eye at her son Saeed and said, “Thanks to you my dear, and to Saeed and Ahmed”

You asked her, “By the way, where is Ahmed?”

“He has gone to live with his uncle in Saudi Arabia and is working there.”

You sighed, “I hope he returns home safely.”

“God willing...” She wrapped her black veil around her face. “I hope I have the joy of seeing them again before I die.”

“You will, Auntie.”

She smiled, “Our destiny is in God’s hands...we are guests on this earth.”

Umm Saeed gazed at you and her eyes twinkled. “My goodness, you’ve become a beautiful girl, Maryam. Tell me, where are your mother and father and your brother and sister?”
You shook your head, Maryam, “Mother passed away.”

She murmured, “There is no strength nor power except with God, we are from him and to him we all return.”

You continued, Maryam, “And my father is well, my sister and I see to his needs.”

Umm Saeed interrupted you, “And your brother, where is he?”

“Ahhh...he went to the Gulf ten years ago, he used to come back during his vacations, but lately he’s stopped coming.”

Umm Saeed shook her head. “It must be hard living so far away in a foreign land. But tell me—what I want to know is—how are you all doing living in that house of yours, so far away from here?”

“I’ll tell you, Auntie, people there aren’t close. Neighbors don’t know each other. Yes, the streets are clean, but they’re also empty—no one is around! To tell you the truth, I’m not comfortable there. I spend most of my time at my grandmother’s.”

The old lady raised her eyebrows, “By the way, how is she?” Is she still strong, does she still have that high voice? Does she still have her teeth? By God, she is a woman who knows the fundamentals, she would never visit the building without knocking on every apartment door to see how everyone was doing.”

Saeed stood up to take his leave. “Excuse me.”

His mother turned her face toward him. “Where are you going?”

He replied hurriedly, “I’ll be right back.” And he left quickly through the open door.

Umm Saeed grasped the back of her chair, trying to stand. “Excuse me my dear, I forgot to ask you, what would you like to drink?”

You stood up, Maryam, exclaiming, “Relax, Auntie, I know where the kitchen is.”
Your eyes sparkled, and you added, “How about if I make two coffees sweetened just the way you like it, on the condition that afterwards, you read the coffee grounds just like you used to!”

Umm Saeed smiled, revealing her missing front teeth. “My goodness, Maryam, you still remember?”

“How about if I make two coffees sweetened just the way you like it, on the condition that afterwards, you read the coffee grounds just like you used to!”

“Huh, what did you say?”

She shook her head. “As you wish, I’ll have coffee without sugar.”

“Without sugar?”

“My diabetes, dear, I hope you never suffer from it.”

“I am sorry to hear it, Auntie.”

“I’m managing.”

“I know…”

You turned to the kitchen and gathered together some coffee and utensils, singing softly,

“Love came to us, came to us

Love tossed us aside, discarded us.

Your eyelashes were as dark as the night...

We were enmeshed in love.”

After lighting the butagas stove, you swirled the coffee over a gentle fire. Silence thundered from behind the kitchen window, which gave out onto the central light shaft of the building. In the old days, the building always resounded with the racket of Umm Meena and her kids, Umm Safeer’s kids, and the whirring of Umm Rachel’s sewing machine.

You had noticed it immediately upon entering the building with Saeed: a large rusty padlock on Umm Rachel’s door. As you climbed the stairs, Umm Meena didn’t open her door in
welcome as she always used to do. It was her habit to run to the threshold of the building behind her children, and her son Meena would slide down the banister faster than the wind.

The coffee was ready, revealing a caramel-colored froth on its surface. You got the small cups ready and poured the coffee, being careful not to let your hands tremble, and you put the tray on the table in front of Umm Saeed. The two of you finished sipping the coffee and you watched Umm Saeed as she turned your coffee cup over onto its saucer. Moments of silence, tension and anticipation ensued between the time Umm Saeed turned over your cup and when she righted it again.

Cup in hand, she brought her face close to yours, “Look, my dear.”

You drew together, and your breaths mingled as you looked at the interlaced lines that streaked the inside of the cup. You listened carefully.

