

## Excerpt from *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*

She left her scribbled notes on the table for days, and we paid them no more attention than we had to the others. Dust piled up on the lines written in the special Chinese ink she had brought for twenty years from Uncle Abdel-Monem's bookshop at the entrance to Bab Al Nasr. She would visit him and ask for lined paper which smelled of cinnamon; accustomed to her question, he no longer exchanged memories with her of the Streetcar Era, as they termed their barb-ridden childhood and complicated relationship. In silence, he would hand her a sheaf of white pages and return her money, and he didn't hear her when she implored him to be stoic. He would go back to sit in his shadowy corner where he gazed steadily at a faded photograph of his family. In its center stood his son, Yehya, smiling, his hair gleaming with oil. The arms of his brothers Hassan and Hussain encircled him, confidently expressing their ambitions in perpetual harmony with one another.

Of this photograph, Uncle Abdel-Monem saw nothing but Yehya, whom he had seen for the last time as a corpse laid out in the autopsy room of the university hospital. His face was charred and he had no fingers; his body bore the marks of electric cables and suppurating knife wounds. One glance was enough to identify him, after which the forensic doctor, as if carrying out a routine task, closed the iron box and wouldn't listen the other man's wild pleas to be allowed to touch his son's face. Instead, the doctor coolly asked him to take receipt of the body, and to bury it without mourning rites and under guard from six of the paratroopers who patrolled, armed and in full riot gear, through the corridors of the morgue.

Before the dawn prayer, Abdel-Monem had arrived at the hospital with Hassan, Hussain, and a friend, and grimly they

took him out. They carried the body to an ancient Volkswagen doing duty as a hearse, lifted it inside, and squeezed themselves in around the coffin. They stared at each other and wept in silence.

Death was spreading through the desolate streets of Aleppo, physically oppressive to a degree that was unbearable. They arrived at the family tomb and the soldiers asked them to carry the coffin inside so that the sheikh waiting there could pray over it. Abdel-Monem just nodded like he was demented and muttered something incomprehensible. The sheikh prayed hastily as my cousins lined up behind him. They didn't raise their eyes from the coffin, out of which the soldiers lifted a fleshy lump wrapped in a filthy shroud. They weren't allowed to look into the extinguished eyes, nor to embrace him as you should when burying a loved one. Their tears petrified in their eyes and they made do with looking at their father who was still crying silently, muttering words no one cared to decipher.

My mother woke from her long coma and sat at the broken-down dinner table beside Nizar, who hummed tranquilly like a deaf fly. She read him a line of the letter to the man she described as a dear friend: "Everything is finished, I no longer hold you to your promise to dance the tango with me on board an ocean liner." She left behind the encrypted tone of previous letters as she stated plainly that it was impossible to trust men who smelled of rats. Unafraid that her letter would fall into the censor's hand, she announced in a final moment of courage that it was all the same to her, and joy no longer concerned her. She didn't for a moment consider herself to have committed any sin; rather, she felt that to face death head-on befitted the grand dreams which had died before she had, and from whose defeat she now had nothing to fear.