

The Book of Safety

Yasser Abdel Hafez

Translated by
Robin Moger



To every battle its weapons, and should you shrink from using any of them on ethical grounds then that shall be to your credit, but expect no tributes when you are defeated simply because you were honorable.

Mustafa Ismail

The Book of Safety (original version)

The Book of Safety

By Khaled Mamoun

Would you like to know your end, then arrange your life accordingly?

“SELECT WHAT YOU CONSIDER TO be the correct answer, making sure to dictate your response to the clerk. Please do not write anything yourself. There’s no need. The pen and paper in front of you are for jotting down anything not immediately relevant to the subject at hand but which you consider crucial and would like to return to later.

“Here, you may enjoy your confession. You might care to take a stroll around the room to let your thoughts flow calmly out—that’s right, like those clichéd scenes that doubtless find an echo in your memory: one man muses, another writes. Between friends, let me assure you that this one is a quite excellent machine, his handwriting neat and more than capable of keeping up with you, no matter how pushed for pace. He doesn’t stall. Try him out, you won’t regret it. Don’t be shy. It’s no fault of yours that this is his job. My dear fellow, doing what we were made for comes easy to us all. I mean, do you despise the miner for coming out of the ground all caked in black?”

No answer.

“Ah well, fair enough. You’ve never seen a miner. Nor have I. My apologies, the image is a little too ‘of-the-West.’ Are there no mines in the East? Just imagine, it had never occurred to me before now! But surely you get the point. Come, let’s not waste time with any more metaphors; what I’m saying is that my assistant here is at your service and will remain so until mankind invents a reliable automated transcriber. They’re

almost there, I believe, but—and let me be frank with you, even at the risk of you thinking me a traditionalist—what a hateful innovation that would be! Wouldn't you agree with me that the further science progresses the further we move from a human communion? Do you not sense, even in your current situation (and I sincerely hope you feel in no way constrained), the human warmth that binds we three together in this room? Now, imagine if that third fellow were nothing more than a machine—a machine that never erred, that carried out its instructions with matchless fidelity. We would feel reassured, certainly, because neither my questions nor your answers would be meddled with. No worries there. But how did fellow feeling become civilization other than through a muddle of error and coincidence?"

1

USUALLY, NOBODY NOTICED ME. I banked on it, and it was what I wanted: for the victim's gaze to stay fixed on the man sat handsomely at the massive desk. Which was how all the accused brought in to us behaved, however alert they were—only seeing me when my superior, Nabil al-Adl, would point me out, at which juncture I would be forced to emerge from the shadows.

“Stay as you are, handmaiden to the truth.”

My preferred designation. He thought and I wrote. They wished me to be his hand and his pen. I was not to sit level with him, and when he walked I would be a step behind: a countrywoman trailing a husband as yet untouched by urban mores. And those who came here understood in advance, which was why they gave me not a single glance, their eyes fixed on the man who decided their fate and not the one who transcribed it. Transcription is merely the documentation of the final verdict, a cosmetic enactment. Yet Mustafa Ismail, former law professor and the man dubbed the most skilled thief of the 1990s, was aware of my presence from the very first. He gave a fleeting turn behind him to where I sat. Later, after I'd become captivated by his ideas, I would remain haunted by that turn, searching for its explanation.

Truthfully, though, neither I nor my profession were quite so inconsequential. What can I call it? False modesty? A deep-seated desire to draw back from the limelight? Some blend

of the two blinded me to the potential of a unique position which I never made use of as I should. Another sufficiently rebellious character might have published secrets the likes of which you've never dreamed. Mustafa, looking to immortalize his tale, realized this, and in me he found his messenger.

Maybe it was for this reason that I had responded to the strange advertisement stuck up on the wall of the café and had set out to claim the role that seemed written with me in mind. During my time in the job, a limitless sensation of power mounted inside me. I would overhear regular citizens discussing the big issues of the moment, each taking a stand and staunchly defending it as they advanced their conclusions and proofs; yet the truth is always different from the way things seem, and I was one of the few allowed to know it—though I couldn't let them in on what I knew, bound to silence without being ordered, in keeping with the customs of all those who came to the Palace of Confessions. Yet it suited me; secrecy did not vex me. The power was quite enough: the growing self-confidence that compelled those around me to approach with caution, as though I were a modest godling come down to walk among them.