“There are open paths and closed paths. But before you is a stream, your path will be green—God willing—and a dark-skinned young man extends his hand to you, do you see him?”

You examined the interlocking swirls and lines, Maryam, for something that might suggest itself in the pattern.

The old lady finished, pointing with her index finger, “There is a package waiting for you, may God soon bring you a happy ending.”

Then she knitted her brows. “But...”

You held your breath for a moment, listening.

“There is a hole in your path.”

You exhaled, “A hole?”

Umm Saeed put the cup back in its place, replying,

“God is our guardian, my daughter.”
You glanced at Umm Saeed’s overturned cup and said,

“What about you, Auntie, aren’t you going to read your own fortune?”

She shook her head. “I have already known my fate for a long time and have accepted it, thank God.”

As your eyes roamed around the place, you noticed the absence of the old dining room table, the empty cabinets and the ebony hook upon which Abu Saeed always used to hang his tarbush and his mother of pearl inlaid cane. Abu Saeed had been a handsome man, despite being slightly lame in one leg—the result of a childhood fall from the top of a cart loaded with his sister’s bridal furniture.

As for Umm Saeed, she had been a strong woman in her youth, someone people always took into consideration. She had an unbounded jealousy for Abu Saeed, the source of which was really the blonde, blue-eyed Armenian woman, Umm Meena.

Umm Saeed looked down over the banister, following her husband’s morning descent to work, when she noticed Umm Meena standing in her doorway, her hair flowing down over a thin-strapped diaphanous gown.

The blood boiled in Umm Saeed’s veins and she shouted, “Have some modesty woman, instead of stopping and flirting with every man who passes by!”

Abu Saeed passed Umm Meena quickly, head down, his feet flying down the stairs in an attempt to escape the situation entirely.

The neighbors opened their doors and Umm Meena called out in her broken Arabic, “You mad at me because I beautiful?”
Umm Saeed tore down the stairs and before she could come to blows with Umm Meena, Umm Safeer got between them. Your mother yelled from up above as people began to gather, “Pray to your prophet, Umm Meena, if you have one, and keep yourself and your children out of trouble!”

After the situation had calmed down and all the doors had been closed on their inhabitants, your mother descended the stairs with you, Maryam, following behind. She rapped on the door and as soon as Umm Meena opened it, your mother said in an authoritative tone, “Get dressed and come with me.”

Umm Meena asked no questions, and in a matter of seconds she stood behind your mother, fully dressed. Then your mother knocked on Umm Saeed’s door, and when Umm Safeer opened it, Umm Saeed could be seen sitting in the middle of the parlour. Your mother entered, with Umm Meena behind her and you too, slim-bodied Maryam, passed through the gathering mass of bodies into the parlour.

Silence reigned.

Your mother interrupted it, “For God’s sake, settle down, Umm Saeed, it’s OK!”

Umm Saeed muttered, “You’re right, may God protect me from the devil’s temptation.”

The women sat watching each other.

Umm Safeer began the discussion, “What do you think, should we go and light candles to the Virgin Mary?”

Your mother replied, “Yes, by God, I have made a vow that I must fulfill... What do you think, Umm Saeed? Do you want to come with us?”

Umm Saeed nodded her head, “God willing.”

“And, you, Umm Meena?”
Umm Meena replied quickly in her thick accent, “'Course, my dear, everything by God’s will.”

Umm Saeed laughed and Umm Meena found an opportunity to make amends. “I really do love you, Umm Saeed.” She raised her hand to her head, adding, “I was out of my senses because of Abu Meena and the children!”

The women laughed, and Umm Meena stood up to kiss Umm Saeed on the head, but Umm Saeed shuddered and stood up saying, “God forgive me!”

The two women embraced.

All the women sat back down, more relaxed now, and Umm Rachel entered through the open door and looked around.

“Is everything OK, ladies?”

Umm Safeer nodded her head.

“Everything is fine, sister, come on in.”

Umm Saeed brought the alcohol burner, the brass pot and the little coffee cups. When the cups had been drained, she turned them over to read the fortunes etched in the grinds.

