

Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge

Ezzedine C. Fishere

Translated by
John Peate



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The Book of Darwish

IT HAD BEEN HIS FAVORITE chair for years, and yet he couldn't sit comfortably in it. His eyes hurt. Words were jumbled and pages merged into one another. Darwish lifted his watch to his squinting eyes. Five. Three hours until the guests arrived. Youssef was due at seven. Darwish had told him to take the subway, because the streets would be jammed. He'd be late if he got a taxi like he usually did. The remark seemed to irritate Youssef, but Darwish couldn't see why his son had gotten annoyed. He needed him there at least an hour before the guests. He was supposed to have come in the morning to oversee Kitty getting the birthday party ready. But he'd called the day before, saying he wanted to catch up with some old New York colleagues, so he'd check in with Kitty by phone and come at seven. Check in by phone! Well, that's if he even remembered to charge the damn thing. He really needed to speak to him before the guests arrived.

It looked like Kitty had done a good job. He'd passed by her downstairs an hour ago to check she was on top of everything. She'd gone out afterward to buy a few things. Three hours to go. No time for work of any real value, like writing. He had tried to use the time for reading, but his eyes were really hurting. He was dismayed he was wasting time now while he'd be pressed for time later, after the party. Why had no one invented a device to which you could upload spare time and download it later? These three hours, for example.

The guests would get there at eight, and wouldn't leave until eleven thirty. The joke was that Salma, the guest of honor, the birthday girl, wasn't coming. She had been running late, gotten the wrong train, and was going to turn up at midnight, after everyone else had gone. He asked himself for the thousandth time: what was it with these kids? Where had he gone wrong with them? Maybe it was genetic. He knew he shouldn't worry about it so much. If that's how they were, why not leave them to it? Let them become the kind of people they wanted to be: people who missed their appointments, missed trains, and lived in chaos. Leave them to enjoy blissful ignorance and the comfort of failure.

Youssef wasn't going to stick around for long. He was leaving in the morning, so there was no point making life difficult over him being late. Better to let things go peacefully for once, he thought to himself. Same with Salma. She would only be in New York a few more days, and he wouldn't see her again after that. Leave her with some good memories. He swore to himself he'd make it happen. So what would he do with these three hours, then? He had to finish the book proposal and submit it by the end of the week. He still had some thinking to do about that, and a whole heap of writing. But he had to sort out all of his books too, before the movers came. The house had to be cleared by the end of the month; in less than two weeks, in other words.

He gave up on the idea of reading, put the book aside, and laid his glasses on the table. The doctor had told him not to strain his eyes. If they started hurting, that was his cue to stop. He began brooding again. Why hadn't Salma caught the morning train? What a silly girl she was. She knew damn well this whole party was for her. The guests would be there at eight. Hellos, how-are-you, that kind of thing, would take half an hour, then Kitty would bring the food in at eight thirty. Eating that late was hard on his poor digestive system. His insides were as tough as old leather these days. He'd normally make

do with a little yogurt, but it'd be a bit strange not to dine with his guests. Of course he'd eat with them. And, yes, of course he'd be awake until one in the morning trying to digest it. That would mean not enough sleep, unless he slept in until nine. Which was impossible; he had an appointment with his lawyer at eight thirty.

He was mad at himself. Why had he gotten himself into hosting this party anyway? If only he had invited them for lunch on the weekend instead. But Kitty wasn't free on weekends, and his idiotic little granddaughter wanted to visit DC before she went back to Egypt. Ah, what the hell, he thought. We are where we are. He'd just have to get up at seven and spend the rest of the day tired and grouchy. What else could he do?

He couldn't read, write, or do anything meaningful in those three hours. It occurred to him to sort through the old bookcases. Maybe he could use the time till Youssef showed up sorting through them. Then he could sit down with Youssef for a little while, hear what was happening with him until the guests arrived. Yes, that was it. He'd sort through his old books. If it had been left to him, he'd have taken all of them with him to the new place, but the cabin was too small. He knew, of course, that he wouldn't actually need any of them, but they had a special place in his heart.

He had arranged with the realtor's office for someone to fix some more bookshelves to the cabin walls, but there was still not enough room. They had worked out the exact amount of space, as well as the number of books he could take; he'd have to get rid of three thousand before he moved in. He had sifted through his old university books the week before, and donated a thousand to the postgraduates' study room. They wouldn't read a single one of them, of course, but it was better than shelves lying empty, or plastered with student posters. So he had two thousand books to get rid of in a week. He couldn't donate any more to the university, the student union,

or any other organization in the whole of the United States for that matter. Most of them were in Arabic, and their educational worth was limited. That was why he kept them in the most private section of his library.

These were the books he had bought in his youth. Some were naïve introductions to theater, painting, sculpture, written by unknown authors who had plagiarized foreign books, and printed by government-owned publishing houses in the Sixties. Some were generalist social critiques written by journalists who understood neither criticism nor society. Some were anthologies by long-dead poets who probably hadn't ever had an audience. He had bought most of these books when he was in high school, or in his early university years. There were others he'd bought while he was working on his doctoral thesis and first started teaching: his Cairo University days. The only value in these books was the part they had played in his life. They were worthless to anyone else.

