A small room in the heart of a tunnel. In the middle of the room stands Grandmother’s brass bed. The pale coverlet blends with the yellow color of the curtains and the walls.

The tunnel is extremely dark. You stand on tiptoes, Maryam, trying to push up a rolling metal door, and you strain to breathe as you finally manage to lift it.

The lights are dim, your old street becomes misty, and the features of the people are not discernable. You spit into your hands and stumble through the tunnel¹. In the yellow room you find legs of meat hanging from the ceiling and a huge hand chopping them up with a cleaver. Blood gushes out and you let out a stifled scream.

You run feverishly. Your father stands at the end of the tunnel wearing his old wool dressing gown, and he has a dirty grey towel stretched between his arms. Suddenly a bed appears and you find yourself sitting on its edge, wearing a short nightshirt—your long legs naked.

Your father screams, “If a person doesn’t want to wash the towel, he will have to walk away from it dirty!”²

You move toward your father, extending your hand to greet him, but he disappears. You call to him but there is no answer.

¹ A motion sometimes believed to ward off evil or bad luck.
² A proverb meaning that when one does not take care of unpleasant tasks, one has to face the consequences later.
You open your eyes suddenly, Maryam. You find yourself having sunk into your seat. You think that perhaps you had dozed off for a bit. Ahhh, Maryam, your father’s spirit haunts you sometimes. The arm of death took him while his son, your brother, was abroad. Your brother did not even make it back for the burial, and even then, his biggest concern was the house, because he was the only son among two daughters. Your sister barely waited until the mourning period was over to return to her husband, far away in one of the oil countries.

And here you are...the walls close around you in grandmother’s house, while the longing for a warm embrace overcomes you. You inhaled deeply and stood up, searching the cupboards and the dressing table drawers for some ties with which to braid your hair. Your hand came upon an open envelope full of old pictures. Grandmother used to filch a few everytime she went visiting.

Oh...the wonderful stories go right to your dispirited heart and renew its spark. You brushed the dust off the first picture and smiled...here is Umm Safeer, the Copt, with her large, beautiful eyes and her dimples. On her right is Umm Saeed, with her fine, soft hair and round eyes, sitting in a dignified manner. Surrounding all those women are their husbands and children. And there you are, squeezed into the picture between Saeed and Meena⎯your head and your shining eyes the only visible part of you. In the background of the picture is the dam of al-Qanatir al-Khayriyya.

The people of the old neighborhood used to gather in the morning of Sham el-Nissim\(^3\) to relax in the gardens; singing, joking, playing, dancing—and dancing with them were the

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\(^3\) A traditional springtime holiday during which families gather for a meal or have picnics to celebrate the coming of spring.
waters of the Nile, joyful at the gatherings at its bank that have continued for thousands of years.

When stomachs began to grumble, they would spread out old newspapers or sheets on the grass, and arrange colored eggs amongst dishes of salad, salted fish, chickpeas and lemons. The picnic always concluded with cups of tea around the primus stove.

You and Saeed would quietly slip away from the gathering to spend a few short moments together, away from watchful eyes.

In the evening, you counted your few piasters standing in front of the cinema, looking at the poster—it was for an actor whose quirky behavior you both loved. Charlie, or Uncle Charlie, as you liked to call him. You chose two seats in the back corner of the theater and as soon as the lights were dim, Saeed’s hand found its way to your body, Maryam. You slumped down in your seat, sighing softly. But once you noticed heads turning around to look for the source of this sound, you both sat up straight in your seats and returned your attention to the film.

In the beginning was a cartoon, you laughed at the schemes of the little mouse, Jerry, who resorted to tricks to escape from Tom, the cat, but Tom would never learn and made the same mistakes every time.

After the cartoon, “Uncle Charlie” would take over the screen, with his laughing eyes and his bowler hat; his little mustache and raised eyebrows, and the cane that he twirled around as he walked.