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You looked at your wristwatch and shifted your eyes between Umm Saeed and the door. When you caught the tap of footsteps on the stairs, you got up eagerly, “Saeed!”

Umm Saeed lowered her head to conceal a smile as you ran to the door. Sure enough, it was him, carrying a package from which thin wisps of steam rose.

“I’m back!” He said, crossing the threshold, his forehead bathed in sweat.

You took the package from his hand, Maryam, and the two of you quickly headed for the kitchen, but Umm Saeed stopped you, insisting that you leave it to her, and when you objected, Saeed grabbed your arm and drew you away saying, “Don’t bother, believe me, she doesn’t like to have anyone in the kitchen with her.”

You shrugged your shoulders.

“Anyway, I brought grilled fish so it won’t need any preparation.”

You gave in, Maryam, and happily went outside with Saeed to stand on the balcony.

Looking around you said, “My, this is such a narrow street!”

Saeed shrugged his shoulders. “The buildings are tall, that’s why it seems so stifling.”

You leaned over the balcony wall to see to the end of the street and said, “Do you remember, Saeed, the swings and the “box of the world”? And the pianola and the Realto
Do you remember when we used to jump over the wall and mill around in the crowd and watch all those carnival shows?”

He smiled, “And when we used to go to the church with Safeer and his sister Buthayna, and Meena, and we used to eat sugared almonds on holidays and celebrations and…by the way…you know Meena always had his eye on Buthayna.”

“Really?”

“Yes, he used to take her off into a corner and they would whisper together and when my eye caught Buthayna’s, she would blush and look at the ground.”

You laughed, “Tsk, tsk…I never knew you had such a naughty side!”

Saeed continued, “And do you remember the burning hiding we got when we stayed late at the cinema? Your brother and Ahlam and Safeer were with us.”

Nothing interrupted your laughter until Umm Saeed called from inside, “Come on in dears, the food is ready!”

You raced into the house just as you had done when you were small, and sat side by side, the food spread before you. Saeed cut some fish and placed it in front of you.

You stretched out your hand invoking God’s blessing as your mouth watered.

Umm Saeed smiled, saying, “May you live long to support us, my son.”

“Everything is thanks to you, Auntie.”

He watched you as you busied yourself with the food, “Enough, Maryam, take it easy!”

Umm Saeed replied, “Leave her to eat as she pleases, son!”

He looked at you smiling. “She’s not eating, she’s gobbling!”

Umm Saeed laughed as your face inflated with rage, Maryam. The rest of the fish caught in your throat and you coughed. Saeed handed you a cup of water.
After you gulped down the water, you replied, your eyes streaming, “Excuse me!”

Umm Saeed said, “Finish your food, my dear, and don’t pay any attention to him.”

You lifted your hands from the food, saying, “Thanks, Auntie, I’m finished.”

Saeed said, “Excuse us mother, Maryam and I are going for a little walk.”

She nodded her head, “As you like, son, I’ll go pray the afternoon prayer.”

After you had gathered up the dishes and washed them, Maryam, you ran, bursting with joy, behind Saeed. In the street you took his arm and the two of you headed toward the river. Saeed jumped up onto the Corniche wall and held out his hand to help you up. The two of you sat down, and the Nile made you three. He rested his arm on your shoulders.

“So what are you up to these days?”

“I’m looking for work, and you?”

“I have a temporary contract with an import-export company and I’ve begun graduate studies. I’d like to finish them in America.”

You raised your eyebrows in surprise, “America?”

You contemplated his tawny skin and his warm eyes and said, “And then, are you planning to come back, or...?”

He frowned and was silent.

You turned your face away from him. “In any case, it’s your life, you’re free to do what you want!”

With the tips of his fingers he held your chin and turned your face toward his until your eyes met. “Of course I’ll come back.”

He pointed with his index finger to the other side of the river saying, “Look over there, close your eyes and dream, you’ll find what you wish for, anytime, faster than you can imagine!”
You gazed at the other bank of the river, searching for an inspiration.