Youssef and Leila were shocked that he was selling the house. Youssef had asked him what was behind the sudden decision. And he had tried to dodge the question, calling it a seventieth birthday present to himself. Darwish's non-answer was not enough for Youssef, who pursued the point, asking if he was moving into a retirement home. Darwish laughed, sort of. "Over my dead body," he said, before changing the subject. When Darwish called Leila in Egypt, she asked him flat out if he needed money. He had dodged that one too. He didn't want an argument. He said he was bored with the house, but she snapped back that it was the one place they all had shared memories of. He said again that he was bored of the place, then realized he had repeated himself, and quickly added that their shared memories would follow them wherever they were. Leila didn't even pretend to understand. She was brutally honest about how unhappy she was about it, and said she'd rather he left things as they were. He archly asked what she planned to do with her house of memories, since she wasn't likely to

spend any time in it. She hadn't visited for two years. Then Leila again, then him again, and then the conversation wound inevitably down the same old path of incomprehension and suppressed anger on both sides. He changed the subject, then she changed the subject, and it ended up with both promising to meet soon, with neither of them really knowing where or when that would happen.

Youssef, after getting no straight answer from his father to his questions, decided to come home one last time, also to see his niece Salma. "Oh, now he remembers she's in New York! She's been here three weeks!" Darwish welcomed the visit, but without enthusiasm. He never knew what to do with him when he came. Youssef would disappear into silence most of the time. He'd grant his father's stream of questions the odd curt answer. In the end, Darwish would give up asking. Then there'd be silence on both sides. Youssef would spend the rest of his time there wandering around the big old house. He might watch a little TV or work on his computer till it was time to leave. That was how he'd been since he was three, when Darwish had split up with his mother; he was the same forty years later. Youssef asked Darwish if he needed anything from Montreal, and Darwish asked for bagels. He couldn't think of anything else. Darwish had tried to give Youssef his old books, saying on the phone that he had two thousand he needed to part with, and casually asking if he wanted any of them. Youssef laughed, then thanked him and offered to store them in his basement.

Darwish stood contemplating his old bookcase, looking at books he hadn't laid eyes on for years. He had walked past them hundreds of times without paying them any attention. It was hard to look at them now he'd decided to get rid of them. It was like he was tossing away parts of himself. These books had helped shape him, make him the man he was—or, more precisely, the man he had been in his thirties before he had come to the States. He suddenly wondered if he had actually

changed at all since then. He knew he had, but wondered whether he had taken a good look at himself since that time, or whether he had simply flipped the pages without noticing the changes. He wondered whether he'd just shelved everything like the works on that old bookcase.

He continued to sort through them, wondering why he hadn't told his children the real reason he was selling. Why not tell them he was putting his affairs in order before the final departure? "Advanced pulmonary cancer." That's what the medics had called it. When he refused chemotherapy, the doctor had told him bluntly that he wouldn't live long. A year, maybe two. Darwish replied that two years without chemo was better than five years with it. The doctor could tell his mind was made up, and told him his current lifestyle wouldn't give him much time without the therapy. Darwish said he was ready to change his lifestyle. The doctor said it meant he'd have to stop teaching, stop reading newspapers, stop following the news—stop anything that could cause stress. He should move upstate where the air, food, and water were better, healthier. The cancer would keep spreading, but the metastasis in his lungs would slow down a little. Darwish didn't need to think about it for long. He'd dreamed all his life of living in a remote little cabin in the woods. Pure air, clean water, greenery. Best of all, he would be able to get away from other human beings. He accepted the doctor's advice right away, and his realtor contacted him a week later to say they had the very thing he was looking for. A cabin overlooking a medium-sized lake in New York State's northeastern mountains bordering Vermont. It wasn't far from Syracuse, which had a state-of-the-art hospital where he could have his check-ups. Darwish made a quick visit, and found that the cabin was right on the lakeside, surrounded by towering trees and thick vegetation. There was no other building as far as the eye could see. He made up his mind then and there, standing in front of the cabin, gazing out at the lake's surface.

The timing was bad. The semester was about to begin and abandoning his teaching duties so suddenly would not go down well, but he went ahead with it anyway. The faculty head, whom Darwish had taught twenty-five years ago, was shocked. His old teacher had given no sign of intent to retire. Quite the opposite, in fact: Darwish was immersed in departmental development plans, and still led his research team with the same rigor he had applied for years. Darwish gave no explanation, confirming only his intention to go. He did not elaborate. The faculty head tried to talk him out of it, but Darwish left no scope for negotiation. In the space of a few days, and after three or four talks with the senior administration of the university, Professor Darwish Bashir put an end to his distinguished, half-century-long academic career. In the weeks that followed, he wound up the rest of his commitments in New York, sold the house, and began planning the simpler, more modest life his doctor had prescribed.

Why couldn't he tell Youssef and Leila any of this? Or his old colleague and former student? Why couldn't he tell anyone he knew, in fact? Because he didn't want anyone making a fuss. He hated drama. He hated having to play the victim, be the object of people's sympathy. What good was having someone profess their pity for you? What good was that to you? And then he would have to take on the role of the brave and tragic figure, to make their sorrow easier for them. No, thanks. No, he didn't want any part in that. He didn't want acquaintances showering him with their sympathy, genuine or fake. He didn't want to waste his final days. His doctors had advised him to avoid whatever made him irritable, and that kind of sympathy was sure to irritate him. The truth was he didn't see any of this, or what lay ahead, as a tragedy. On the contrary, he felt relieved when the doctors told him. He even had to suppress a smile until he was safely alone. He felt fate had handed him a final victory: allowing him to go while he was at the top of his game. Death was supposed to come

suddenly, but he'd been given advance notice. He put on a tragic face, because that's what you were supposed to do, but really he felt relieved, like a heavy load had been lifted.

