Grasping the letter in your hand, you walked toward the old building, Maryam. You asked the policeman standing in front of the iron gate, “Does Mr. Aziz Amin work here?”

He nodded toward the interior of the building. “Ask at the information desk.”

You entered a stately reception hall, which featured a large gold-framed picture of the President of the Republic in military dress, an enormous crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and a Shirazi carpet covering the floor and stairs. A large elevator stood in the middle of the hall.

You entered the elevator and went to the second floor as they had instructed you at the information desk. A sign hanging on the wall read “Cultural Affairs.” You entered and wandered between the empty desks, until you reached the lone occupant of the room who was sitting and reading a newspaper.

You greeted him, “Hello.”

He lowered the newspaper from his eyes. He was in his forties, and had thick hair, narrow eyes and a thin mustache.

In his Iraqi dialect, he said, “Hello, what can I do for you Miss...”? “Maryam, Miss Maryam.”

Still holding the newspaper, he said, “Please sit down.”

You sat asking, “Is Mr. Aziz here?”

He shook his head. “He’s on his way.” And he returned to his newspaper.
You looked around at the long room with its high walls and crowded desks. In the center of the room stood a brass map outlining the regions of the country.

Two men arrived and greeted you, “Hello.”

You and the man with the newspaper replied simultaneously, “Hi.”

The first man folded up his newspaper and stood up to take his leave. “Excuse me, Miss.”

“Sure.”

You drummed your fingers on the edge of the desk, keeping your eyes glued to the door.

• • •

Cairo

“The Good Mood Café” was located in a downtown alley that branched off from a main thoroughfare. It was the meeting place for various and sundry types; students, intellectuals, politicians, artists and ordinary citizens.

The café was packed with chairs and tables which spilled out onto the sidewalk and into the adjacent passageway that was located between two buildings. The three of you sat together amidst the smoke rings and the clicking of the dice.

The original proprietor of the café had been a stout, dark-completed man with heavy lips, buckteeth and kinky hair. He always wore a loose, flowing gallabeyya and sat in the café smoking his water pipe with obvious enjoyment. He would sit there, vigorously blowing out puff after puff, until his eyes had become glassy and he began to cough. He was always surrounded by his many customers who used to spend their evenings chatting, laughing and enjoying the atmosphere of the busy café. When he died, his sons and grandsons were careful to maintain the café as the meeting spot it always had been, and to keep its name “The Good Mood Café”.
“At your service, Miss,” said Amm Mistika. The most senior worker in the place, Amm Mistika had an elongated face, white hair, black eyes, and a thick mustache. He always wore a clean gallabeyya, and a towel folded with care over his arm. In the pocket of the apron that he wore during work hours, he kept a small notebook in which he recorded all the drinks on tab.

Shihab said, “But you already know our order, Amm Mistaka!”

The waiter turned on his heel and yelled, “Get me two teas, a medium-sweet coffee, and set up the hookah with molasses flavored tobacco!”

A voice on the radio chanted,

“The village head man had a son and Oh, he is joyful!
Happy at last, he is celebrating with a party as big as a wedding!”

The three of you continued your conversation.

Shihab said, “Have you finished the paperwork?”

You replied, Maryam, “I submitted my passport...”

The third of your trio, Ahmed, said: “I don’t see why you have to leave, Maryam.”

Ahmed was a poet who composed in formal Arabic. He was a small, slender man with a wheaten complexion. Shihab on the other hand, wrote poetry in colloquial Egyptian, and was tall, slender and wore thick glasses on his prominent nose. Shihab used to get into heated arguments with Ahmed, especially when the conversation turned to discussions about the relative merits of formal and colloquial poetry.

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1 A song by the Egyptian singer Shafiq Galal.
2 The Arabic language has multiple levels or registers. The poet Ahmed mentioned here writes in an elevated, literary style very different from the ordinary Arabic that people speak everyday.
He said, “And since when, Sir, do you understand ‘necessity’—you who writes in a language the people can’t relate to?

Ahmed, annoyed, replied, and you think that you are the only one who understands? You and your so-called “popular poetry”. He counted off on his fingers a number of famous poets who wrote in formal Arabic. “Look man, you have Ahmed Shawqi, al-Ma‘aari, Salah Abdel Sabour, Ibrahim Naji, Umru al-Qais and Abu Firas al-Hamdani and...”

Shihab cut him off. “Alright, skip the sermon, brother, I was wrong.”

You said, Maryam, “Good lord, guys, I am leaving my country even though I have no desire to. But what can I do? I can’t continue being unemployed, and there are no opportunities for work and settling down here, I’ve had it!”

Surprise registered on Ahmed’s face, “Unemployed...since when?”

Shihab responded irritably, “Don’t you live in this country? Have you forgotten that people rose up in the street like flood waters when the government raised the price of bread?”

Ahmed rubbed the hair on his head. “I think that business happened over three years ago, when I was out of the country, working on my doctorate in Hungary.”

Shihab shook his head. “Yes, yes, I remember”. He cast a sympathetic glance your way, Maryam.

He said: “What’s going on with you and Saeed?”

You shook your head.

“You know...”

“What?”

You shrugged your shoulders.

---

3 A reference to the 1977 Egyptian Intifada
“You know...”

Shihab knit his eyebrows, “What’s going on with you, Maryam, you can’t say anything beside that?”

“I really just don’t know...”

Worn out by sorrow, you were silent for a moment and then said: “You know, Saeed went to America and after a while I just stopped hearing from him.”

Silence descended upon the three of you.

Amm Mistaka returned and served the drinks. He stacked the tobacco holder of each water pipe with layers of tobacco and charcoal until the coals crackled. Shihab took puff after puff, blowing out thick smoke.

You took a gulp of your hot tea, Maryam, “Really, the thought of leaving my own country is killing me, but what can I do? I can’t find a way to make a living and I can’t guarantee what the future will bring.”

Smoke rising from his lips, Shihab replied, “Can any one of us can bet on tomorrow?”

The cups of tea and coffee began to circle around with the smoke rings. The shouts in the café rose with the clatter of the dice, while the voice on the radio crooned...

“I hope Umm Hassan is well
Safe from the evil eye...”

You asked Shihab, “Have you written the letter?”

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4 Scattered throughout the narrative are portions of this song written by Ahmed Adawiyya and sung by Umm Kulthum (see also pp. 102 and 106) Salem represents this song as one that runs repeatedly through Maryam’s consciousness, perhaps reminding her of popular songs that she heard during her childhood in the old quarter of Cairo.
He took an envelope out of his shirt pocket and handed it to you, saying, “I told him to take care of you.”

“Thanks.”

He shook his water pipe: “Amana sends her greetings to him and tells him that he should take courage.”

You nodded your head, “Done.”

You turned over the envelope, contemplated the name written on it and read in an audible voice: “Aziz Amin.”


Baghdad

Men began to crowd into the place, the office became congested with people, and the noise of the intermingling discussions rose to a drone. Suddenly, a clamor arose in front of the door, and people began to look towards it. You put your briefcase over your shoulder, Maryam, and decided to take a look.

Two men were quarreling.

One of them screamed at the other, “I am free, brother, and I have the authority to edit and delete words as I want!”

The other replied, “No you don’t have that right. No one, no matter who he is, has the right to change a single letter of what I have written without consulting me first.”
People began to break up the argument, some of them grabbed one of the disputants and took him down in the elevator and some took the other party into the office, sat him down at his desk and tried to calm him down, “Watch out for yourself Mr. Aziz, it’s not worth it…”

Then the group around him dispersed, each person returning to his own desk.

You approached Aziz’s desk with quiet caution, Maryam, and stood for a few moments observing him while he straightened up his papers.

You asked yourself, “Is this the Aziz you’ve been looking for?”