My initial assumptions about Mustafa's intentions were blown away by his confessions. He didn't want me to immortalize his story, as I'd imagined. He didn't care. This much seemed clear from what he said:

They lie who say that a man's life story is all he leaves behind. They set us in motion with profound utterances that fix themselves in our thoughts, and we move accordingly, like machines with no minds of their own. You are the totality of the actions you undertake now, in the moment, and when you pass on that space you filled is taken by the breeze. Actions are fated to be forgotten, and the history books never pay attention to what you had intended they should. They see what they want to see: a beautiful woman who gazes your way, but her heart and mind don't see you. Don't act the fool by troubling yourself with immortality.

*

He was doing as he pleased, as though he were still free as a bird, one more soldier enlisted, just as he'd picked out his chosen men before: a nod of the head to make them instruments of his will, awaiting orders and a time to carry them out. I was one of the chosen. He saved me from research in the bookstacks, from concocting patchwork theories snipped from dozens of different books—criminal motive, the behavior of the masses in the absence of a unifying objective, the resentment of the poor as a driver for human history. He saved me from playing an unsatisfactory role.

“Not useful.”

Thus Nabil al-Adl, my terror of whom—or of what he represented—I had spent the first part of my training battling to master. The softest manifestation of the state's power, the sort whose thoughts and plans lie beyond your power to guess at.

“Well, maybe useful, but you have to hitch it to reality. We're not a research center—in part perhaps, but we have other facets you will have to experience for yourself.”

Mustafa helped me discover these facets. He vouchsafed me passage to the other shore, from enemy to ally, and all I had to do was wait to be told the details of my mission.

We knew about him before he arrived, from old files in the archive, but ordinarily we wouldn't place much faith in them. We knew how they were written. As al-Adl sighed:

“Torture, fabrication, and filth.”

But nor was he much impressed with what I gave him, selecting from my report only the most obvious passages, those whose meaning was plain. I had written:

What Mustafa Ismail and his associates achieved evokes both a legend and a scientific fact. The legend is that of the Merry Men who banded around Robin Hood, and associated with this legend is a scientific fact, to wit: psychologically and physically, men require an activity that might theoretically be beyond their capabilities. This 'merry' part of man, this

ribaldry, must be sated, which explains why, for instance, the male prefers war over dialogue. Castrated by civilization, this aspect of his nature may find its outlet in addiction—to sex, to sport, to drink—but others can only fill the void by engaging in a rebellion that liberates them from authority.

My superior described what I presented to him as ‘a sentimental report.’

And although in a professional context the phrase was meant harshly, it pleased me. Perfect as a cryptic title for a book. Perhaps I’d use it, would agree to the terms offered by Anwar al-Waraqī, owner of a printing press who was seeking to rise a rung on the ladder of his trade and take on the title of publisher. He thought the stories I told him about what went on in the Palace of Confessions would make a good book, showing how things really got done in this country.

“And anyway, brother,” he’d said, “it’s a chance for us to get out of here! See the world a bit before we die.”

I would make al-Adl a character, would overstep the bounds and write his name. Who would ever believe that Nabil al-Adl was flesh and blood, and genuinely occupied a position of such sensitivity? Who would ever know but members of the club, the cream of the crop? Who would ever credit that these things were real? Regardless of risk, there was no way such an artistically satisfying character could be allowed to slip through my hands. He had all the qualities to ensure the book’s success: his blind devotion to traditional values, his passion for (enslavement to) the ringing lines whose phrases, no sooner uttered, burrowed themselves inside my mind as though I was being mesmerized. Could he ever have allowed himself to sacrifice his fine-sounding ‘torture, fabrication, and filth,’ and cast around for something more in keeping with my sentimental report?

I may say that I knew him; I worked with him for five years. It was he who chose me. An official in his position has the right to choose his assistant.