He realized he wouldn't leave much behind. He would die like everyone else did. Those who really loved him would remember him fondly; the rest would remember him the way they wanted. This didn't matter to him. Darwish was seventy years old, and it actually felt like a blessing to know how much time he had left. It was a chance to put his affairs in order, with his own two hands, and to do what he had forgotten or been too lazy to do. From that time onward, he wouldn't do anything he didn't want to. He would flatter no one. He would spend no time on people he didn't like. He wouldn't make compromises or long-term plans. There was no long term anymore. He would do all the things he'd put off. He'd live in his remote log cabin on a lake in the woods or the mountains. He'd read books he'd never had time to pick up before. He'd write the book he'd always wanted to write: on the future of the Arabs. He'd spent his whole life studying Arab history. He had always dreamed of writing about their future, but his natural cautiousness prevented him. Now there was no point in being cautious. He would draft the book proposal and meet with the publisher early next week. Once he was in the cabin, he would begin writing.

He called Leila in Cairo and cajoled her into sending Salma to stay with him for a month. He tried to persuade Leila herself to visit, but she flatly refused, like she had done for years. He wanted Salma to come so that he could see her for the last time, but he also wanted to drag her out of that shell her demented mother kept her in. He wanted to rid her of the shackles she wore in Egypt. She might even be tempted to finish her studies in the States, and maybe settle down here afterward. You never know, he might succeed in rescuing her from the miserable future her mother had in mind for her.

When Youssef announced he was coming too, Darwish organized this birthday party, inviting a few friends and relatives. He decided to invite everyone he was close to in the US so that they could see Salma, and so that he could see them for the last time and sort out a few practical matters before he died. He wanted to give a few of them money, to help some of them out with their jobs, and to bid all of them farewell. Then he'd see his lawyer at eight thirty in the morning, get it all down on paper, in a will, and arrange the funeral. After that, he'd move to the cabin and devote himself to writing his last book. He would have liked to have kept Kitty on but couldn't, so he had arranged for a maid to look after him at the cabin. She'd fix his meals, go shopping, drive him to Syracuse when it got too much for him, that kind of thing. He bought a little boat and looked forward to sitting and gazing out over the silence of the lake, soundless and motionless but for the lapping of little waves on the prow. He might learn to fish. He bought a big TV screen and huge speakers, the kind he'd refused to buy for years because they were too pricey. He bought a pickup truck too—just right for the terrain around the cabin. Everything was ready for the move. All he had to do now was to sort out those books.

He didn't recognize it at first: Albert Hourani's *A History of the Arab Peoples*. His eyes lingered on it for a few moments, unable to recall where it had come from or what it was about. Then, in a single instant, the past forty years hit him. There were Jane and Zeinab, standing in front of him in two different houses, in two different eras. He was overwhelmed, and things began to spin around him. Dropping the book on the floor, he grabbed hold of the bookcase, but his unsteadiness didn't ease. He knew that dizziness well, and that it wouldn't pass quickly. He tried to gingerly lower himself to the floor, but the dizziness was too strong. He lost his balance and, though he tried to clutch the shelving, slipped and fell onto the wool rug. He waited for moment, prone there on the floor, then tried

moving his arms and legs. Everything seemed to be where it should be. Nothing broken. Not yet. He crawled slowly to the bookcase, slumped against it, and sat catching his breath. He thought to himself that he had been smart to insist on wooden floors after all. Had he followed Zeinab's plan and installed tiles he would have definitely broken a bone. He often had these dizzy spells. None of the doctors could treat them. They told him it was because his blood pressure would suddenly drop, but they didn't know why. What was the use of these goddamn doctors who told you what was wrong with you without being able to fix it?

He sat slumped on the rug, contemplating his study with its elegant, neatly made, brown wooden shelves. Thin white drapes hung over the wide window, the tree in the street visible beyond them. Not a sound got into the room through that double-glazed window. The wood of the window frame matched that of the shelves. There was not a speck of dust on the books. Good job, Kitty, he thought. He looked at the book that had fallen onto the floor beside him. Where had it been all those years? How could it have been there all that time without catching his eye? His faintness subsided little by little. He inched toward the book on all fours, grabbed it, and maneuvered himself back to the bookcase. He smiled as he flicked through Hourani's pages.

He had bought it in London, but not because he had hoped to learn about the history of the Arabs. He was already an expert on that. He had bought it for Jane, his British girlfriend. It was an easy read and a good introduction for those who didn't know any Arab history and wanted to get a lot out of one book. Hourani started with the emergence of Islam and its teachings, then its spread beyond the Arabian Peninsula, through the various eras, the different dynasties, the ebbs and flows of Arab politics, until he reached the modern age. All this in a few hundred pages. He gave it to her as a gift, jokingly suggesting it would cure her of her ignorance.

Though he had spent five years in London writing up his doctoral thesis, he hadn't met Jane there, but in Cairo, which surprised their small circle of friends. Jane was tall, slim, shapely, and beautiful, with long chestnut-brown hair, which she would either let hang around her shoulders or pin up with whatever was to hand, normally a pencil. She had come to Cairo for a year to learn Arabic, on some scholarship or another. She grew to love the city in all its chaos and ended up settling there. They gradually got to know each other, and grew closer until they ended up more or less living together in an apartment in Giza, behind the zoo.

The thought of marrying Jane had occurred to him early on: she had many of the qualities he sought in a partner. But something about her unnerved him, so he didn't tell Leila or Youssef about her until he was sure of their relationship.

He traveled with her to Britain to visit her parents, who lived on the outskirts of Glasgow. They walked to the riverbank where she had played as a girl, gazing across the endless pastures. She took him to the local pub, where throngs of young men had pestered her as a teenager. And they met all the neighbors who wanted to see "this Egyptian Jane has fetched back."