He was a medium sized man, with a wheat-colored complexion, light brown hair, a delicate nose and hazel eyes.

The man who had met you when you first arrived at the office came over, and as soon as he saw Aziz seated at his desk, he turned to him and said, “This young lady was asking about you.”

Then he moved to his desk and buried his head in his papers.

Aziz raised his head, his hazel eyes pierced yours, Maryam, and you blinked.

He stood, extending his hand. A ring set with a large blue stone on his finger caught your eye.

He said, “Hello.”

You extended your hand and shook hands with him.

“Maryam Abdel-Fattah.”

He grasped your hand firmly.

“Aziz Amin. Please sit down.”

You sat down on a chair facing his desk.

He said smiling, “What can I do for you?”
You took the letter from your handbag and gave it to him.

He opened it curiously, reading in a whisper and then burst out joyfully: “I can’t believe it! Shihab, that scoundrel!”

He leaned back in his chair, expanding his chest, “Ahhh… even the paper smells of home!”

You looked into his shining eyes, Maryam, and said, “He sends his greetings and tells you to take courage.”

He gazed at you firmly. “Thank you. Will you have something to drink?”

“I wouldn’t mind…”

He folded the letter and put it in his pocket, exclaiming, “Why don’t we get out of here, get some fresh air and we can talk at ease.”

You nodded, “Not a bad idea.”

The autumn air greeted you the moment you emerged from the building, and you strolled down a long street crowded with shops of various types, pedestrians, old buildings, hotels, cafés, newspaper kiosks and cars. Entering a side street, you headed for a koshari place, and took a seat at a table overlooking the street.

That was the first time that you met Aziz, Maryam. Shihab had told you one time that Aziz was Palestinian. And here the two of you were, in a strange city, separated only by a small wooden table set with salt and pepper cellars, little bowls of salsa and spices, and a metal pitcher. It was as if you were in Sayyida Zaynab or Bab Sha’riyya.⁵

Aziz broke into your ruminations. “I’m so glad you arrived safely!”

You smiled, “Thanks!”

⁵ Popular districts in Cairo.
He took a letter out of his pocket, unfolded it and smoothed it out with his hands.

“I miss Egypt so much!”

“Did you spend a lot of time there?”

“About twelve years.”

He brought his face near yours, “You know, I just want you to keep talking, I’m dying to hear the Egyptian dialect and the Egyptian spirit—especially when it’s on the tongue of girl as sweet as honey.”

You blushed and bit your lips, whispering, “You’re sweet...”

The waiter approached, a man in his early thirties, with a dark complexion and the features of a country youth.

He said, “Can I take your order Mr. Aziz?”

Aziz looked up at him, “Hi Ahmed, how are you?”

The young man’s accent emboldened you, Maryam, “Are you from Egypt?”

“Yes.”

“From where?”

“From Shubra.”

“Home of the best folks. Have you been here long?”

“Almost five years.”

Aziz broke in, “And you haven’t yet been able to put away enough for the dowry and the price of an apartment?”

Ahmed grimaced, “It’s still early.”

He wiped his hands on the bottom of the apron that he was wearing over his clothes, took from his pocket a picture of his fiancé and handed it to you, Maryam.
You studied it. She was a baby-faced girl with almond-shaped eyes and a lovely smile. She couldn’t have been more than seventeen.

You said, “Good luck to you!”

Aziz looked at the picture and said jokingly, “She’s as lovely as the moon, and wasted on you!”

Ahmed laughed saying, “What can I get you?”

Aziz replied, “Two specials.”

“Fine.”

“And why don’t you add a lot of chili pepper.”

The waiter put the picture back in its place and moved away shouting, “Two specials here and make ‘em good!”

You looked out the window, Maryam.

The crowd in the street had begun to thin and the car horns had quieted.

You said to Aziz, “I see everyone knows you around here!”

“Well...”

Another waiter brought the dishes, quickly lining them up on the table, and then moved efficiently on to the next table.

The smell of the spicy sauce, peppers and salsa made your mouth water, Maryam.

The two of you dug into the koshari with delight, and after you had finished, Aziz leaned back in his chair stretching and gazing intently at your face.

He said, “You know that your eyes are lovely.”

You smiled.

He added, “...and your hair is wild... and what can I say about those dimples?”
You laughed, avoiding his glances.

“Look brother, how beautiful this girl is, her beauty is truly Egyptian.”

You stopped laughing, Maryam, and said, “It’s clear that you exaggerate...or are you just a flirt? You should know, I also have a tough side.”

He lit a cigarette and offered you one, but you refused, making the excuse that you don’t smoke right after eating.

He blew smoke rings in your face, saying, “What’s new with Shihab?”

“He’s OK, but he doesn’t laugh like he used to.”

“Really? The best thing about Shihab was his laughter. I wonder...does he still write poetry?”

“It’s the only thing he’s got left.”

“You know that we used to be really close. We used to stay up late, walking around all the streets and different quarters of the city, from Hussayn to Sayyida to Old Cairo and the Citadel and Midan Opera and Fuad Street. We’d chat until dawn at the coffee shops and go to all the hangouts, and the political, cultural and artists’ circles. We also participated in the demonstrations, the last one was in ’68, before I was deported from Egypt.”

You recovered from your surprise. “You were deported?”

Sadness crept into his voice, “It’s a long story, let’s talk about it later.”

Silently he gazed out the window, at the ancient buildings and the passersby in the street. The waiter lifted the dishes from the table, cutting off Aziz's ruminations.

“What would the lady and gentleman like for dessert?”

Aziz said: “I’d like mahlabeyya pudding.⁶

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⁶ A creamy, milk-base pudding often flavored with rose water.
Just like a child, Maryam, you said, “I’ll have rice pudding.”

The waiter turned away.

Aziz smiled. “Do you know the joke that goes: Once a guy asked his mother, ‘Do you want to get married, mom, or would you rather I bring you mahlabeyya pudding?’ And the mother replied, ‘Who me? You think I have the teeth to eat mahlabeyya?’

You laughed, and when the order came, Aziz took a heaping spoonful of rice pudding and brought it to your lips. You blushed, and looked away.

Aziz said in a tender tone, “Taste it...you are forgetting that Shihab asked me to take care of you!”

It was as if you had known him for a long time, Maryam, as if he was sitting with you in a dining room or café back in Egypt. Feelings of familiarity and affection crept into your heart.

Aziz put his cigarette out, and began to devour the bowl of mahlabeyya as you ate your pudding. After both of you had finished the food, you took a tissue out of your hand bag, wiped your hands and mouth, and handed one to Aziz.

He lit a cigarette and pushed his chair back from the table, asking: “Where are you staying?”

“With some relatives of ours, just until I find some work.”

“And have you found anything?”

“Nothing, but I am still looking.”

He puffed out the smoke, saying: “Give me a couple of days to ask around and I’ll see if I can find you some leads.”

You nodded, “OK.”
Aziz clapped and the waiter came quickly to gather the plates, saying, “To your good health!”

Aziz took some money out of his pocket. “The check.”

You walked to the door, Maryam, he caught up with you and the two of you headed toward the bus stop. You shook hands and agreed on a time to meet again.

*****

Cairo

Dawn was about to break.

You were depressed with the place and with life, Maryam. It was no longer possible to adapt to this desolate era—not under any circumstances.

You curled up on the floor in the corner of the room, staring at the ceiling.

*****

Your small hand had trembled in Saeed’s as the two of you slipped quietly into the bedroom.

The house was completely still, and so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. Everyone had gone off to the funeral of a man from the quarter.

You threw down your school bags, kicked off your shoes and crawled under the bed. Saeed played the role of the father. Frowning, he said, “Did you get the food ready?” “Yes, and the children are asleep.”
“Good, come on...let’s take a little rest.”