In this film, Charlie played a factory worker who fell victim to the ‘teeth’ of enormous machines, like a terrified rabbit in the jaws of a predator. He worked mechanically at his job until he collapsed from exhaustion and overuse—just like a rusty bolt. The foreman
kicked him out of the factory, his hat and cane fell into the street, and he was carted off. The audience laughed at Uncle Charlie’s funny movements, and at the strange little noises that he made. You and Saeed convulsed with laughter and tears ran down your face.

You put the picture aside, Maryam, whispering, “Ahhh, Uncle Charlie, you became a cog in a machine that wouldn’t stop... if only you could have predicted what’s happening now. Have we all become gears in tyrannical machines that have no mercy? Tell me, please, Uncle Charlie, will the wheels never stop turning?

You gazed at the picture again—its edges were curled and worn. There is your father wearing his tarboosh and crisp, clean clothes. He is standing with a group of men—some of whom you remembered and some of whom you didn’t. Which of those men had died? Which had left the country, like his Coptic friend Al-Kasan? Al-Kasan, a painter who had married a foreigner, was standing behind your father. He used to visit your house from time to time, and on one occasion he gave your father a painting that depicted a thick stand of trees along a river.

You and your father once visited his home, which was packed with canvases and paints. Even his bedroom seemed to serve as a studio for his colorful work. His wife was a blonde, blue-eyed woman who used to give you chocolates and magazines with pictures. She also had her own room with a large silver cross hanging on the wall over her bed.

And who is that standing alert like a soldier to right of your father? You touched your hand your forehead—it was Abu Awad, your father’s cousin from a distant village in Upper Egypt. The elder of his small community, he always sported a distinctive twisted mustache. You had only seen him a few times, and that was in that far off place. He marked the birth of his son, Awad—after producing four daughters—with celebrations and lovely evening
parties. Before Awad had even reached his twentieth birthday, his father married him to his paternal cousin Mahasin.

As a small child, you had attended this wedding party, Maryam. When Abu Awad died, his son did not replace him as village sheikh, but instead emigrated with his wife to one of the oil countries.

As the fates would have it in your little world, Maryam, you were their temporary guest during your exile in Iraq. But Awad had become a stranger to you. He was no longer the nice village boy you had known, and even Mahasin, his wife and cousin, seemed different.

The last time you encountered them was after your return from a meeting with Aziz. As soon as you entered, Awad turned his back to you—he was wearing striped pajamas—and his wife ran toward you, wrapping a robe around her body, her gold jewelry jingling.

She cried, “What’s kept you out so late, Maryam?”

Awad turned around and approached you as sparks flew from his eyes. “No girl living under this roof can stay out until such an hour.”

He pursed his lips adding, “Haven’t we told you? Instead of wandering the streets, you should attend to this matter of Mr. Abdel Hafiz. What’s wrong with him? Why aren’t you paying him any attention? He is a very important man in the ruling party, and he will take you far, very far.”

His wife winked, “And, he has his eye on her, she only has to give him a sign...”

You flung your bag on the nearest chair and cried angrily, “Go on...why did you stop speaking? He is married and has children, and he is as old as my dad!”
Mahasin did not help the situation by replying, “There’s nothing shameful about marrying an older man.”

Awad continued, “Also, he has a lot of influence in this country.”

Awad’s words provoked you, you approached him scowling, and he stepped backwards. Grey was spreading through his hair even though he was only in his early forties. You screamed at him, “And sir, of course you have an interest in my getting close to him so that you might become the one who carries his bag and writes reports for him and sits up late at night, and makes matters easy for him… and who knows what else!”

He fell with all his weight into the chair; eyebrows raised, and sputtered, “Who told you this?”

You sat down, crossing one leg over the other. “This is a small country, there are no secrets.”

He looked at you, still wide-eyed, “Tell me, who told you this?”

You shrugged your shoulders, Maryam. “You don’t need to know that.”

Mahasin rushed to stand behind her husband’s chair, yelling, “You should be ashamed of yourself, Maryam!”

You breathed out angrily, “And it’s not shameful that you don’t care about me?”

Mahasin hurried over to close a door. “Lower your voice, the children are still awake!”