Jane was a good-hearted, decent sort of person, but her relationship with Egypt was confused. She told Darwish when they first met how much she loved the Egyptian people's good-naturedness, and their warmth and humanity. She found something in them that she had felt lacking from her life in Britain. He laughed to himself, being someone who actually loved the cool standoffishness of the British, finding in their respect for privacy something he lamented as sorely missing from Egyptian life. They found themselves in reversed positions, as he criticized she defended Egyptian life and people: "Yes, she is lying. From a legal point of view, she's lying. But it's not a real lie"; "This is not a weakness, it's caution"; "No that's not nepotism, it's really just an expression of gratitude";

“It’s absolutely not a class thing; it’s a different view of roles and responsibilities.”

He never accepted any of her excuses, never accepted that different rules applied to Arabs. Arabs were not a corrupt offshoot of the rest of humanity. The same rules and moral standards applied to them as to anyone else in the world. Saying anything else was patronizing trash masquerading as sympathy. To accept a lie from an Arab but no one else meant you saw a fundamental weakness in them that the rest of humankind didn’t suffer from. It was treating them as if they were granted permission to be irrational. He told her this, time and time again. Her indulgence of Egyptians and their shortcomings began to aggravate him. He asked her to read their history to understand why they were just like any other people, and how they had ended up the way they had. She would then see that indulging their faults was not the solution. Treating them like responsible grown-ups was. She tolerated, even reveled in their backwardness. Jane said she didn’t have the time to immerse herself in Arab history like that. Enter Albert Hourani. When he gave her the book, she seemed pleased. She did start reading it, but soon gave up, saying it was boring and that she preferred to learn through mixing with people.

But she didn’t learn through mixing with people. In fact, she slid deeper into “idiotic tourist syndrome,” as Darwish diagnosed it. This was an ongoing argument between them, as she believed the real problem was that his way of thinking barred him from recognizing any of the complications unique to Egypt. He would protest that he was born of Egypt’s soil, but he could tell the difference between complications and plain old bad behavior. In his view, Egyptians needed re-education. Whether it was because of their poverty or ignorance or poor education made no difference to him; the upshot was a deterioration in their moral codes. She would counter that he was the victim of his Western education, which had planted in him this naïve idea

that people could be reformed through argument or appeals to conscience. That's why he fought with everyone all the time: because he preached at them instead of trying to understand them. He would laugh and ask sarcastically whether that was an insult or a compliment, and her face would redden.

On one occasion, she gave the example of the passport official who had been dragging his feet over her visa papers until she had quietly slipped him fifty Egyptian pounds. Darwish had protested at the time: "That's exactly the kind of petty bribery that has built the grand edifice of corruption in this country."

She tried to remind him that there was more to it than that, adding, "The state pays its employees a nominal salary, knowing it's not enough to get by on and that they will top it up from those who need services and favors."

"That's just an excuse."

"But that's how things really are. You can't claim right or wrong when that's how life is here."

He gave her a condescending smile, patted her shoulder, and said, "That is a perfect example of your confused logic. Right is right and wrong is wrong. The only people who confuse the two are the morally bankrupt."

"What you call immorality is actually just a different type of morality, with its own beauty."

That really irked him. He felt he was involved with an imbecile; all she needed was to wear rags and run after a Sufi nutcase. He accused her of compensating for her failure to integrate into British life by taking a stance that allowed her to feel superior. She was a victim of her own mythmaking about the mysterious Orient. She countered that he was, in fact, infatuated with the myth of Western order. He looked at her with almost complete despair. Then he said there was a seminar he wanted to catch, and left.

After this familiar argument, their life would return to its calm normality.

He was teaching at Cairo University, a short walk from their house. She was working all the time with various projects for an assortment of civil society groups, from helping garbage collectors to looking after street kids. But the differences between them put an end to their shared social life. He saw no point in involving her in his problems, whether those related to his work or to his fraught relationship with his children and their mother, which had begun to take up a greater part of his life. Everything seemed to require explanations and discussions, and produced unbridgeable disagreements. Darwish confessed to Jane one day that he found it hard to deal with his children. Youssef was stubborn and would take no direction from him, either ignoring what he said or pretending not to understand. Leila was defensive all the time, of herself and her mother, whenever he made even the mildest remark. She was forever edgy, even hostile at times. Jane asked him why he insisted on commenting on everything his kids did. He responded that he expected better from them. He couldn't change their mother, who was the cause of all this bad behavior, so he had to use whatever time he had with them to set them right. Jane suggested he should learn to accept them as they were, rather than trying to reform them. He tried to explain his objections, but she didn't understand. She just kept repeating herself until he gave up on the conversation. From then on, Darwish avoided the subject, and started avoiding other subjects. In the end, the things they couldn't talk to each other about dwarfed everything else. Silence became the norm. Their life together didn't last long after that.

He smiled while recalling it all. He wiped the grime off the book's white jacket and wondered if he could really throw it out, into the abyss. He had used this book to measure the women in his life. Would it really end up in the recycling or, worse, in the garbage? He pictured the words gradually paling as the pages of the book were pulped, till there was nothing left but plain white.



His back hurt. Was it possible that such a little fall could have hurt him this much? Sitting on the floor was painful. Coping with wooden flooring was not as easy as he had thought. It was the first time he'd sat on it, of course. And putting it in had caused a lot of heartache between him and Zeinab. Why had installing wooden floors mattered so much?