You stretched your little body out on the cold floor under the bed. Saeed undid the suspenders of his shorts and stretched out his hand to lift the hem of your school smock as elation stole into your aroused body. He tried to kiss you and you withdrew bashfully. He came nearer and touched you and you embraced him as he embraced you. Bathed in sweat, you kissed.

Suddenly, you heard footsteps and you both held your breath. You pulled down your dress, Maryam, and Saeed pulled up his suspenders.

Both of you curled up in a corner under the bed until the footsteps had faded away and you were certain that no one was around. Quickly, you crawled out from under the bed and scampered away like frightened mice. Simmering with both newborn ecstacy and terror, you flew up the stairs and away from the scene of the crime.

••••

You were making the the rounds of the house, Maryam, when your grandmother’s spirit took possession of you.

You remembered how the steam used to fill the bathroom as grandmother dipped the jug into the hot water and poured it over your head. Gathering her damp gallabeyya between her thighs, she would scrub your naked back with a rough loofah. But when she turned to your chest, you would bashfully fold your arms over your two protruding lupine beans. Grandmother used to laugh, wipe her forehead with the back of her hand and then continue scrubbing your little body.

As you reminisced, you poured the warm water over yourself and murmured words from an old song, “You who are by the pond, go to the ocean...”
Ahhh...Maryam...how you long for a moment of warmth...why does the day drag on so?

You met Aziz on the sidewalk outside the building where he worked.

He raised his face to the sky, “Looks like it’s going to rain.”

The square was packed with pedestrians and cars, the buses were jam packed and the car horns were relentless. The sky darkened as low clouds gathered. People dashed across the streets nimbly while school children leaped about joyfully in the rain.

Aziz grasped your arm, “Come on!”

He pointed to a taxi. You two of you squeezed into the small car. The rain poured down heavily as the driver began to cut through the crowd and across the muddy ground. Aziz put the collar up around your neck, Maryam, and he understood from your surprised glance what you wanted to ask him.

He said, “We’ll go to the house until the rain lets up.”

“But...”

“We’ll talk later.”

You arrived in a residential area whose new buildings and open spaces stood in contrast to the crowded downtown. Date palms and tall buildings sheltered paved streets with gutters that drained away the water and made them seem to sparkle. Even the cool wind had a different scent than those dust-laden breezes of other areas. Aziz told the taxi driver to stop in front of a building on the corner of the street.
You said to yourself, “I wonder, are things here really as they seem?”

Why did you come here with Aziz, was it out of a feeling of safety, or out of curiosity?

On the whole, he had never been anything but respectful towards you.

The two of you walked a short distance and stopped at the entrance to the house.

Aziz gestured with his hand, “Please, come in!”

You were reluctant to enter.

He frowned “You don’t trust me?”

He stood looking into your eyes, and said, “If you doubt for a moment that I am an honorable person, go back!”

You grasped his hand. He smiled and preceded you up the stairs.

You started up the stairs tentatively, Maryam. The house was silent except for the howl of the wind in the staircase.

Aziz got to the top before you and stopped at the third floor. He poked his head around the banister and yelled.

“Where’s your spunk?”

You responded irritably, “You live with our Lord above?”

He laughed, “No, he lives with me!”

You gathered your strength and hurried up the final stairs. The apartment was on the top floor. You leaned your back against the wall, panting. He turned the key in the door.

He bowed, saying, “Enter my princess.”

You were offended as soon as you entered Maryam, by the stuffy odor and the mess. Cigarette butts were scattered everywhere, along with remnants of food and books and papers.

You lifted some newspapers off a chair and sat down to catch your breath.
Aziz ran to the kitchen, and his voice rang out from within, “Tea will be right up!”

After you had taken a moment’s rest you got up to look around the place, Maryam. A large desk occupied the middle of the sitting room. Books were scattered chaotically on shelves, and an iron and some clothes sat atop a classically-styled dining table next to the desk. Spongy chairs surrounded a circular wooden table. In the corner of the room was a tape player piled with cassette tapes. A buffet on the other side of the desk bore a small brass candelabra with two thin candles. An old picture of the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus hung on the wall.

A small passage joined the sitting room to the kitchen and bathroom, and another led to the bedroom and to a door that opened out onto the roof terrace.

Aziz came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of tea and put it on the table. You, Maryam, were still standing in front of the buffet staring absently at the picture of the Virgin.

Aziz exclaimed happily, “Tea, my beautiful lady!”

You smiled, Maryam, and sat down to drink the tea with him.

As the warmth began to spread through your body, you said, “Thank you, this is just what I needed.”

Holding his cup with both hands he replied, “This is green tea, a friend of mine from Tunis gave it to me.”

You looked at him, surprised. “You seem to have friends all over the world!”

He replied sorrowfully, “People are all that is left when you have neither money nor voice.”

You nodded your head. “You’re right.”

The rain let up and the two of you finished sipping the tea.

He took you by the hand saying, “Come on, I’ll show you the view!”
He opened the door to the roof and you walked out onto its wet surface, pushing aside laundry lines that were empty except for lingering drops of rain. You stood together before the terrace wall. Aziz stretched his arms and took in a deep breath.

You cast your eyes, Maryam, toward the towering date palms, the verdant, intertwining trees, the streets washed with rainwater and the minarets cradling the sky. You could see little birds flying around, trying to serve as decoys in order to protect their nests.

An abundance of green lay between two rivers, carrying the scent of history, the fragrance of dates and oranges, and the memory of the scepter and the crown.

Aziz patted you on the shoulder, interrupting your ruminations. “Where did you go?”

Your heart flew to the distant horizon and you said, “I miss Egypt.”

He held your face in his hands. “Is this the first time you have been away from home?”

You gulped, “The first time.”

He stroked your hair, smiling, “By tomorrow you’ll be used to it.”

The sunset call to prayer rang out over the houses of the city.

He put his arm around your shoulders, “We’d better go in.”

You sat in adjacent chairs as the moments passed in silence.

Suddenly the electric went out and you tensed up in your seat.

Aziz got up looking for a source of light. He seemed to know the place like the back of his hand, because he got to the buffet without stumbling, and lit two candles. He walked back towards you carefully and placed the candles on the table.

He sat down, patting your hand sympathetically, “I’m with you, don’t be afraid.”
You stole a glance at his face in the dim light. His features reflected both determination and geniality. His eyes stole toward you, Maryam, through the space of the flickering candlelight.

He said, “You know, you resemble my sister.”

You smiled, “Really? What’s her name?”

“Zahra...you even have the same delightful smile.”

“Will you introduce me to her?”

His voice was bathed in melancholy, “The last time I saw her was about thirty years ago.”

Surprise bridled your tongue, Maryam. He leaned his elbows on the table, cradling his head in his hand, and you perceived his need to confide.

“We were three siblings and the world was vast and open before us. We ran around and laughed and played in the groves amidst the olive and orange trees. We fought and made up, and gallivanted around in the grassy fields as we listened to both the church bells and the call to prayer.

We lived on the highest tell; if we raised our hands we could touch the sky. Our eyes could embrace the mountains far in the distance. We were clever at making kites, we would color them, and fly them, and our spirits would fly with them...higher..higher...far above the other kids’ kites.

My mother was good at making fitiir.7 We would wake to her voice as she was kneading the dough, and find her surrounded by the women of the neighborhood. My grandfather had his own way of doing things—while we liked to sit under the grape trellis, he always sought the shade of the orange tree. Tea, song, and late-night gatherings brought us together. I could always

7 A traditional, multi-layered bread, eaten with cheese, honey or other toppings.
smell the scent of oranges in my mother’s bosom, in my father’s sweat and in my grandfather’s beard.”

Suddenly Aziz fell silent. He trained an angry glance on the dancing candle flames. Then he blew out successive puffs of smoke, Maryam, and returned to his story.