The wording of the advertisement, torn from a newspaper, had forced me to stop and read it through:

In your own hand, write the story of your life as you see it in 300 words. You may use any literary style or approach to convey your message. Send the document in a sealed envelope to the address provided, writing below the address: c/o THE OFFICIAL RESPONSIBLE FOR THE 'TO WHOEVER WISHES TO KNOW ME' COMPETITION. We will be in touch.

And with that, I sent off the necessary, without the faintest idea who was behind the advertisement or what they might want with the applicants. Subsequently, I would learn to my astonishment that thirty letters had been chosen from thousands upon thousands of submissions. Let's think clearly here: do you, as I did, send your life story to an unknown address for an unknown purpose unless you are ready and waiting to entertain a mystery? The days go by, but your enthusiasm remains undimmed. You keep your senses sharp lest the call go unheeded. And when it comes, it's to reveal this farce: I'd always thought myself different from other people, and had made sure to keep clear of them, but I was now to find that thousands of them had had the same idea, and had been waiting to be summoned as I was!

The thirty were soon whittled down to five. Someone came along to look over the queue standing outside the door. Three years later, this person would be me. I came straight from home and joined a crowd of about forty souls all hoping to get their hands on the prize, pretending to be one of them. For exactly two hours, instinct guiding my judgment, I struck up conversation. I provoked, played on nerves: one of many tests to determine the five who would be chosen.

The final test, briefly stated, was that each of us rewrite his life story from the beginning, not necessarily with the

selfsame words and sentiments we'd sent off in our letters, but any way that took our fancy—just for purposes of comparison and to make sure that our first efforts hadn't been plagiarized or written for us by others. One of us withdrew for a reason we never had explained to us, though it was clear enough: he had no story to call his own.

I wrote:

The first time I mourned anyone was at the death of Fahmi, son of al-Sayyid Ahmed Abdel-Jawwad, and the first time I felt fear was when I read about Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis. Awaking to find that you're an insect, and must now deal with the world on that basis, and because you know the world has no logic, and that stories are truer than reality. Then all things are possible, even things as nightmarish as this. Then *The New York Trilogy* showed me that meanings are tangled together and confused to an extraordinary degree, and that most likely nothing has any value. That is how I might describe my life: from one book to another, from one story to the next. I could list dozens—no, hundreds—of works, but this is not what you're after. You want to know what happened to me in real life. Only, unfortunately, I have done nothing worth mentioning to date. Of course, I engage in the quotidian activities that keep me alive; it's just that now, approaching thirty, I cannot think of anything worth telling. The dilemma may have its root in my attitude. There are those who can turn the simplest incident into a dramatic happening worthy of the world stage, but it is my belief that certain conditions need to be met before adventure can claim the name, that there are conditions that make a life fit to be written down. The power to breathe, and speak, and mate is not enough to make your tale worth telling.

This, in short, is my story, which you asked for; and, as you can see, it is finished inside your limit of three hundred words. And because I believe this limit has to matter to you—it was the only condition you mentioned, after all—I shall add the following: my way of thinking is liable to lead to nervous collapse, but what spares me is that Florentino Ariza is my favorite protagonist. Like me, he spends his time engaged in trivial things, waiting for his one ambition to be realized: to be reunited with his sweetheart. A lucky man, who gets what he wants.

After we had passed through a battery of tests, they gathered us together in a large room. We'd no idea what to expect and hadn't dared ask. Not a sound. None of the usual chatter between office workers. No doors opening and closing. The person who'd escorted us to the room hadn't uttered a single syllable. We had climbed from the ground floor to the third, then down a long corridor, and our guide had pointed to the far end of it and walked off. A room, empty but for five chairs.

I hadn't been able to get a precise fix on al-Adl's age; his features were so bland that it was difficult to form impressions. He inspected us, our files between his hands, then spoke two words, no more—"Khaled Mamoun"—before turning to exit the room, leaving the door open. I went out after him and shut the door behind me, making sure it did not slam. I fancied that there was a smile on his face. His guess had been on the money, his instinct true: he had picked out an obedient helper who required but few words to do what was asked of him.