In a calmer tone, Awad said, “Maryam, my girl, we only want what is best for you.”

His wife walked toward the kitchen muttering “I take refuge in God from the accursed Satan… I am going to make lemonade to clear your minds.”
You caught up with her, “There is no need for that, I’m exhausted… I’m going to bed.”

You walked toward the bedroom and before you closed the door between you, you said, “Please wake me early, with the children.”

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Cairo

You came across another photograph, Maryam, and you exclaimed, “Who is that beautiful laughing woman?” She was wearing her hat the way foreigners do—her figure as perfect as that of a manikin in a shop window—while she rested her arms on the terrace wall. In the background one could make out the minarets of ‘Cairo the Protected.’

You drew the picture closer to your eyes. Ahh...it was your mother when she was still young and beautiful and was, as your father liked to describe her, just like a princess. But why did her lovely figure become so bloated and flaccid in her older years? You remembered the last time that you dreamed of her; it had been a few days after Grandmother’s death.

She had approached you with her rhythmic stride, wearing a diaphanous white gown. She had a marvelous smile on her lips, and her eyes were gleaming. She passed through the glass of the closed window, surrounded by sheer, heavenly rays.

You turned over on the bed, rubbed your eyes and abandoned your pillow, but no sooner had you stood up than she left the room. You searched all around the house and found her sitting, her back against the kitchen door, holding two small doves in her lap.

You exclaimed, “What beautiful doves, mother!”

4 An epithet of Cairo.
Your mother stroked the little birds and sang, “*Oh dove of the land, fly, stand up and flap your wings.*”

You lifted the cover from your body, Maryam, singing softly, “*Stand on the shoulder of the free man and reap the harvest.*”

You looked around, it was pitch dark and your mother was gone.

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You lit the lamp and a sound from outside reached you. It was, as you expected, a voice ringing out from the café.

“*Oh daughter of the Sultan*

*Take care of the poor*

*The water is in your hands,*

*and Adawiyya is thirsty.*

*Give me some water, give me...a kiss*

*The water in your hands is...*”

The smoke rose over the customers’ applause and the clatter of cups. The radio continued to blare, “*On Abbas Bridge, the people are walking, walking...*”

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5 Lines from a patriotic Egyptian song.
6 The line finishes, “like sugar”. This and the following line is the rest of the Umm Khulthum song, written by Ahmed Adawiyya.
You closed the window, and turned around muttering, “I miss you so much, mother...but what does the dove in the dream mean? And why were you cradling it so carefully in your hands?”

May God have mercy on your soul, mother, and upon that of father, who kept you under his thumb, even throughout his illness. You took care of him and vowed that you would serve him even if he turned into bare bones. You would lift your face to heaven asking, “Lord, let my day come before his!”

Your mother was fashionable in her youth. She used to anoint her body with strong perfume and wear dresses embroidered with delicate winding patterns on the bodice. During those days, this style was called “Décolleté Shadia”. She used to love Shadia’s songs, and she sang them wherever she went. She never missed a single one of Shadia’s films playing at the
cinema and memorized all her songs by heart. As she sang, her hips and shoulders swayed and her long hair followed suit,

“Oh...engagement ring
May we all have good fortune
And build brick by brick
Our nest of love.”

You were very taken, Maryam, at how your mother’s body moved in her silver high heels. In the wee hours of the night you crept into her room as she slept in order to steal those magical shoes from under the bed. You dusted them off and struggled to put them on so as to descend the stairs, swaying with the sound of the heels clapping on the marble. Your hips danced with joy until you fell, rolled down the stairs and twisted your ankle. In the end you got a burning thrashing.

Despite your mother’s love for your father, and her good feelings toward him, a tempest would blow up between them from time to time, especially when your paternal aunt came to visit from her distant home.