“It was the first time I heard gunshots close to our house or even close to Bethlehem. After that, the bombardment intensified, the laughter died, and our joyful childhood was over.

The destruction began to advance onto everything; the orange and olive trees, the grape vines, even the houses and gardens. It marched right into the garden of our home and had no mercy for my grandfather stretched out under his orange tree. That is, I doubt he died of sorrow before the gunfire reached him.

My father searched all over the house for my grandfather’s rusty, long-barreled old rifle. He cleaned it with an old rag and left, leading my older brother by the hand. When their absence continued, my mother told me to suppress my tears, because it is shameful for men to cry. At night my sister Zahra and I hid in a corner of the house, crying and clinging to each other. Every day my mother uttered prayers and made supplications to the Virgin Mary and to Jesus. She lit candles, and despite all that, news of massacres continued to come.

One day, the bombardment intensified and the fire engulfed the people, the crops and the walls. It was the final blow for my mother, who quickly packed our clothes into a bundle and balanced it on her head. She carried a second bundle in her hand, with bread and provisions for the road. She hid a small fabric case in her bosom containing various items, including my father’s silver ring set with a blue stone, and a picture of the Virgin. My mother put Zahra on her shoulders and galloped through the fire and the wailing. I followed, staying closer to her than her
own shadow. We hid in the woods; we climbed hills and descended back down them. Then we were piled into a rickety pick-up truck with others who were fleeing to the Jordanian border.

The candle dimmed and was spent.

Aziz hurried over to the buffet, and looked through the drawers for a new candle. His search yielded only one. He lit it and and cradled its flame with his palm. Then he stood it in the brass candelabra on the buffet. Heavy moments of silence passed. In the space of the dying light between you and Aziz, longing for home danced with the fire.

After a few minutes, light flooded the place, Maryam, and involuntarily you called out, “Oh!”

Aziz rubbed his eyes, “Good God, darkness is a curse!”

You got up suddenly.

Surprised, he cried out, “Where are you going?”

You drew your jacket across your chest. “It’s late!”

Aziz looked at his watch. “It’s only nine o’clock...it’s still early!”

He stood up, raising your face with his palm. “How about some coffee?”

You nodded your head. “OK.”

Aziz headed for the kitchen saying, “How do you like your coffee?”

Following right behind him to the kitchen you replied “Medium sweet.”

You came near him, “I’ll make it for you.”

He swirled the coffee in the small brass pot over the burner. “No—no offense—I enjoy doing this.”

You laughed and stood beside him. Together, you watched the coffee rise in the pot as it began to boil over a gentle flame.
Aziz lifted the pot off the flame carefully, saying, “By the way, I phoned an acquaintance at one of the newspapers to inquire about work for you, and he said that there is a temporary editorial position open. What do you think?”

Without hesitation you replied, “I accept, of course. What is there to think about?” He shut off the burner, opened the kitchen cupboard, took out two coffee cups and together you left the kitchen. He placed the tray on the table and you sat down.

He swirled the coffee pot and poured the dark liquid into equal measures. With the first sip you said, “Mmmm, perfect coffee, who taught you?”

He shook his head: “Life as a refugee.”

He took out his pack of cigarettes and held it out to you. You drew one out and after another sip of coffee you said, “It seems like you’ve smoked for a long time.”

He exhaled smoke into your face, without replying, and jiggled the coffee in your cup. You sipped your drinks in silence. Aziz threw his pack of cigarettes into the corner of the room, sat on the arm of your chair and played with your hair. You concealed a shudder that ran through your body. You put out your cigarette, and raised your face to look at him. A bridge of alienation and longing linked your gazes.

He stood, headed for the bookcase, and went through the books saying, “Do you like poetry?”

From your seat you exclaimed, “Of course!”

He returned to his seat carrying a book and sat down leafing through its pages. “This is a collection of an Iraqi poet named Saeedi Yusuf. Would you like to hear some?”

“I’d love it!”

He took a deep breath and began to read.
“A prophet shares my apartment
He lives in an oblong room
Every morning he partakes of my coffee and milk
And the secret of long nights”

His hazel eyes flashed. Shutting the pages of the book he turned his face towards you.

“Why did you leave your country?”

The question took you by surprise, and you cast a glance at the picture of the Virgin,

“There was no work!”

“Did you look hard enough?”

“I wore out my shoes looking. Egypt is not what it used to be, it’s become like a carnival market—chaotic and with no one in charge.” You swallowed bitterly, “People’s very emotions have become self-serving.”

He said, “Are you attached?”

You squirmed in your seat and bit your lip.

In a subdued voice you replied, “I had a friend, I would be lying if I told you that I no longer have feelings for him. He traveled to America to study and the years went by. He promised me that he would return but…”

He contemplated your sad eyes, eavesdropping on the strangled tone of your voice.

“Then I stopped hearing from him and my emotions were in limbo as I wondered whether or not he would return.”

He brought his face near to yours. “How long do you want to wait for him?”
“I don’t know.”

You regarded his sharp features and his kind eyes and said, “Are you separated from someone special?”

He let out a shrill laugh.

Irritated, you asked, “I said something funny?”

He stopped laughing, “No, not at all. It’s just that I myself am in a constant state of absence; absent from my family and homeland, absent even from myself, traveling from country to country like a lost bird. It’s hard to think of settling down.”

He lit a cigarette and then broke your silence, “There’s no need to worry—everything, from absence to exile—is hard at first, but habituation, as Camus says, sometimes has its own strength and power.”

You sighed, “Are you able to keep up your morale?”

He exhaled smoke into the empty space of the room.

“Sort of...I channel my anxiety into my work writing articles in newspapers and magazines. I publish some and others are rejected by the censors. The rest of the time I spend between friends and the Party.”

You raised your eyebrows, “The Party?”

“The Palestinian Democratic Party.”

“Really? Is there a party here other than the government party?”

He put out his cigarette, “You have a right to be surprised, it took a lot of time, effort and trouble to establish it.”

You exclaimed, “You were involved?”
“Yes, we were a group of intellectuals and political refugees, but we have not escaped observation and interference in our activities. You understand, of course, that we exist in the shadow of martial law and anything could happen. It is as though we are living in the palm of a genie.”

You gazed distractedly at the yellow color of the walls and looked at your watch.

You exclaimed, “I want to finish this conversation, but I should go!”

You stood up and put your bag over your shoulder.

He let his hand rest on your shoulder. “Don’t worry...I’ll take you home.”

Cairo

The birds were chirping and you were still up, Maryam. You listened to the machine that makes the flour for bean patties, and to the radio blaring from the coffee shop.

“Good morning, listeners!”

Other sounds reached your ears; the drone of groups of students walking to school, and the clatter of the small wooden cart pulled by man selling baleela pudding. You covered your head with your grandmother’s shawl, took a deep tin bowl, and went out to join the crowd of people and children waiting in front of a shop to buy fava beans prepared with olive oil and spices, and hot bean patties. You were surprised that some of the stores were still closed, even though they had opened their outer doors at the crack of dawn.
You stopped by the bakery and stood in line until it was your turn. You put the bread under your arm, and carrying the steaming dish of beans in your hand, returned to the house. But you felt no appetite for the food.

You looked at the picture of your grandmother and saw her smile at you. You extended your hand toward her, “Please, have some!”

She shook her head firmly.

You broke the loaf of bread invoking God’s name and tackled the food and the memory of your grandmother. She shared the sustenance with you.

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Baghdad

You looked up and found the place lit up, Maryam.

Aziz’s flat was called “the airport” because it was always full of people of different nationalities and identities. You ran up the stairs, pressed the doorbell, and Aziz opened the door, welcoming you. Smiling faces greeted your entry.

Aziz began the introductions, gesturing to you, “Maryam Abd el-Fattah.”

Then he pointed to each of the others in turn.