You repeated, whispering, “I wonder what tomorrow will bring?”

Sleep left you, Maryam. You got up, wandered about the room, closed your grandmother’s box, and sat on the edge of the bed, asking yourself, “When did your spark go out?”

You heard screams, followed by crying and a clamor and the sound of windows opening and doors locking. The noise came from across the street, from the coffee shop that had once been called “Café Mary”.

Mary had been the wife of Amm Ibrahim Hamama, that handsome, dark-skinned man who had loved sailing the seas ever since his youth. On one of his trips to Greece he fell in love with a beautiful girl, married her, and brought her back to his country, hoping to settle down. He opened a coffee shop and made it a meeting place for people of the quarter, and out of his immense love for his wife, he named the place after her. He was extremely proud of her sweetness and fastidious nature and he used to praise her soft skin, slender build, her wavy red hair and violet eyes.

Hamama was also proud of the fact that he adulterated the wine that he served to the foreigners in the days of the British occupation. He used to put a large quantity of methylated spirits into the wine along with a measure of cheap flavoring. He would shake it vigorously and

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7 Literally “uncle”, this term is a respectful way to refer to, or to address an older man.
then call what he produced “aged wine”, the likes of which could not be found anywhere else on
the face of the earth.

Hamama also used to hide students fleeing from British fire during the demonstrations. He would open a door for them in the back of the coffee shop that led on to his house and shelter them until the street was calm and they could be on their way. Every evening in the café, Hamama used to tune the radio to the voice of Umm Kulthum, for whom he had a passion until the end of her days.⁸

Mary was always devoted to the cleanliness and organization of the coffee shop. She also had gramophone on which she played Greek music and she took requests for songs from her clientele. She liked collecting old coins and postage stamps from countries that she had visited, along with keepsake pictures of her childhood and youth, and of her trips with Hamama on board boats sailing from one place to another. Mary stored all these small things in a box inlaid with mother of pearl, which had a key of such a size that it would sprain the fingers. She kept that key hidden under the carefully folded clothes in her antique chest.

Most of the customers loved Mary for her warm personality, her happy countenance and—above all—for her fierce love of Egypt. She was a woman who hated occupation wherever it existed on the face of the earth, and she helped her husband to prepare the tainted wine for the English soldiers. She also helped him to shelter the students who were fleeing from the demonstrations. She took in these young people who had no other place to go, and let them buy drinks at a discount.

⁸ Umm Kulthum (1898-1975) was an Egyptian singer who was famous across the Arab world. She was also known to her fans as “The Lady”.
Mary was assiduous in lighting candles to the Virgin Mary, hoping that her Lord might grant her a son. She remained childless for many years until her creator deemed her worthy, and she gave birth to a boy. She used to fast and give alms along with Hamama, and donated money and clothing to the mosque as she did to the church, making no difference between them. She was full of compassion for the poor and when she died, the people of the quarter mourned her deeply.

Hamama was powerfully affected by her death. He had loved her passionately and had had no conflicts with her except concerning her coddling of their son, Sayyid. Hamama was always warning her that she would spoil him after he discovered that she was giving the boy money behind his back—in fact, giving him everything he wanted without expecting anything in return.

Hamama did not live long after her death. Death came suddenly one night as he was sitting up and listening to ‘the Lady’. Mary had been buried in Egypt according to her will, and Hamama joined her as if they had agreed to stay together both in this world and in the next.

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A loud bang rang out in the neighborhood and you knew, Maryam, that it was a gunshot. The wailing ceased, the screaming subsided, and the muttering stopped. Along came the Police van with a crowd of policemen rushing and jostling alongside it. The Officer burst into the café, his men right behind him. They overturned the tables and the water pipes, beat the intoxicated patrons on the backs of their necks, herded them out of the café and piled them into the van. At the head of the mass of men was Sayyid, the son of Hamama, and the sole inheritor of the café.
The policemen broke down the hidden door and confiscated the little sacks of bango and hashish that had been packaged for distribution, along with the pills and drug-filled syringes, and they left the café in a ruin. Then the officer ordered his men to search for ‘the Mongoose’ and ‘the Pounder’.