Your paternal grandfather had been a trader from Upper Egypt, and he roamed far and wide selling his goods. One day, as he was trying to make his daily bread, he travelled into the land of the Turks. When World War I began he was unable to return home. But the idea of settling down there began to appeal to him and he married a Turkish woman who bore him three girls, one of whom was Aunt Ghalia. The girls grew up and the grandfather died—a stranger in a foreign land.
Aunt Ghalia rarely visited Egypt. She was a pale woman with golden hair that reached to her hips. She spoke very little, but she enjoyed her few visits tremendously and loved the warmth of Egyptian family life. She liked to visit the mosques and the saint’s shrines and she would never fail to pray for the reunification of the family in the al-Hussayn mosque, and to visit the local tombs. She would wander in the old areas and buy precious and beautiful things from there as mementos of the beloved land. Then she would return to her country a bit heavier, since she could not resist the *mulukhiyya* and the stuffed vegetables—especially the grape leaves—and the little pots of okra and sheep’s trotters and so on.

Your father used to take pride in his Turkish relatives and when he was feeling particularly proud and found something amiss, a conflict would rise up between him and your mother. Then the issue would grow from a family quarrel to a major conflict. Your mother would put her hands on her hips screaming, “In the name of God, Abdallah, don’t you be thinking that these outsiders are better than us, they are from the stock of tobacco and soap merchants, and they got rich at our expense!”

Your father’s eyes would bulge, “Have some shame, Waliya, instead of saying that you should be saying how thankful we are.”

“We are the ones who are generous, my dear, our country is full of riches!”

In the evening, your mother would distribute flat cakes stuffed with pistachios and almonds, and Turkish delight that Aunt Ghalia had brought with her on her visit. She beamed with pride at her neighbors, as both young and old circled around the magnificent scent and all ate with pleasure and delight.
You put the picture aside, Maryam, and a smile crept across your lips as you picked up another. The photo was badly ripped, so you tried to smooth down the torn pieces to identify some indistinct black shapes.

You leaned your back against the wall, and brought the picture close to your eyes. It was your mother and your aunt and surrounding them were other women—all wearing black. You had three aunts, but there was no sign of the youngest aunt, whom you resembled.

You were still a young child but the vision of the fire that caught the hem of her gown had never left you.

She had torn screaming through the narrow passage between the stove and the bathroom as the fire ran from the hem to the top of her nightgown with horrible speed. There was no one else but you in the house, Maryam, the others had gone out to offer condolences to one of the neighbors. You were curled up in fear—crying and screaming—and even now, Maryam, you don’t know why the fire had just flamed up like that.

Theories began to fly: some said it was an accident, while others attributed it to the emigration of her beloved, and regretted that she had fallen into a state of despair. You could not understand how fire could devour such a lovely person. You knew only one thing: that your aunt would never return and that black had become the dominant color of the household.
Baghdad

Your mind drifted to another scene in which the color black was predominant. One day you were walking down a street in the city of your exile, and you began to see groups of people wearing black. They were scattered here and there, on the doorsteps of the houses, on the sidewalks, on the rooftops, in the gardens, mosques, courtyards, squares, and even in the narrow alleys.

Women were slapping their faces in despair and wailing and tearing their gowns and beating their heads with their sandals, and men were rubbing their faces with dirt and hitting their heads with their sandals or clogs until blood began to flow. The place had a strange, mythic atmosphere of self-punishment.

You hastened your steps, skirting the masses of black. You kept running until you found yourself in front of the koshari restaurant in which you had eaten the first time with Aziz. Suddenly you wanted to take refuge within its familiar confines. You asked for Ahmed the Egyptian, the waiter who had greeted you so warmly that day with Aziz, and who showed you the picture of his fiancé.

His colleague said that he had joined the army and had been transferred to the Iranian front.

You thought about the woman who was waiting for him in Egypt, remembering her beautiful dark face with the friendly features of a country girl. You asked yourself, ‘I wonder what his family or relatives thought about this? Did he choose to go or was he forced?’
The face of an old man staring into his cold plate appeared to you. The sun was setting and your spirit was sinking under the weight of exile and the sight of the depressing homes around you. In the back of each house was a trail of wet sand leading to the sewer drain. Children were playing and squabbling in the alleys. Women, most of them wearing black, walked slowly in groups. Men in white gallabeyas and beards were heading toward the only mosque in the neighborhood.