After an exchange of greetings, you sat down in a chair facing Suhayla and her brother.

Aziz said, “By the way, Ibrahim is a great artist.”
He pointed to a painting hanging on the wall, “That’s one of his canvases.”

The group turned their heads toward the painting of a human skull, within which a woman embraced her infant. She was surrounded by rocks and olive trees.

Ibrahim turned his face toward Aziz smiling, “Do you remember, we used to go around to the different neighborhoods, trying to catch glimpses of the girls under their wraps? Do you remember the ancient houses with those delicate wooden lattice windows and the scent of incense? Ahh.. that was a beautiful time. We would stay up until dawn in Sayyida Zaynab and Hussayn chatting and smoking water pipes.”

Aziz shook his head smiling: “There’s something you are leaving out!”

Ibrahim, with his Nubian features and wide forehead said, “Remember the first time you tried the water pipe...what happened to you?”

Aziz laughed.

Ibrahim stood up, imitating his friend. “After you took the first puff your eyes flashed and your face flushed the color of a carrot. You stood up, puffed out your chest and said, “I am a he-man and...smack! You fell flat on your face!”

The group burst out laughing. You felt a sense of warmth amidst this group and were eager to know their stories.

With the back of your hand you wiped away a tear of laughter, and said, “Pray God all turns out well!”

Mazin wondered out loud, “Why do Egyptians always repeat that expression? Its as if they think that happiness is too good for them!”

Ibrahim replied, “Because the Egyptian has drunk sorrow with his mother’s milk. He’s been the victim of invaders, occupiers, and all manner of rulers: after the Romans came the
Mamluks, then the Ottomans, the French, and then the English. People laugh out of helplessness, Mazin. Haven’t you heard the saying that goes, ‘The worst calamities are laughable’?

Mazin’s hawk-like eyes accentuated his sharp facial features. “I’ve heard it and experienced it, by God. People in south Lebanon spend their days hovering between death and life, every day—and despite that—they live. They eat, drink and laugh. The girls marry, get pregnant and give birth. Children grow up, there are moments of joy, evening chats, and sorrows. The young men learn how to bear arms and the mothers learn to be strong and patient through their trials and hardships. Life continues, despite the gunshots and the roar of the rockets.

Addressing himself to Mazin, Ali said, “Do you think it would it be possible for me to obtain a permit from the Lebanese government to film in the South? I want to propose making a piece on the camps for my final film project and...”

Mazin cut him off, “I don’t want to dash your hopes, brother Ali, but the situation is very difficult, the matter of permits is complicated.”

Ali knit his eyebrows, “Why is that, as long as I apply for the official papers?”

“Look friend, there are many camps. For example, the Ilyas camp in Beirut, and the Ayn el-Hilwa camp in the South and the Burj Barajneh camp on Mount Lebanon and Sabra and Shatilla and others, and these camps are subject to different authorities and groups.

Mazin counted them off on his fingers, “the group Sons of Palestinian Martyrs, the Palestinian Red Crescent, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the People’s Front, the Democratic Front and others. On top of that, there are military positions for the Resistance, and between one moment and the next, fire may break out and the bombardment swings into full throttle. And I forgot to say that there are also Antoine Lahad8 squadrons in the Lebanese army,

8 A Lebanese general and leader of the South Lebanon Army, b. 1927.
and they are more murderous and dangerous than the Zionist enemy. They are allied with them and...”

Ali cut him off, “Enough already! Forget the final project and thanks be to God!”

Mazin smiled, “Don’t give up, I’ll raise your idea with my commanders and maybe they can help. But I’m not going to promise anything.”

Aziz picked up on Ali’s preoccupied mood. He was a dark-complected young man with a strong build, thick hair and pitch-black eyes.

He said, “Why don’t we hear something on the oud, Ali?”

His glance moved to each of those present, saying, “By the way, Ali is a skillful ode player and his father, may he rest in peace, was Awad Asil.”

Then he looked at his sister, saying, “And this sweet girl plans to be a writer!”

Suhayla’s face flushed. She was not more than eighteen years old, and her wheat-colored face still bore the features of a child.

She said, “You exaggerate, Amm Aziz.”

Ali grabbed the oud, and strummed its strings murmuring, “I want to hear you sing...let’s hear some lines from Mahmoud Darwish’s poem with al-Abdallah’s musical arrangement.”

Hamdan nodded his head, “Great idea!”

Ibrahim exclaimed, “hush!”

Ali tuned his oud strings and in a soft voice he sang,

“I long for my mother’s bread

and my mother’s coffee
and my mother’s touch

Childhood grows within me

Day after day

I love my life because

If I died

I would be ashamed to make my mother cry.”

The group applauded and Ali shook his head smiling, his eyes twinkling. Marwan’s glass was full to the brim. He raised it and circled around the seats. Anxious glances followed him.

He said, “Tomorrow is unknown but today is mine.”

Mazin tried to stop him but Marwan pushed him away, shouting, “Leave me alone!”

Marwan was in his mid fifties, a broad shouldered, bald man with an ample mustache. He turned to Ali, imploring him, “I want you to perform the poem The Angry Brow. Please sing it for me... do you know it?”

Ali nodded his head, “I know it.”

Marwan raised his glass crying, “A toast to Ali! A toast!”

Ibrahim grasped Marwan by the shoulder and sat him down. “Calm down, Marwan, calm down.”

Ali responded to Marwan’s request, and began to play:

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9 Lines from the quatrains of the 11th and 12th century Iranian philosopher and poet Omar al-Khayyam. Umm Khulthum performed this poem in song. Al-Khayyam also famously wrote about the pleasures of wine, friends and the present moment.
“My country

Oh that eagle that plunges its beak
Into my eyes
Into the blaze
Where is the history of the Arabs?
Everything I own is in the presence of death
The angry brow.”

The clinking of glasses stopped, and the group bowed their heads in silence. Ibrahim approached Marwan’s chair shaking his head angrily, “God damn you! Aren’t we all sad enough? You had to request that poem in particular?”

Marwan poured the last drop from the bottle into his cup. He raised his arm up high and the wine streamed down over his bald head.

He screamed, “Wake up people! If you don’t, you will be herded like sheep. As the poet said, “React or die!”

The cup fell from his hand and he dropped to his knees, choking with tears, “Take me to my house! Get my children!”

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10 This appears to be a version of Mahmoud Darwish’s famous poem Jabiin wa ghadab, translated into English and published as “Pride and Fury” by Khouri and Algar. The Arabic text of this poem, and a translation by the editors can be found in An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry, eds. Mounah A. Khouri and Hamid Algar. Berkeley: University of California Press 1975, 229. Many consider Darwish to be one of the most important modern Arab poets, and the national poet of Palestine. His work evokes the personal and political struggles of Palestinians who faced deterritorialization after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and its subsequent growth and seizure of lands formerly occupied by Palestinians.
Numbness befell the group. Aziz and Mazin hurried to assist him, with Ibrahim following behind. They helped him to his feet and Aziz went ahead of them to open the bedroom door. They heaved him onto the mattress, and he tossed and turned on the bed, fully dressed as he was, muttering, “Treat me with what made me ill in the first place.”

Ali gathered up the scattered bits of broken glass. Suhayla brought a rag and dried the floor while Hamdan started straightening the place up. Aziz, Mazin and Ibrahim returned to their places.

Aziz noticed your distraction, Maryam, and said, “Hey, where did you go?”

You replied, “I wonder if Marwan needs a doctor?”

Ibrahim replied, “Right now, he’s as high as a kite, he’s forgotten everything.”

Your glance moved between the group and the bedroom door. You said, “But he’s obviously unwell and feeling defeated.”

In a voice full of sorrow, Hamdan said, “My dear, we’re all defeated.”