The Mongoose was a slightly built man famous for being a slippery character who could make a quick get-away by leaping across the roofs of the houses. He had a knife scar on his left cheek and fox-like eyes, and he could sniff out danger wherever he was and disappear with the wind.

As for the Pounder, he was stout, dark-skinned and had piercing eyes. He never took a step without a switchblade hanging from his belt. Both young and old gave him a wide berth. He used to start cutting the hashish at high noon in the alley behind the café. The Mongoose, the Pounder and Sayyid would gather on the sidewalk outside the café at the end of the evening to pass around a waterpipe filled with hashish. They also used to heckle the passers-by until a fight inevitably broke out to round out the evening’s events. This was all carried out with a careful placement of lookouts on the street corners and under the auspices of the quarter’s Police detective, with whom they had a solid relationship.

In the days of the depression, when the government had the place by the throat, they adulterated the hashish and mixed the bango with cheap herbs or chopped mulukhiyya leaves. The Mongoose would ride his bicycle, circling around the groups of youth and people that used to meet on the corners and alleys of the city’s quarters. Sayyid would remain in the coffee house cellar, filling the bags of tainted bango with the aid of the Pounder. They would work in the very same cellar that used to serve as a hideout for the students fleeing British bullets.
And you, Maryam, still behind the window watching attentively, noticed Detective Sarwat, with his corpulent, flaccid body and his hulking feet and bulging eyes, standing outside the café after the departure of the police van. Next to him was his rusty bike, leaning up against one of the subdued old houses. You could not figure out why Detective Sarwat kept watching you—even now that your hair had started to gray and you had given up on the world—he still kept an eye on you, despite his swollen legs and failing vision.

One time, you had noticed him following you all over the place, from the green grocer’s to the fish market to the bus stop, and through the passages, alleys, quarters and upper class districts, and finally to the train station. When you heard the sound of his panting and the distinctive whirring of his bicycle you quickened your steps until he finally caught up with you on his rusty bicycle, his breath rattling.

He pleaded, “For God’s sake Maryam, enough! You’ve made me dizzy running around looking for you!”

You stared at him, screaming, “You’re the one chasing me around in circles!”

In an unrelenting tone, he replied, “Look, lady, I am just carrying out orders. I need to submit a report or else...”

You pushed him with your hand, “Forget the report and all this nonsense. It’s you, no offense intended, who has lost his senses. You’ve nothing better to do than ride around looking for me?”

He had wheeled his bike away muttering, dragging his defeat behind him with heavy steps. You followed him trying to remember the last time you had played a game of cat and mouse, Maryam. It was at a demonstration you had attended, where people were demanding an end to rising prices only to find themselves confronting the security forces. You’d had to flee,
and hide away for awhile to escape notice of the security detectives, but because the matter was over quickly, the defeat had been even quicker.

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You and a number of your school mates had searched for someplace suitable for hiding away. You found, after some difficulty, a place at the end of Haram street. It was an apartment on the ground floor with three rooms and a parlor. Two rooms opened out to each other and there was a third one secured by a padlock hanging on the door. You haven’t forgotten—and never will forget—the sight of the building’s owner Mrs. Zizi, a woman in her late forties who wore her hair dyed a bright red color. Her face was stained with various powders, she had a full figure, and kitten-like eyes. The amount of gold she wore caught the eye as it lay heavy on her neck and wrist and jingled when she walked.

You were four girls with a compact to live in disguise: Layla, Sabra, Zahra, and you, Maryam. Tall, fair-skinned and freckled Layla would go out one day veiled, and on another day she would sport a blonde wig. As for Sabra, she was a dark-skinned, slightly-built girl with high shoulders. She would go out once wearing a gallabeyya and a veil, and another time wearing a wig, and yet another time wearing jeans and a short-sleeved blouse. You, Maryam, sometimes wore the wig on your head and sometimes the veil. At any rate, the wig made the rounds amongst the four of you.