You arrived at Suhayla’s house. It was a single story red brick house, with wooden windows and a rusty iron door. You knocked twice for its owner, and Suhayla quickly answered, smiling warmly.

She led the way inside, Maryam, and you entered a hall that was carpeted with a woven reed mat. In the center of the mat was a low, round wooden table on top of which sat a brass teapot and some small cups. Sitting in front of it was a thin old man, silently examining the plate in front of him.

You said, “Hello!”

You repeated the greeting, but there was no answer. He continued to stare silently into his plate.

Suhayla said, “He won’t hear you.”

You walked behind her. She was wearing a long gallabeyya, embroidered in the Arab style. The two of you walked slowly into an adjacent room, and sat down on a woven rug in the middle of the room.

She patted you on the shoulder, “Welcome my dear...you have brought light to the house.”
Smiling, you murmured the traditional response to her welcome, “The house is brightened by its inhabitants.”

You glanced around the room. It was wide, with a high ceiling, and was furnished with two sofas also covered with Arab-style woven rugs. Between the sofas was a low brass table on top of which was a cassette player, surrounded by cassettes, papers and an ashtray full of cigarette butts. An oud leaned against the wall in the corner of the room.

An ancient wooden bureau with a mirror in an Arabesque frame sat on one side of a small table, which was set with a kettle, a brass coffee pot and small delicate cups. On the other side of the table was a small stove. Cardboard boxes piled high with old newspapers, books and magazines were scattered all over the room.

Suhayla said, “I bet you’d like some tea!”

She stood up, lit the stove and put the small kettle over the fire. When the water boiled, she took the kettle off the fire, poured in dry tea and placed the top firmly back on. She arranged the kettle and some cups on a tray, carried it over, and put it down on the floor between you, Maryam. She turned on the tape player and Fayruz’s voice burst forth:

Sad northern nights
Remember me always
Remember me
You sipped your tea, enjoying the fellowship and the song, and asked her about her news.

Grasping her little cup in both hands she said, “Thank God...my studies are going fine, and I write now and then but...” She took a sip of tea and looked away bashfully. Then she said, “There’s something personal that is troubling me, and I just can’t relax...”

You replied sorrowfully, “Who can relax these days?”

She put down her cup. “You know my grandfather...you saw him when you came in?”

You nodded your head. “Yes, I saw him.”

“He’s been like that, unable to speak or hear since my father disappeared. Father was in his twenties then, a handsome, affectionate man. I was a child when soldiers stormed the house one day. They beat him and tortured him. My grandfather searched for him everywhere; the police departments, the jails, the prosecutor’s office, the vital statistics register, the passport office, the hospitals, and so on. Days passed and the years went by and no one ever found out what happened to him or where he went, if he is alive or dead. Can you imagine, Maryam? I have begun to fear my own dreams.”

A sad silence reigned between you, and Fayruz continued to sing,

*Sad northern nights*

*Remember me always...remember me*
You said to Ahmed the Egyptian’s colleague, “I wish you’d tell me Ahmed is OK.”

He replied, “God willing,” and went back to his customers.

You left the koshari shop behind, Maryam, crossing the street only to find more blackness awaiting you. You asked one of the passers-by on the street about it. He raised his eyebrows, surprised, “How can you not know? Today is the commemoration of the battle of Karbala.”

The image of a handsome young man passed before your eyes, Ali ibn Abi Talib, who vouched for the safety of the Prophet of God—God bless him and grant him salvation—and slept in his bed, warding off the disbelievers. That young man became such a romantic figure, a knight, courageous in the pursuit of justice.

Like the fate of other idealistic people, he fell into the trap that they had so skillfully set for him, and the succession was usurped from him. The factions changed, they split and multiplied until even his sons Hassan and Hussein met a tragic end. Seeds of dissent uprooted the ideals of the Muslims and prevented them from remaining united as one community.7

In sorrow and with a vision of blood before your eyes, you mumbled to yourself, Maryam, “What good are feelings of guilt, and what is the use of such sadness about the fate of that noble knight, Ali? What’s the point of these rituals that punish both body and soul?”