Ali said, “Weakness is a human tendency, but we have to resist it.”

Aziz added, “You’re right Ali, we all have to play our role.”

Hissing with anger Hamdan yelled, “Who is allowed to play his own role? I, for example, am chief editor of a newspaper, and despite that, I cannot get beyond a sense of defeat. Every day the government sticks its nose into the newspaper’s business, not to mention the fact that it censors us and makes secret reports.”

Aziz interrupted his tirade, “Nothing lasts forever, Hamdan. By the way, what about the position for Maryam?”

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11 A quotation from Abu Nuwas, the 8th and 9th century Arab poet who extolled the pleasures of drinking wine.
Hamdan nodded his head, “There’s currently an editorial position open, and she can start whenever she wants.”

You said, Maryam, “Thanks for you help, Hamdan.”

“You’re welcome, but tell me more about yourself.”

You straightened up in your seat and recited, “Maryam Abdel Fatah, graduate of the College of Arts, Department of Philosophy, 1974, Egyptian citizenship.”

Aziz smiled, “You’re a child!”

You frowned, preferring silence.

He added, “Do you know how old I am?”

You maintained your silence.

“Fifty years old.”

Ibrahim replied, “We are the same age, man!”

Aziz breathed, “Actually its fifty-two, so relax!”

You smiled, Maryam, “You don’t look it!”

With a sly laugh Ibrahim said, “And there you are!”

Suhayla asked Hamdan, “If I wanted to publish a story in your paper, what’s the procedure?”

Hamdan took off his glasses. “Submit it to the editorial secretary but don’t touch three topics: politics, religion and sex.”

You laughed hysterically, Maryam.

In surprise, the group turned to look at you.

You cried, “It’s the same triangle!”

Mazin asked, “What triangle?”
You replied, feeling frustrated, “It’s the same taboo subjects: politics, sex and religion. The very same taboos that exist in my own country and that oppressed and stifled me—and now I realize—it’s the same thing here!”

You felt like sharing your frustration, and continued in a choked voice, “Every day since I arrived here I get up early and look for work, and by chance, now I’ve found a job. But now it seems that I’ll have to become a member of the ruling party and if I refuse, I’ll lose my job and have to go back to hunting and searching again. It’s the same stranglehold here and there.”

Aziz approached you and stroked your hair. “Take it easy, Maryam, everything passes.”

You fixed your gaze on Hamdan, asking, “Tell me, Hamdan, do I have to become a member of the Party here?”

Hamdan looked around him and said, “No, I think that the editorial department is removed from such matters.”

You took a deep breath, “Thank God.”

Ibrahim said, “I appreciate your situation, but I don’t see the world as bleak as all that.”

Having emptied his cup Mazin asserted, “To tell the truth, brothers, I only found my freedom when I started fighting in south Lebanon.”

Aziz replied, “But democracy must come first, or violence and chaos will be inevitable.”

Mazin’s face flushed. “This is where we have always differed, Aziz. Remember how we were when we were young? We were fearless when we started to fight.”

Aziz scowled, “You mean that I am a coward!”

Mazin replied hastily, “God forbid, I didn’t mean that at all!”

Tense moments of silence passed until Suhayla broke it, “Amm Mazin, I wish you would tell us about how you came to know Amm Aziz.”
Hamdan smiled, looking thoughtfully at Suhayla. “You want to write a story, right?”

Suhayla shrugged her shoulders without replying.

Mazin looked into Aziz’s angry face saying, “I wish that Aziz would tell it, he’s better at telling stories than me.”

Ibrahim replied, “Yes, tell the story, Aziz!”

Aziz began the tale. “I met Mazin for the first time in the camps after we’d fled with the other refugees to Jordan in 1948. He was a headstrong boy—a stallion you might say—strong and redhead. We’d vie to see which one of us could climb the tell the fastest. We used to play cops and robbers, always squabbling over which one of us would be the cop and which the robber. We’d toss a coin and Mazin would be angry when it was his turn to play the robber—it always came to blows. Ever since I was little I loved to read, and Mazin loved to hunt with his shotgun. One time, he caught a small falcon and he carried it on his shoulder wherever he went.

In the evening—we and the children and people of the camps—used to gather around the fire and we would divide amongst ourselves the morsels of food and the dream of return. Tea circulated along with the sad stories. We would smell the fragrance of the oranges and the breezes off the mountain and when darkness came, the blaze of the fire increased. The Children of the Martyrs Welfare Organization took up the matter of our education. We listened to the lesson written on the chalkboard, repeated it and committed it to memory. When we came of age we participated in smaller Fedayi operations as we were able. After the success of any operation we would dance and sing and share our joy with one another.

One night we were ambushed. We had two comrades with us, one escaped and the other was wounded in his back. We were imprisoned for about year. When we got out we returned to the Fedayi operations again. Our youthful energy was intensified by our zeal, we would cross the
river and the darkness and return carrying our heads high. One night we went to bomb some army barracks. A group of officers and soldiers found us and seized us and we were sentenced to death in front of a firing squad. Some resistance fighters were able to rescue us, but then we faced a tortuous journey through the most rugged parts of the mountains and through the middle of the swamp lands, until we arrived at the Egyptian border at the end of 1954, as I recall it. The Egyptian government welcomed us with open arms and helped us to settle down and complete our education free of charge. It was the first time I saw Gamal Abdel Nasser and I was able to say hello to him.

Mazin smiled, “I remember that we had our photo taken with President Nasser, but I don’t know where that picture went.”

Hamdan said, “May God open a way for you, Amm Aziz.”

Aziz filled his glass and munched on some peanuts. He gulped down his drink and contemplated his friend Mazin as though he had to look at him in order to remember their shared past. Then he went on with his story.

“We completed our education and then volunteered to fight with the Fedayeen in the 1956 war. We were among the first to bless the union between Egypt and Syria in ’58. The PLO took over responsibility for our care and expenses. We lived in Old Cairo, Shubra, Sayyida Zaynab and Hussayn, and we hung out in the cafés—al-Fishawi and Riche—and we met many Egyptian intellectuals. We joined literary groups such as Galileo and Apollo and took part in activities at the cultural centers. We saw exhibitions, plays and movies and hummed along to the songs of Abdel Halim, Umm Kulthum and Nagat.”

Aziz’s voice changed, becoming sadder. “But this situation did not last, the debacle of ‘67 came along, which made our lives hell and blew away our dreams and ambitions. We left
after Nasser announced his resignation. We ran in the streets like crazy people and participated in the demonstrations of ‘68. We were arrested and deported from Egypt and then Mazin and I parted ways. He went to South Lebanon and joined the Popular Front, and I went to Tunisia as a member of the PLO. I lived there for years working in the communications department of an agency under the authority of the Organization. My material circumstances improved, but I became weary of office work and I decided to leave, and I ended up among you, here.”

Ibrahim said, “You’ve lived all your life on the edge, Aziz.”

Aziz nodded his head. “And I still am, to tell the truth.”

Mazin said, “It was our choice from the beginning and we have to keep going.”

You addressed yourself to Ali, Maryam: “Have you heard of the Egyptian poet, Salah Jahin?”

He replied quickly, “Who hasn’t heard of him? What a great poet and cartoonist!”

“Do you know his quatrains?”

He rubbed the hair on his head, “Some of them.”

“Do you know ‘It was I who needed to do the impossible’?”

“Of course.”

“I wish you would play it.”

Ali tuned his oud strings, saying, “I want you to sing with me, Maryam.”

Your face went red.

“But…”

Ibrahim encouraged you, “Sing, and we’ll join in the chorus.”

You nodded your head “OK.”

Ali began to play and you, Maryam, sang,
“It was I who needed to do the impossible
I saw the moon
And I jumped up high
Whether I get a better look or not
Doesn’t really bother me
Why should it? As long as my heart is already full of joy
How strange!”