It was close to six o'clock, and he hadn't sorted through anything like enough of the books. Failing to make the most of his time like this irked him, but he comforted himself with the thought that he would have all the time he needed once he was in his cabin. He had to put all these memories, as well as that damned book, to one side. He could sort through a few hundred before Youssef arrived. He wondered about giving the book to Youssef. He didn't like reading, though—never had. Darwish thought he had deliberately chosen a career in international relief organizations so as not to have to do much reading. After all, handing out sacks of flour to the needy didn't require much background research. If Darwish asked him to take the book, he would, but what would he do with it? Perhaps he'd give it one of his girlfriends, maybe even his wife-to-be, to read. Not that Darwish had ever met a girlfriend, or heard anything about one. Had Darwish destroyed his son's faith in women, or was it unfair to blame himself? It could be Youssef's silent moping that drove women away. Or maybe his hatred of reading. Or maybe he fell in love with women who gave him Hourani to read, and then dumped him.

Darwish turned the book over in his hands. He didn't think he could bear to part with it.

Zeinab had read it, or had started it, at least. She spent long years poring over it but read incredibly slowly. She died before she finished it. Darwish had known from the first year that she never would get to the end of it and began to lose hope in her altogether. The poor woman died before she'd got past the

Mamluks. Why did remembering that make him smile now? He didn't know. The truth was he hadn't understood much about his impulses regarding Zeinab, and that included what made him marry her. She had been so far removed from his idea of the sort of woman he wanted to be with. No one, including himself, could work out why he and Zeinab had gotten married. Leila couldn't, Youssef couldn't. His friends and colleagues couldn't work it out. Even Zeinab herself couldn't.

He met her in the hospital where she worked, when his mother was being treated there. Zeinab was nice, slim, attractive, clever. She would apologize for herself all the time, and was shy, clamming up if anyone talked to her. He had tried a few times, but she was very much the quiet type. The more he tried to draw her into conversation, the quieter she became. She told him later that she cursed her silence every time he left her office and thought over all the many things she should have said to him. She always swore to herself not to do it the next time, but she always did. That's the way things continued until Darwish's mother was discharged from the hospital. After a few months, however, his mother became housebound, so he contacted the hospital manager and asked him to send a junior doctor to examine her at home, and suggested Zeinab. They saw each other once a week at his home when she came to see to his mother. Things developed pretty quickly between them after that.

He felt very attracted to her, but was also well aware that there were twenty years between them, and twenty other things. As their relationship grew, he would harp on about the age gap, but she would laugh it off, saying it was him who would end up going to her funeral. Age wasn't the only gap between them, however. He was quick-witted; she was ponderous. He was focused and organized; she was airy and capricious. He was thick-skinned; she was sensitive. He was ambitious and determined; she was easily sidetracked and generally quite negative. He was focused on the world of ideas;

she was not. He was proud to the point of arrogance; she was humble to the point of impassivity. He was image-conscious; she was resigned to other people trampling all over her. He loathed people, but forced himself to engage with them. She loved people, but was distant. He was a manipulator; she had no agenda. He was fiery; she was gentle. He was life's expert, she its novice. Darwish wasn't sure they would last, or what, if anything, would hold them together, but he found himself compellingly drawn to her.

One day he decided to follow his heart. He had been ill and was feverish. He woke up to find her dabbing his forehead with a damp towel. In his drowsiness, he grabbed her hand and kissed it. She stroked his hair and kissed his hand tenderly. She asked him directly if he loved her, and he smiled and said, "Seems that way." She smiled too, and told him she had loved him from the very first. She didn't know how she'd cope when he left her. He asked why she assumed he would. She said she knew she wasn't good enough for him, and that he would surely leave her one day. He smiled and told her that she should truly hope so, because he was hard work to live with, a little tiresome, and a little obsessive. She was quiet for a time, then said slowly and purposefully that she knew that, but it didn't scare her. He leaned over to her and asked if she'd marry him. She kissed him and said simply, "Yes."

What had made him marry her? Leila asked the question angrily, Youssef skeptically. Incredulous friends asked too. His way with words helped him craft an answer for each one. He used the answers with Zeinab too, when she asked. And she asked him often, as though testing how sincere he was. He never found an answer to convince himself, though. But they had gotten married nonetheless.

It wasn't long before he got the call from a university in New York. His standing as a serious historian had grown substantially and he'd published in various prestigious journals. New York called, and it didn't take him long to answer.

He had left London after his doctorate, and had been back in Egypt for seven years. That was long enough to convince him there was no point staying in his country of birth. He'd gone home because he'd felt a sense of responsibility to his family and to his country. But seven years of teaching feeble-minded students who understood nothing and had no desire to learn changed his mind. Seven years of failure in reforming the department, despite all the promises made, all the money spent, and all the grandiose statements issued, convinced him trying was pointless. Seven years of sterile debates with fellow academics and writers who couldn't link their premises to their conclusions convinced him to leave. Seven years of dealing with a society hooked on its own hang-ups, a prisoner of its victim mentality, and hostile to anyone who suggested it needed to get out of the mess it was in convinced him that this was a doomed nation. Nothing and no one could rescue it. So he decided to save himself instead. Zeinab was more than happy to leave an Egypt she felt suffocated by. Leila, however, wouldn't leave her friends, and decided to stay with her mother. And, of course, she railroaded Youssef into doing the same. Darwish left with Zeinab, leaving his children behind, but determined to lure them to the States later.

Life in New York suited him perfectly. The academic atmosphere at the university was all that he had hoped it would be. He settled down, and his academic work flourished, even shone.