You completed your walk with difficulty amidst the throngs and the wails, and the question assaulted your mind, ‘Are we living a second Karbala?’8

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7 Ali was the fourth Caliph of the young Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad died. Not all Muslims believed that he was a rightful leader however. Ali’s followers became known as the “party of Ali,” or the Shi’a. After Ali was killed by his enemies, the Shi’a movement grew.

8 Here the author refers to the fact that Hussein, the son of Ali, was killed at the battle of Karbala by Muslims who came to be known as Sunnis. In the Iran-Iraq war, Sunni and Shi’a
You were dying for a cup of tea, so you put some water into the kettle. As you stared into the eye of the dancing flame, another scene emerged from your memory.

From a distance, the figure of Suhayla came into view. You were walking across a garden that had a fountain at its center, its spouts of water illuminated with colorful lights. Exiting the garden, you arrived at the door of the theater where she stood.

You greeted her and—NOTING THE EVIDENT DISTRESS ON HER FACE—asked, “You’ve been waiting here long?”

She looked at her watch, “Amm Aziz and Ali are late.”

You patted her on the shoulder, “We’d better go in.”

You interlocked your arm with hers and walked into the lobby. The place was air-conditioned, with colored lights, pictures of actors and comfortable seats everywhere. You sat down and sipped tea together, and before you had finished your cigarette, Maryam, Ali entered the hall hurriedly, carrying an oud under his arm. Aziz followed carrying an envelope.

Muslims also fought each other, although that war was also motivated by Saddam Hussein’s territorial and political aspirations. It was not purely a sectarian war.
in his hand. Suhayla called to her brother and he wheeled around. As soon as he saw her he rushed over to her.

She said, “Quickly for goodness sake, the band is waiting for you.”

Ali exchanged a few quick words with Aziz, embraced him and then disappeared into the auditorium. Suhayla caught up with him, saying, “I’ll beat you inside, I’d like to watch Ali from the front.”

Aziz whipped around snapping, “I need some air!”

In seconds he was back outside the theater. Surprised by his abruptness, you caught up with him, Maryam. After the two of you crossed the street to the opposite sidewalk, you grasped his arm to stop him.

“What’s wrong? Tell me!”

He kept walking. Together you crossed another square, leaving behind the hubbub of the crowds. You arrived at a residential street by the river, where sleepy houses and the flowing water calmly accompanied you. Aziz sat on a wooden bench under a eucalyptus tree, gloomily gazing at the movement of the water. You sat down next to him in silence. He took a deep breath, looked around, and drew near until he was almost touching you.

He said, “I have heard from reliable sources that the Palestinian Democratic Party might be dissolved.”

Alarmed, you cried, “That’s terrible, what are you going to do?”

He looked around him and found nothing but the veil of night and silence. “I received orders to give up the apartment and go.”

You stared with surprise into his hazel eyes. “But...”

“Mazin was right.”
“You mean...”

“South Lebanon”

“You’re determined to go?”

“There’s nothing else I can do.”

You got up from your place, and approached the wall by the river. Aziz stood up, following you, and rested his arm on your shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t be afraid.”

You took a deep breath, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was difficult in these circumstances.” He raised his palm to your face. Do you want to come with us?”

“With you?”

“With a group of my associates and I. Perhaps you can catch up with us, we can make the arrangements.”

“Really?”

He smiled, “But you should know, there are Kalashnikovs out there.”

“When will you leave?”

“Any time now.”

You looked to the river, silently, Maryam. Salty tears began to gather in the corner of your eye. A light breeze caressed your hair.

You said, “But you were just going to the theater, as if everything was normal!”

“I have to behave as though everything is normal, and besides, I needed to see you.”

The two of you walked alongside the river. Then Aziz stopped suddenly and looked at his watch. “I have to go.”

“Just like that?”
“There’s no time...so...what do you want to do?”

Your voice choked, “If I have to leave, I’d rather return home.”

He shook your hand. “Take care of yourself.”