Zahra was the intermediary between the apartment and the outside world. She would go out early in the evening and not return until dawn, and sometimes she would even spend the whole night away. Zahra was on the thin side, with short hair and round eyes. With time, you
girls attracted the attention of the neighborhood and as they say, “You made a spectacle of yourselves.”

One day, the landlady Zizi showed up, her weighty bangles jangling on her arms and a heavy gold necklace lying on her sturdy chest. She arrived leading a tall, dark-skinned man in his early thirties. He wore his hair greased back with Vaseline, sported a striped suit, and carried a large bag in his hand. But what really caught the eye were his pencil thin eyebrows, his kohl-lined eyes and his swaying gait. Mrs. Zizi wanted to put him up in the third room— with who? With you four girls! This idea was certainly not going to fly, and you girls refused immediately. Your refusal soon escalated into abuse and false accusations from Mrs. Zizi, while the man stood in the corner and contented himself with watching the spectacle. The situation would have become a hand-to-hand scuffle if Mrs. Zizi had not taken the strange man by the hand, and led him away from the place, all the while threatening to punish you.

In the morning of the following day, you girls were startled awake by a violent rapping at the door. At first you all rushed around in circles, but it was not long before you got hold of yourselves and, mindful of circumstances, silently communicated with your eyes. Layla rushed to open the chest in the old Ottoman under the window in the parlor, and Sabra helped her to gather the assortment of clothes, and to scatter them out onto the tiled floor. With amazing speed she lifted the wooden box containing the remaining pamphlets that had not yet been distributed. You and Zahra ripped the pages out of them and threw them into the toilet. Then each of you tucked her personal and University IDs into whichever piece of clothing she had thrown on.

In the time that it takes water to run through a sieve, the Police chief had forced the door open and stormed into the room, with Mrs. Zizi and two policemen right behind him. It was no surprise to you that the State Security apparatus should show up at your apartment, but you were
shocked by Mrs. Zizi’s accusation of theft. Of course you denied it, but within minutes a careful search of the apartment revealed a necklace behind the back of the Asyuti-style chair, and two gold bracelets hidden amidst the clothes inside the wardrobe.

You realized too late that the cursed Zizi had a copy of the key and, while you were sleeping, had carried out her secret attack, planting the ‘stolen’ jewelry. The police van was parked at the head of the main road, and in order to reach it you had to traverse a long, narrow alley. You walked one after another, with the people standing along each side watching the procession. Your screams were of no avail, and you were put under arrest.

You tried to recover your calm and agreed to present your IDs and say that you were students living away from home in a furnished apartment, and that it was your bad luck that you had landed at Zizi’s place. But as your detention lengthened, you went back to screaming and banging. The Second lieutenant responded to your protests by screaming back at you. Finally, in the face of your insistence on seeing the Police Superintendent, he submitted to your demand.

And so, you stood lined up in front of the Superintendent who looked at each of you, one by one, as if he was saying, ‘What is it that brings together the blonde and the veiled girl?’

Quickly you got out your university IDs and put them on his desk. He studied them, his glance moving between the pictures and your faces.

Then he stood up, and passed in front of you asking, “Aren’t you girls from good families? Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves for stealing? Did they teach you that in college?”

Sabra answered quickly, “We were looking for a furnished apartment for which we could split the rent equally. The broker sent us to Mrs. Zizi and...”

The Superintendent interrupted, “Who are you talking about...Zizi?”

Zahra added, “Sir, you know that ‘The stranger’s eye is feeble.’”
Layla hurried to back her up, “What’s more, Superintendent Sir, this accusation is a trick because she brought this hulking man and she tried to force us to let him room with us, and you can see, Sir, that we are all girls.”

And you, Maryam, said, “And Sir, you can see by our looks, no offense intended, we’re not that type.”

Sabra burst into tears crying “God protect me from the slanderer!”

In a strangled voice Zahra said, “She’s a clever woman, may God protect us from her evil doing, and...”

The Superintendent interrupted you, “Enough...hush! You and her...I’ve had enough this morning!”

Silence fell over the room. The Superintendent pressed a button on his desk and a soldier appeared immediately, saluting.