Zeinab found it tough. For a start, she had to take all kinds of exams to get her medical qualifications recognized in the States, even though she had practiced in one of Cairo's major hospitals. This siphoned much of her time and energy and took her away from everything else she needed to do to acclimatize. It affected her psychologically, and also had an impact on their home life and marriage. He didn't like this, not one bit, and was quite open about his displeasure. Zeinab didn't

have enough time to look after him, or the fancy old house he had bought on the Upper West Side and was so proud of. They had agreed that she would take charge of the decor and furnishings of their new house, but she couldn't even choose a color for the curtains. Zeinab had never been an expert in such things, but swore she would master the art in New York. However, she found herself unable to master anything.

She not only neglected the house; she neglected everything. She didn't feel she had time to even look after herself, let alone be part of Darwish's New York social life. Gradually, she became isolated and depressed. She struggled to pass her exams, which made her forever anxious. She would wake up every morning feeling miserable, then waste the morning wandering around the house, doing nothing in particular. By noon, she had run out of reasons, valid or not, to procrastinate, and finally began to study. She would struggle with topics and issues she didn't understand until five, when she'd start on dinner. And if anything ever went slightly wrong, if he made even the slightest remark on anything she'd done, she would spend the evening sulking in silent misery.

Zeinab would say that she was slow on the uptake, but not stupid. As a sensitive person, she was all too painfully aware of his dwindling respect for her. They talked about it a lot. She said she understood his reasons for it, but couldn't accept them. She tried to articulate her side of things; how she needed to feel loved and admired in order to flourish. She said she couldn't cope with his constant judging of her; his never-ending scrutiny of what she did made her confused and hesitant. She reminded him dozens of times that he had loved her despite how different they were. And she asked him hundreds of times why he said he loved her if he actually loathed her. He tried to explain that he understood her logic but couldn't control his anger at her many mistakes. He promised to try to curb that anger, and she promised she would make an effort to change too. But she couldn't find it in herself to even

try. And he couldn't hide his annoyance. As things got worse, she threatened to leave. He laughed and asked her where she would go. When she said she'd simply vanish somewhere, he, of course, didn't believe her.

One morning, she announced she wasn't going to take the exams, or at least was going to defer them. He protested, knowing how important they were to her future, but she was adamant. She said that she wanted to focus on their life together, to get their relationship back on track. Stopping their marriage sliding was more important to her than anything else. He kept up his protests. What was she going to do, if she gave up on being a doctor? Her reply was unambiguous and determined. Yes, she was a doctor, and that was something special about her, but she couldn't risk her marriage for this. She had to regain control over her life first, then she could go back to those damned exams. Next year, or maybe the year after. He didn't agree and asked sarcastically if a housewife was all she wanted to be. She replied calmly that she'd study other things, things she'd wanted to study all her life, but hadn't had the chance to.

"Like what?" he asked wryly.

"Like the subjects you teach. Arab history, for instance."

He couldn't think of a good reply to that. He toyed with the idea of suggesting the ill-omened Hourani book, but thought better of it. Even so, she came to him a couple of days later asking if he had a good book on Arab history she could read. He got up, took the Hourani off the shelf, and gave it to her without a word.

Leila and Youssef came to live with them after their mother died. He'd always thought it was best for him and the kids to live together. Now he would be able to heal old wounds. Undo the hard knots. Reestablish relations. Their mother's death was a shock to everyone and it was felt best for the kids that they have a total change of scenery. The universities of New York could open up their minds too. New horizons.

What he didn't realize at the time was that life doesn't obey rational logic, but that everyone and everything has its own special rationale. Leila launched her war of liberation as soon as she arrived, while Youssef declared independence. Leila decided she would oust Zeinab from her father's life, saying she couldn't figure out why he'd chosen "that woman." All that New York had to offer a girl of Leila's age did nothing to appease her and, however he tried to expound Zeinab's qualities, Leila's contempt for her was unbending. Living under the same roof didn't ease her hatred of Zeinab either. It had the opposite effect, in fact. Her antipathy grew, and the tension it produced came to dominate the atmosphere in the house. It was palpable. It lay behind every little word or gesture. Who controlled the TV remote, who played their stereo and when, which lights were on or off, bedtimes, who sat where, who did their homework where, which movies they went to see, what was for dinner: it was all one remorseless battle. Leila kept trying to belittle Zeinab, and Zeinab kept trying to defend herself, to prove herself.

Youssef, meanwhile, went off to his room as soon as he arrived, and during his four years of college only emerged to eat or on his way out the door. His father kept trying to bring him out of his room, to have him sit with the rest of them, but he always failed. Whenever Darwish called him, there would be no reply. Whenever he went looking for him, he'd always find him, headphones on, plugged into his laptop. Youssef would look at him quizzically and lift one earpiece slightly. If Darwish asked him a question, the reply would be brief at best. If his father told him something, Youssef would just nod or grunt something back. Then he'd smile the same smile he used on everybody, put his headphones back on, and retreat into his world once more.

Sharing a house didn't break down any of the barriers between them. Nothing made the children happy. Leila festered in her discontent, and Youssef in his silence. And where

Darwish failed, Zeinab, of course, did too. It grieved Darwish. He wished Zeinab could magic up something to win over Youssef and Leila, but her powers as a sorceress were dismal. As much as Zeinab could tell it hurt Darwish, she sensed too that he blamed her for it in his heart. She couldn't understand that. Why blame her for everything? She could see how much his life exasperated him, and how she exasperated him even more. He made her feel a victim and a failure at the same time. They'd discuss it, argue about it, tell each other hard truths, but the wound remained painful. Each set piece just added to the despair that anything would ever change between them.