He turned his back to you and hastened away. In the space between the river and the night, loneliness was extinguishing the flame in your heart, Maryam.

Even the mute walls of the houses seemed to mock you.

The snapshots of your life lay scattered on the ground.

Your heart was gripped by sadness.

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Cairo

You fled from your grandmother’s house, Maryam, and from the grip of the memories that it held. Once in the street, you passed by the grocer’s and nearly did not recognize Kawthar, as it had been a long time since you had seen each other.

There was no one inside the shop except her paternal uncle, who was known by the title “Master”, although you, Maryam, were aware of no master other than almighty God. You didn’t know who gave him this title or if perhaps he had simply bestowed it on himself.

What you knew about the situation was that Kawthar’s uncle had wanted to inherit her father’s shop after he had died, and that his other brothers had shared in this ambition. They had seen fit to leave Kawthar, now a young widow, only a small share of the inheritance, especially since she had never produced a son.
Kawthar used to stand in the shop from early morning until evening, her infant daughter wrapped in some cloth in a cardboard box. She remained there buzzing back and forth like a bee responding to the customers’ requests until she went home to the narrow shelter of a relative’s home. But she did not enjoy this space for long, since the women of the family were jealous of her and they hastened to throw her out. Eventually she ended up, thanks to those ‘respectable folk’, living in the attic of one of the old houses.

The crowd in front of the store dwindled. You noticed a woman wrapped in black from head to toe, moving among the shelves. Nothing was visible of her but two holes around the eyes. The woman approached you, interrupting your wandering thoughts.

“Can I help you sister?"

You knew this voice, you could have picked it out from among a hundred voices. You stared at the holes in the black face veil, and stumbled over your words. “I...because...”

You pointed to her robe, replying, “Can it be you?”

She eyed you, examining you from top to bottom, Maryam. You were wearing a skirt and blouse and your hair was hanging down on your shoulders. She nodded her head, “I’m grateful that God has led me on the right path and I’ll pray for guidance for you, God willing.”

She indicated with her hand, which was covered in a black glove. “Please go in!”

As soon as you stepped inside the shop, her uncle left it, muttering. You brushed the dust off a wooden chair and sat down stiffly. “Thank you.”

She completed a transaction with one of the customers and turned toward you. “Excuse me, sister Maryam, as you can see, I can barely keep up with the customers.”

You glanced between the shelves and the customers and said, “Take your time.”
“What would you like to drink?”

You smiled, “Thanks, but let’s wait until you are free, I have missed you so much, and I want to chat and laugh and carry on like we used to, Kawthar!”

The tone of her voice changed. “Please don’t call me Kawthar. Call me ‘Sister’ or ‘Hagga’.9"

It was an odd situation, Maryam. You stood up, not believing your ears.

You replied, “OK, Kawthar, I mean...my sister...I mean Hagga...Oh dear...”

You left her to her customers, and stepped outside the shop asking yourself, “Is this the same Kawthar that I used to know? Or some other woman behind that face veil?” You struck out on the street leading to the river, longing for the friendships of your past.

“Is the dream on the other shore, Saeed? Or has the dream become a bullet in south Lebanon, Aziz?”

You tried to move forward, between phantoms of departed loved ones, and the locked doors of your present. A voice came to you from afar, strains of the song Late Afternoon Sun.

You stopped and listened.

“Neither we nor you have an equal in sweetness...”10

Where was the voice coming from?

Perhaps from the radio at the café.

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9 ‘Hagga’ is a title given to a woman who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the pillars of Islam.

10 Here the Salem leaves out the phrase “ya niil” (Oh Nile) in order to leave open the place, and suggest that Maryam’s experience could happen anywhere. These lines are from a Bayram al-Tunisi poem sung by Umm Khulthum. Bayram Tuni (1893-1961) was an Egyptian poet exiled by the British on account of his nationalist verses.
Or perhaps it was a woman singing on a balcony.

Or a man crooning...

Or a bird circling above...

Or a child’s laughter...

Or has so much longing made you start to hear voices?

Maybe...

The Nile at Cairo