The group repeated,

“It was I who needed to do the impossible
I saw the moon...”

Ibrahim applauded, “Wonderful...wonderful...Jahin is such a great poet!”

After the singing, Ali leaned his oud against the back of a chair. You got up, Maryam, along with Aziz and Suhayla, to go to the kitchen and prepare supper. Ali and Ibrahim cleaned off the table, while Ibrahim picked up the glasses and bottles.

In the kitchen, Suhayla asked you, “Do you want taman?”

You raised your eyebrows, not understanding at first.

She pointed to the bag of rice.

You smiled, “Oh, you mean rice!”

Suhayla replied, this time using the Egyptian word, “Ruz!”

“Yes, we call it ‘ruz’ in Egypt, but anyway, I think we should eat light...what do you think about egg and cheese sandwiches and fried potatoes?”
She nodded her head, “That sounds like a great idea!”

Aziz said, “Are you ladies chatting or preparing the food?”

You both laughed.

He opened the refrigerator and took out some meat slices and put them in the oven.

Suhayla peeled the potatoes and started to fry them as you warmed the bread and prepared the salad, Maryam.

The three of you emerged from the kitchen carrying trays of sandwiches, broiled meat and salads, and the group devoured the food quickly. After the meal, Aziz cried out in a languid tone, “By the way, there isn’t a young man around who can make better tea than Abu Khalil.”

Ibrahim got up enthusiastically and soon the cups circulated along with the conversation and the smoke.

Mazin looked at his watch, stood up suddenly and passed by those seated as he headed for the door of the apartment. He turned the knob, saying, “Goodbye everyone, I’m due in Lebanon tomorrow!”

Aziz walked toward him. They embraced and exchanged some whispered words.

Hamdan caught up with Mazin, “Drop me off on your way, I have work in the morning.”

Standing in the threshold of the open door Aziz said, “Keep in touch...OK?”

With a speed matching that of his footsteps on the stairs, Mazin yelled, without turning around, “God willing...Goodbye!”

Aziz shut the door and before he had a chance to sit down, he heard a confused voice coming from the bedroom.

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12 Aziz calls his friend by his kunya, that is he is referred to in relation to his son Khalil: ‘Abu Khalil’ or father of Khalil.
He stood up listening, and after a minute he said, “I think Marwan is awake.”

Ibrahim replied, “Great, let’s go get him up and have him drive us home.”

Aziz entered the bedroom with Ibrahim right behind him. They grappled Marwan by the arm, and succeeded in getting him up off the bed.

Staggering as he walked, Marwan mumbled, “Where am I?”

Ibrahim pushed him into the bathroom, and put his head under the tap.

Aziz brought a towel and dried his head.

You, Maryam, prepared a cup of coffee and brought it for him. Marwan gulped some down and said, “I’m sorry, everyone, I’ve been a pest.”

Ibrahim replied, “Forget it…the important thing is, are you OK now?”

He nodded his head, “I’m fine.”

He took the last sip of his coffee, stood up and looked around, “My keys.”

Everyone searched with him, on the chairs and under them, until Ali found them behind a large chair.

Aziz helped him to straighten up his clothes. “Thank God… you were in a bad state, but you look a lot better!”

Ali put his oud into its fabric case and Suhayla went into the bathroom and came out with her bag on her shoulder. “I’m ready!”

And you, Maryam, echoed, “I’m ready.”

Aziz turned toward you, gently pulled your jacket closed across your chest and whispered, “Stay in touch!”

You followed the others down, while Aziz stood at the top of the stairs, waving farewell. You all piled into Marwan’s car, which took off, disappearing quickly into the fog.
The lights were dim; one could not distinguish the occupants from their wraps.
You walked down a long passageway, Maryam, and entered a narrow room with a low ceiling. The room had no windows, only small slits high up on the walls that allowed the entry of a few rays of light and a little stale air.

The person seated closest to the door stood up to do the introductions. She pointed to those present saying, “Naziha...Gazwan.”

And then she gestured to herself, adding lethargically, “Suhad.”

After all the greetings were exchanged, Maryam, you sat down in front of your desk. It was piled high with papers to be edited.

After straightening up some papers, Ghazwan said, “We would like to order some tea for you, sister Maryam.”

You shook your head, “Thank you, but your warm welcome is enough for me.”

Suhad got up, walked around her desk and came toward you. She was short, stout and had green eyes. Her chestnut hair was pulled back in a braid.

She said enthusiastically, “Today you are our guest. So, would you like tea or coffee?”

You smiled, Maryam. “Koshary tea, with the sugar on the side.”

She stroked her hair, “What is koshary?”

Ghazwan replied, “Koshary, that’s an Egyptian food, right?”

Suhad raised her eyebrows; “There is no food in the department, only tea and coffee. Be patient, my sister and after work we’ll make you food, and...”
You cut her off, “Koshary tea is made by pouring boiling water on loose tea leaves and adding sugar, you see?”

The group laughed heartily, except for Naziha, who stood up suddenly, rapping her knuckles on the desk. “We’d better finish our work, we’ve still got a lot to do.”

Naziha was extraordinarily slender, with narrow black eyes and short hair. Confronted with her stern features, the group fell silent.

You looked at the papers piled up on your desk, Maryam, and asked yourself, ‘How am I going to get through all this editing in this dim, stifling room?’

The situation didn’t look good.

The first days of work passed in a sort of cautious calm, except for Suhad’s cajoling you every morning, “Please, Miss Maryam, say ‘Good morning’—Egyptian-style!”

You would reply with the greeting in the Egyptian pronunciation.

Suhad would lean back in her chair, “You Egyptians have such a lovely way of saying things!”

Suhad was, to a large extent, a spontaneous type, and the opposite of Naziha, who wore a distinctly wary look in her hawk-like eyes. As for Ghazwan, he was, as they say, a mild tempered sort, always trying to keep the peace.

Suhad put a cup of tea on your desk, Maryam, and then went to get a chair to sit down next to you, giving her back to Naziha.

She asked you in a low voice, “How are you all in Egypt? And how is Adel Imam? I really miss seeing his new work. I have most of his films and plays on video and recently my family and I saw the play *The Witness Who Didn’t See Anything*. It was great, you know, I saw it three times!”
Ghazwan said, “That play had political references to the Sadat era.”

Naziha shot you an uncomfortable glance, Maryam. It seemed that she had been eavesdropping on the conversation. She said, “Should we call you a Sadatist, or...”

You gave a bitter laugh, replying, “There’s no call for that.”

Your face flushed Maryam, and tension gripped your chest, as you added, “I don’t accept anyone describing me as a Sadatist—I am Maryam, remember the name well—I am just here for work, no more and no less. I hope I have made myself clear.”

You grabbed a piece of paper from the pile on your desk and took your pen adding, “It’s enough that we pay the price for the mistakes and stupidity of others.”

The atmosphere was electric. Suhad returned to her desk, hiding her head in her papers. Ghazwan busied himself organizing the folders in front of him.

Naziha pursed her lips and stood up suddenly, crying, “You mean that I’m stupid, don’t you? Really...you Egyptians!”

You threw down your pen, Maryam, with a sharpness that was unlike you, and cut her off, “Don’t say something you might regret!”

Naziha recoiled in her chair.

Ghazwan said, “She doesn’t mean to insult you, Maryam.”

You returned to your papers, muttering, “Or maybe she does.” Naziha gathered her papers and her bag and hurried toward the door crying, “This can’t continue...we simply can’t go on like this.”

The atmosphere was thick with tension as everyone went back to work in silence.
The days began to run together, each the same—with you sitting at the same desk, under the same low ceiling and the same dim light—in a circle of alienation and weariness.

One day you looked at Naziha’s empty seat, and remarked, “I wonder why Naziha is absent, it’s not like her.”