Things settled into a life perpetually on the brink. The downstairs rooms were open battlefields all the time. Arrows flew in all directions, from the kitchen and the lounge. Darwish ended up despairing at the three of them. Mimicking his son, he hid himself away in his study upstairs. He also spent more time at the university. Leila made downstairs her operations room, spending most of her time there spying on everyone's comings and goings, lunging out into the hall for a fight if she ever spotted Zeinab or Darwish.

After a few months of this, Zeinab was exhausted. She had fought on all fronts at once, without backup or allies, and without any real, obvious reason to keep on fighting. She had no desire left to prove herself to any of them: not to the angry Leila, Youssef in his own little world, or even to her withdrawn husband. And she realized Darwish had given up on her too. He didn't even deny it when she put it to him, so she lapsed into despair. She surrendered; she simply wilted. She slowly withered, and seeing her do so only made him angrier at her. He secretly blamed her for everything, including wasting away as she did.

When Leila moved to California on a master's scholarship, and Youssef to Montreal on an undergrad bursary, all that was left in the house was Darwish's silence and Zeinab's wilting. She never took her medical exams. She

contemptuously rejected the very idea if he ever even mentioned it, and got mad if he pressed the point. He made a deal with an interior-design student he knew to redo the house, and used the opportunity to have the ugly curtains she had picked out for them thrown straight in the trash. He brought Kitty on to take care of the cleaning and cooking. As for Zeinab, she took to spending the day on the couch with some magazines, in front of the computer, or wandering to the shops and back, without really buying anything. She did persist with Hourani, though, reading a paragraph or two a day and taking notes, but whenever her husband came home he'd find her asleep on the couch, the book lying on her chest. He'd wake her. She'd be startled, gather up her jumble of stuff, and go straight to bed. But then one night he came home, tried to wake her up, and couldn't.

That was twenty-five years ago. Twenty-five years. He dealt with her death with a cold, steely impassivity. There were no tears. His sorrow took the form of silence and resignation, almost a continuation of his despair over her. He stayed away from women after Zeinab. It wasn't a conscious decision, but his whole being recoiled from intimacy of any kind. He didn't reflect much on Zeinab's passing back then. He avoided thinking about the meaning of her death. It wasn't necessarily because he didn't care; perhaps it was because it was more than he could bear. That was his way of dealing with it. Hiding from it. Ignoring it. Shutting himself off from it completely. He never used the word "death," but said that she had "passed on," "departed," "gone." He folded up the whole thing and put it away with the rest of his feelings.

His heart was a stopped watch. He went into deep emotional hibernation. The rest of him carried on, the part he knew and could control: his teaching, his research, his writing. He spent more time with his students, volunteered for every university committee going, supervised any thesis that came his way. The rest of his time he filled with writing and

research. His reputation rose. He ended up the leading historian in his field in North America. He got numerous offers to return to Egypt and teach there. Institutions from all over the Arab world wanted him to join them, even if only for a year. He turned them all down; he saw no value in the Arabs, or in trying to teach them. In fact, he saw no point in trying to change anything or anyone anymore. He wouldn't even try. Instead, he pursued a life of being content with whatever was at hand, ambitionless for anything beyond what he could currently control. He neither relished what he had, nor pined for what he hadn't.

He even gave up on Leila and Youssef. He accepted that he could never free Leila from her anger, or Youssef from his shell. Leila completed her Master's at Berkeley, but didn't come back to New York. He made no real effort to change her mind. She worked as a lawyer in Los Angeles for several years, and had several relationships, none of which lasted. He'd ring her now and again, catch up on her news, and make the odd comment on what she was doing. The conversations would always end in barely concealed rage on her part, but that was all. A few years later, Leila went back to Egypt, wanting to "do something useful." He expressed his displeasure, but did nothing to try to prevent it. She called him a little later to say she'd met an Egyptian doctor called Luqman, whom she subsequently married and had Salma with.

She and Salma would sometimes spend the summer in New York with Darwish. Sometimes Luqman would come too. They would stay with Darwish, but not really spend time with him. It was like they happened to be guests in the same hotel. Kitty was the only one who connected them. Darwish loved Salma, but Leila prevented their relationship from developing. She kept them away from each other. He could see that, but he didn't protest. Leila cut down on those visits over time and eventually they stopped altogether. When she then broke up with Luqman, he wondered if she would then forgive him

for leaving her mother. He found out later that she had started wearing the hijab and leading a more austere life back home. He had a thing or two to tell her about that over the phone, but resigned himself to it.

Youssef found a job at the UN, which took him to one African warzone after another. He never married, and Darwish never tried to persuade him to. Nor did he ever try to talk him out of his line of work, though he thought it a waste of time. When Youssef quit his job for no obvious reason, and went to live in Montreal on the pretext of writing a book, Darwish said nothing. What was the point? It wasn't that he didn't care about either of them, but he no longer tried to direct their lives. He didn't try to keep Leila in check or talk sense into Youssef. He didn't try to patch things up, resolve old differences. He had surrendered; it wasn't possible to change another person.

It was twenty-five years since he had surrendered. But what had just happened to him, slumped against his old bookcase on the floor? He clutched Hourani's book as if he had discovered a long-lost murder weapon. He saw things anew. Quietly, undramatically, he felt as if he had come to understand. As if he'd woken from a long dream. Was this how a man was supposed to discover what his life meant, sitting on the floor, browsing through his old books before dumping them in the trash? He asked himself why he hadn't seen things this way before. Twenty-five years after his wife's death, illumination had finally come from the dog-eared pages of that old book.