“Get me Officer Fawzy! The soldier saluted again, turned around quickly, and hurried out of the office. Only moments later Officer Fawzy was in front the Superintendent, his gaze moving between him and you girls. The Superintendent shouted, pointing at the telephone, “Get me that damned Zizi!”

The officer leafed through the pages in a notebook on the desk and quick as lightening, had Zizi on the line. The Superintendent grasped the telephone receiver and sat back in his chair screaming,

“What’s going on, woman? You think we don’t have anything to do besides dealing with you?”

There was silence as he listened to Zizi’s response, and then he burst out, “What are you talking about... stealing... who do you think you’re kidding?”
The Superintendent listened to Zizi’s voice once more before erupting, “That’s enough! Now come and withdraw your complaint on the record and if you don’t, I’ll turn my back on you and your whole family will suffer!...“All right…its over, I don’t want a fuss!”

Furious, he slammed down the receiver, gathered the IDs in his hand, gave them to the Officer, and addressed himself to you girls, “Next time, you’d better be more careful. I don’t ever want to see your faces here again!”

The Officer handed you back your IDs one by one, and after the official procedures were finished, you took to your heels and flew out of the place.

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An ambulance siren pierced the air. You stretched your neck out the window, Maryam. The ambulance workers were lifting up a man whose intestines were dangling from his abdomen. Another man had his arm severed by a bayonet. Among the other injured were people with knife wounds to the face, and bruised, beaten bodies.

You shut the window and collapsed into the seat next to it, resisting nausea. Pain ran down your spine. You walked sluggishlly, leaning on the wall, and in a moment, you fell with all your weight to the floor. Who could help to revive you, Maryam?

Your friend loaded his passion for life onto his back and left for distant lands. Do you think he will return? Or will life in America suit him? Ahhh, Maryam, will that be the end of you? That you’ll fall down once and not have the strength to stand up again? You resisted going to the doctor on several occasions...would it turn out to be what they call “loss of desire to live”? 

You tried to stand up, supporting yourself on the arms of chairs until you reached the bedroom. Insomnia tore up your bedclothes. You gulped down a tranquilizer pill and fell asleep for a short while.

_There you are ascending the stairs... hands tied... a guillotine appears to you at a distance. Ugly metallic faces turn around it, screeching like crows:_

_Let’s splatter her with dirt!_

_Let’s fling filth at her!_

_Let’s smash her and scatter the fragments of her corpse!_

_And they went on...and on..._

Here you are, hiding in a time other than your own time, and yearning for the one who will gather up your bones. Your soul is imprisoned in a cycle of losing wagers, you are driven to mistakes, the mistakes lead you to foolishness, and the losses transform you into a monster.

_The guillotine looms large and tiger-like, you draw near and it creeps toward you. You stop climbing, you turn your back on it and collapse onto the stairs. The circle of accusing voices continues to tighten._

You woke up from your distraught sleep, Maryam, and felt your neck. Thanking God that it was still there, you turned on the light in the room; everything was in its place. Grandmother’s chest, the brass bed, the kilim and the old wardrobe. You uttered an invocation seeking refuge in God from accursed Satan and you tried, once again, to sleep.
You heard the meow of a cat and sat up. Uff...what had woken that cat at this hour? You put the pillow over your head and the cat continued to call, “Daouuud!” The night was wintry and the hissing of the kerosine stove intermingled with the meows of the cat outside the door.

Your Aunt was still turning the butter with her long wooden stick. The fire blazed with blue flames. Gathering around the fire and stretching out your small hands towards it, you and your siblings were warmed by the stories. The story that night was about the Prophet Suleiman who could speak to the birds, animals and reptiles. Auntie told about how the sea became stormy and the winds turned dark with grief upon Suleiman’s departure. The birds and the animals lost their ability to speak after his death, except for the cats whom the jinn inhabited, and who continue to call “Daouuud” in lament and longing.

You asked in surprise, Maryam, “Auntie, why don’t the cats call Suleiman?” She hit your hand with the hot stirring stick saying, “Girl, the cats are free to cry as they will, what business is it of mine if they call Suleiman or Daoud? They are all prophets!”9 You dropped your head and continued listening to your aunt, who soon drew you into a new story.