Ghazwan replied, “Keep your mind on your work, Maryam, Naziha doesn’t need to work like the rest of us.”

Suhad pursed her lips, “She never visits anyone nor does she want anyone to visit her.”

You shrugged your shoulders, “She’s free to do what she wants…I suppose we should get back to work.”

Ghazwan took a handkerchief from his pocket, dried the sweat from his brow, and glanced between you and Suhad, saying in a low voice, “Naziha is granted special exceptions as to when she comes and goes, and she has free reign to search files and so on, in return for...”

He looked toward the door, and then turned his head to examine the entire extent of the narrow room.

You waited for him to finish what he was saying but he remained silent.

You said, “You mean she is a ‘sparrow’?”

He said nothing.

Suhad raised her eyebrows, “What sparrow? What do you mean, Maryam?”

You shook your head. “I mean that she watches what goes on in the office and writes reports about everyone.”

Suhad put a finger over her mouth. “Be quiet, the walls have ears.”

Silence reigned.

You slipped out into the fresh air, Maryam.
After work you hurried to the bus stop, climbed into a seat, and leaned your face against the window. You were struck by the streets and alleys as they went by, lined as they were with houses, shops and trees, and peopled by a multitude of brown faces. You heard the children’s shouts and the calls of the vendors pushing hand carts packed with everything from old clothes and appliances to toys and handmade items. You could hear the quarrels of women as they bargained over prices, along with the hurried steps of men shouldering their way through the crowd. You could see narrow shops, minarets, cafés and alleys, and above, the beautiful lattice-work windows and balconies. These sights and the aromas of bread, incense and water pipes made you feel as though you were in one of the popular districts in old Cairo. You felt suspended in time, swinging between a feeling of alienation from your country, and a sense of alienation from your very soul, Maryam.

A song came to mind and you murmured, “Oh you, going to Ghouria...bring a gift for my beloved...”

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13 Al-Ghouria is a market area in the old or ‘Islamic’ part of Cairo.
You used to walk side by side, fingers interlocked, with firm steps and hearts that opened onto a beautiful world.

That was the way it was between you and Saeed, your first love, Maryam. You walked together in al-Ghouria, looking at all the handworked goods, from embroidered gallabeyas and scarves embellished with beads and little balls, to carpets and skullcaps and shawls and ornaments.

You breathed in the fragrance of history that emanated from the elegant wooden windows, Zuwayla gate, al-Ghouri palace and the wall of old Cairo. You savoured the incense and small shops, the ancient mosques and cafés, and the smoke of the water pipes. Emerging from al-Ghouria into the street of the goldsmiths in Khan al-Khalili, you dreamt of two wedding bands, some bangles and a little nest of a home. Then you strolled through the Hussayn area as the Sufis performed their rituals of remembrance and you walked the long alley to the Masafir Khana whose walls have quietly embraced works of art and design throughout history. You climbed the winding steps to a shop famous for hot spicy beans and fried bean patties and devoured your food with pleasure. Then after roaming around for a while, you wound up at Fishawy’s coffee shop to sip tea at your leisure.

Your eyes met, gleaming with the idea of going to Grandmother’s house. The old lady greeted you, her calm smile revealing her prominent silver teeth. She always asked if you were hungry, and then set a generous meal on the table before you. You never, ever confessed that you had already eaten from the restaurants and cafés on the street.

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A famous art gallery in the Hussayn area.
Grandmother left the two of you alone on the pretext of preparing plates of rice with strained yogurt and vowing that you would lick your fingers of its deliciousness. From time to time she poked her head out to make sure that you were each sitting in a seat some distance from the other, you could always sense her shadow lurking nearby.

Once you forgot about Grandmother, and your hands met in longing, your eyes in desire. Saeed whispered, “I love you.”

Embarrassed, you flushed and replied in a whisper, “Stay by me, don’t ever leave me.”

He stroked your hair with his gentle palm. “I’m with you, don’t be afraid, I promise.” He raised his right hand in an oath, “I vow in the name of Almighty God, that I am yours, Maryam, and I will not leave you until the day I die and...”

You laughed, “OK, OK...I believe you!”

Noticing a slight movement behind the door, you moved apart, and Grandmother’s shadow slid between you.

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You stretched your body out on the sofa in the heart of the room, Maryam, and shut your eyes, trying to rest, but it was no use. A rapping sound invaded your head. You opened your eyes—the rapping was coming from the direction of the ceiling. You steeled yourself as the noise intensified.

You turned over, what was the use? You got up and called out from the window overlooking the back stairway, but no one answered. You listened carefully and said to yourself, ‘This is the sound of the meat pounder. It must be Zuba, there’s no one but her and her sister
Azhar left in this ramshackle old building.’ You called another time, but they never heard you, and if they had, they would have just screamed as usual, and then demanded to know, “Why shouldn’t they pound the meat? Don’t you want them to eat? And why would someone like you stay alone in the house anyway? They are free to do what they want on their own property and so on...”

And if someone wanted to get involved and negotiate with them, all he would get is abuse, some nonsensical muttering, and maybe even an accusation.

Zuba, Azhar and Murtada were the children of the deceased landlord. His wife had followed him in death, leaving her oldest daughter Zuba at fifteen, and her other daughter Azhar at nine, and Murtada at only three years old. It was said that the landlord had been an introverted, weak personality in the face of his wife, who had a sharp tongue and who quarreled with any of God’s creatures whether there was a reason or not.

The oldest daughter had inherited these characteristics from her mother, along with her appearance, for she was thin, her skin was a dark, almost rusty color and she had protruding teeth and curly hair. Murtada resembled his father more, shy and overcome by his older sister’s dominance. As for Azhar, she was excessively fat, and her features almost drowned in the flesh of her bloated face. Her older sister’s tight control over her very breaths had reduced her to the likeness of a terrified mouse.

The people of the quarter made fun of those girls, giving them sarcastic nicknames. They called Zuba “the Scowler” and they called Azhar “the Fat Failure”. As for Murtada, they called him “Girlie”. The Scowler, and her sister the Fat Failure undertook to raise Girlie in the lifestyle of their father. It was their good luck that the boy was clever at his studies, so that—directly after
his graduation—he traveled to the oil countries, and during his long absence he was content to send home regular sums of money every month and for each holiday.

The Scowler was divorced twice because she was barren, so she ended up having liaisons with the customers of the local café. They would slip away from the café, reaching her via the roof terraces, or in the café cellar, or on the outskirts of town. As for the “Fat Failure”, she was excessively curious, and would stick her nose into things that did not concern her—which was basically innocuous—but which exposed her to the ridicule and abuse of the men and women of the quarter.

Once you were at your Grandmother’s for dinner, when suddenly Grandmother stopped eating, stood up and made her way slowly to the door of the apartment. Quick as lightning she flung open the door, hurling the Failure back, and slamming her head forcefully against the opposite wall. You got up quickly to rescue her from Grandmother’s grasp, and just barely enabled the girl to escape. She hastened out the door like a terrified rabbit, with Grandmother’s screams pursuing her, “You wretched girl! You’re not going quit this nasty habit of yours? By God...if I catch you eavesdropping again it will be a bad day for you...you fat thing, you disgrace to girls!”

You closed the back window, Maryam, after despairing of stopping the racket of the meat pounder. You looked into the mirror that was vibrating on the wall in the passage between the kitchen and the bathroom. Dark circles surrounded your eyes, and white strands were invading your hairline. You grabbed a comb and began combing your hair, but after a moment you stopped, staring into the glass. You flung down the comb, mumbling, “Why should I even bother?”

The rapping continued.
You lifted your face to the ceiling asking yourself, “Perhaps your fate has become like theirs? Ahhh...Maryam, who can turn the rusty wheels of your life? Who would be willing to take the risk?”