He saw Zeinab right there in front of him, as though she were really there. She was smiling that broad, loving smile of hers, her eyes forever imploring. That look was what he had loved most about her. He had seen it often, but it seemed he had never understood it. He saw her now and realized suddenly, acutely, how much he missed her. He longed for her as he had when he'd first met her. If she had been there at that moment, he would have asked her to marry him again.

He had wished back then that he could spend the rest of his life alone with her, and he felt the same longing now. He had thrown that all away over some ugly curtains, over spat about damned medical exams. He'd lost sight of it in all the chaos and failure of their lives together. And then, when she had died, the longing had too. But why had it come back to life? Was it because he was walking toward his own death now? Or was the iron cage into which he'd locked his heart when she died finally giving way?

He was taking a hard look at himself now. Had he committed the very sin he'd preached against every day of his life? He had taught his young students to question their prejudices and assumptions. He'd taught them to forget what they had been told and to start again. But had he ever examined his own prejudices, his own assumptions? Had he ever really taken a good look at himself? How could he have let these lofty standards and principles crush the life out of the one woman he'd really loved? Suddenly he understood why he had married her. He had loved her. It was that simple. He'd loved her, though she hadn't conformed to his ideal.

He hadn't listened to her. He realized that now. He hadn't listened, he'd just preached. Just like Jane used to say he did. Preached. What a fool he had been: a man who couldn't even hear his own wife. How stupid. He wondered if the children's bitter hostility toward her, and to him, had made him that way. There he was, trying to blame them for his own mistakes. He was to blame, for his mistakes and for theirs too. He'd sowed the seeds of unhappiness. He'd driven the two of them apart. He'd pushed the children away. Leila was brilliant, but alone and bitter. Her whole world was built on anger. She had fallen for four different boys, and then ended up marrying the fifth. Each time she would loudly declare to her father: "I've found the man I've been looking for." The man she'd been looking for. The woman he'd been looking for. Maybe she had a copy of the Hourani too. And then there was Youssef, the eternal bachelor.

Darwish was truly asking questions of himself now. How could he have presided over such chaos? Or more precisely, why could he not allow any chaos? Had he not tried to control everything, perhaps things would have turned out a little better.

He looked at his watch. Nearly seven. Youssef would be there soon. What was the point of sorting out all the books? They could go to hell. He'd phone Leila and get her to come to New York. If she turned him down again, he'd tell her he was dying and wanted to see her for the last time. If only he could go to Egypt. He wasn't up to it, though. Maybe he could get Salma to stay on; that might draw her mother over too. Maybe he could persuade her mother to get Salma into college in the US. Then maybe Leila would stay too, even if only some of the time. He'd try to convince Youssef to spend the winter in the cabin with him. He could work there on this so-called book of his. Better there than in the bitter cold of Montreal.

He'd tell them both he was sick, that he hadn't long left. Maybe they would be angry that he'd kept it quiet. They might be angry he was going to die when they had expected him to be solid and always there. This was the image that Darwish had sought to imprint on them, and encouraged them to aspire to. They would think he was deserting them, but he'd open up. He'd confess to messing up their childhoods. He wouldn't dodge it. He'd own up to his mistakes. He'd made mistakes, and was still making them. Everyone did. He'd try to be more human, maybe get them to change their mind about him. It was his last chance. Maybe the shock of it all would soften their hearts. Maybe the urgency would make them speak honestly, from the heart—let it all out. Maybe it would make them see their lives differently, face up to their errors, take some responsibility for what had happened, and learn not to repeat his mistakes. He realized, of course, that he couldn't do all this in one go, or even one visit. It would need time and perseverance. He still had a year, maybe two.

If he succeeded, it would be the greatest thing he could bequeath them. He wouldn't demand their love and devotion. He didn't dream of some happy future together. There was no future. All he hoped for was to help them leave the past behind. Maybe Leila and Youssef would spend some time at the cabin with him, even if only for a little while. And maybe when he died there, on the banks of that lake, they'd remember their last days with him, and not the past and its wounds.

Yes, that's what he would do. He'd start tonight with Youssef. He wouldn't let him hide away in his silence. And he'd phone Leila in the morning, after he'd spoken to Salma about her staying on for college. He looked at his watch again. Nearly seven. There was a lump in his throat. What was keeping Youssef? The guests were coming at eight. They wouldn't have enough time to talk. He'd have to put it off until morning, then, and speak to Leila in the afternoon. But he had to be at the lawyer's at eight thirty. He couldn't put that off. Ah, but Youssef had said he would go back to Montreal on the ten o'clock train, so they wouldn't have time to talk in the morning either. Why was he taking the train, for God's sake? Who did that? And why was he late? Hadn't he promised to come at seven and make sure the goddamn birthday party was all set up? Couldn't he turn up on time just once in his life? Just once before his old dad died? Perhaps he could take him aside during the dinner party. But that would be awkward in front of the others. No, that wouldn't work. He'd ask him to stall his travel plans tomorrow. He'd do it as soon as Youssef got there.

Yes, he'd ask him to stay on for a while. Then he could speak with him after he got back from the lawyer's. It'd all be fine. He was sure of it. All he needed to do now was get up off the floor, put Hourani back in his place, and get himself ready for Youssef and the others.

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No Knives in the Kitchens of This City

by Khaled Khalifa, translated by Leri Price

Otared

by Mohammad Rabie, translated by Robin Moger

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by Sinan Antoon, translated by Maia Tabet



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