9 The aunt has things confused. According to Islamic tradition, Prophet Suleiman used to talk to animals, but here the aunt tells the children that the cats are calling for Daoud, or the Prophet David, not Suleiman.
And here you are...your head like a dead weight on the pillow. The cats’ meows don’t stop, nor does sleep come.

You got up heavily, hunger gnawed at you. You headed for the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. There was nothing in it but a piece of cheese and the remains of the fish from yesterday’s meal. You lit the oven and warmed the fish as you busied yourself chopping garlic and searching for the cumin that somehow eluded you.

You were dying for some pickled vegetables, Maryam, and you looked at the glass jars that were devoid of anything except a layer of dust. Your grandmother had always been intent upon carefully lining up the little glass jars filled with cumin, black and red pepper, fenugreek, mint, cinnamon and anise. When she needed more of anything, she would send you to Amm Girgis’s spice shop to fetch it.

Amm Girgis was a gentle man who spoke little and was always eager to please. He was famous for making herbal remedies for various illnesses and he always tended to the needy before those with wealth and influence.

You used to play with his daughter Sonya, and with Kawthar, the daughter of Amm Farag the grocer. One day, when you were heading to your grandmother’s house, a slender, barefooted girl grasped the hem of your tunic and pointed with her little hand:

“Go talk to her!”

Her face was dirty and her chestnut-colored hair tousled. And then as quickly as she had appeared, the girl ran off. You had turned around, Maryam, to see what the child was pointing to, and you noticed Kawthar gesturing to you.
Kawthar was the only daughter of Amm Farag, the grocer. A man with a kind face and gentle features, Amm Farag always responded to the requests of his customers pleasantly and with a smile.

His shop was always clean and neat and he was patient with the poor when it came time to settle bills. In those days, the people of the neighborhood shared in both the good times and the bad.

Your grandmother used to sit, squatting under a weak ray of light that fell from the one window that gave out onto the street. She listened to the neighbors’ gossip and the movements of the passers-by on the street, and to the calls of the vendors, the arguments, the shouts of children, and the voice of “the Lady” coming from café “Mary”.

Grandmother used to cover her face and shake the sieve between her hands, sending the rice hulls flying in all directions. She would call out to you, “Come my dear, Maryam!”

Leaving your seat, you would hurry toward her, “Yes, Grandmother!”

“Open the cupboard and take half a riyal from the purse”.

You would open the fabric purse and listen to grandmother’s instructions.

“Run and get us some sweets and cheese and come right back!”

You would fly out the door, Maryam, not only to get the requested items but also to play with Kawthar. Kawthar was about the same age as you, a beautiful, charming and mischievous girl, whose light brown hair fell down upon her back and whose black eyes glittered whenever there was a chance to play. The two of you ran around, far from the grocery shop, playing hopscotch and hide and seek, racing each other down the street to the passage leading to the river, slipping off your shoes and allowing your feet to be moistened and caressed by the water. Then you would climb up onto the grass and—completely immersed in the exhilaration of the
moment—you would race again, this time through the trees, only to vomit up the *hummus assham* and the cotton candy in which you had indulged. As usual, you were late returning to your grandmother and you endured a scolding along with the loss of the half riyal.

You walked toward the shop and when you got close, you found Kawthar standing at the door waiting for you. She was wearing a headscarf and after you embraced, you cried playfully, “I have missed you, you rascal!”

She straightened the scarf on her head and replied, “And I missed you more! What are you up to these days?”

You nodded your head, Maryam, “I’m fine.”

Kawthar sighed, “Praise the Lord, the generous, forgiving and merciful.”

One of the customers called out to her.

You patted her on the shoulder, Maryam, “Stay well!”

She called, “But it’s still early!”

You smiled, “I’ll stop by another time...”

You turned your back on the shop and were overcome by the longing for Saeed, the years of childhood and youth, and for the old quarter.

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10 *Hummus Assham* is a hot spicy drink made from whole chick peas.