The next day, I received a plastic card, blank but for my name. No logo, no phone number, no job description, just, in its center, engraved in black: Khaled Mamoun. The first of the avatars of a mystery which I must accept without question. No one ever brought it up. They acted as though everything were completely normal. I couldn't tell: was this deliberate disregard or was it stupidity? Was it, indeed, the

long habituation that leaves the strange familiar? Would a time come when I would cease to be brought up short by the thought of my existence within an institution unlisted as part of the state establishment, headquartered on a patch of wasteland, and ringed by a wall shielding the mounds of sand we were forbidden to approach?

But perhaps I was overdoing the astonishment. What did I know of the world, anyway? Other eras have played host to dinosaurs the size of buildings, and seas that part to swallow kings. What's one more wonder? Why did I obsess over peripheral details and miss what my coworker Abdel-Qawi called 'the crucial point':

"Why can't you just accept that we're as high as it gets—the agency that only takes on the most critical and sensitive cases?"

Logically speaking, I agreed with him, but one thing stood between me and acceptance:

"But whose agency?"

An exasperated sigh, then he would pull himself together, invoking the patience of a father confronted with an offspring's mulishness, a father who believes such patience is the way to ensure that his son learns all there is to know:

"Just so you'll stop pestering me, then. We are an agency tasked with looking into and keeping tabs on *everything*—on whose behalf I couldn't say for sure, but what's certain is that we are on the side of good against evil. Not that I'm bothered myself, but I'm telling you to help you get past this silly muddle you're in. Why do you ask questions that can't help you? This place has been around forever, as far as I know. It's a miracle we were chosen. And quite honestly I reckon you're asking the wrong thing. Instead of 'What's our job?,' ask yourself 'How am I doing?'"

A pointed observation, and one I had heard on numerous occasions. He would repeat it robotically.

It was either that, in the instant he was made, air had outweighed the other elements in his body, or that he was able to manipulate this balance for his own purposes. He moved just like it, light and quick. His presence took me unawares: I would hear neither door opening nor the sound of footsteps. He had a physical slightness at odds with his morbid craving for food. After he had departed my life, a caricature of the man lived on in my mind: using a chicken bone to write or comb his hair, outfits accessorized with vegetables—a collection of contradictions called Abdel-Qawi. For all the settled calm with which he was endowed and which imbued his features, he was the most trying person I have ever met, flitting without warning from mood to mood. He would decide to speak and it would be impossible to interrupt him: loud tones to make his point, frequently lapsing into silence midway through his inexhaustible stock of stories for the air to fall still once more. Before we bonded, this behavior had incapacitated me. This reaction of mine astonished him, and he regarded it as evidence of an unhealthy absent-mindedness—or worse, a disregard for others. And, as always with him, what he believed was not up for discussion.

I couldn't make up my mind which position best suited him. Uncategorizable in a place whose function was to categorize and judge. Which is why I left and he stayed on. His experience enabled him to sidestep the difficult question. Commenting on his behavior, I once told him, "We are obliged to be serious."

And he replied, with a simplicity that defeated my assertion, "Says who?"

Is this why everybody loved him?

We got caught up in a friendship, ignoring, like teenagers, our lack of anything in common. With the self-centeredness of someone on a voyage of discovery, I didn't care; I needed a guide through the initial stages, and for the duration of that period there was nothing I hid from him, with the exception of the fact that I was writing down everything that happened.

I was, as they say, swept away: bewitched by his regional dialect and the childlike laughter that vied with his constant chatter, and obsessed with the riddles he left dangling over my head.

“They called me today from Alexandria. Try and guess what’s happened.”

I had no way of knowing who ‘they’ might be, but I had learned not to ask, because he would manage to sidestep my inquiries by deploying one or other of his extraordinary stratagems. Family, I guessed, his relationship to them reduced to financial assistance. But as I grew closer to my other colleagues, the mystery surrounding Abdel-Qawi—his roots and family—only deepened. The way he spoke about Alexandria gave the impression he’d lived there as baby and boy, but the occasional southern phrase left the connection he sought to imply open to question. Everyone had a different story for him, which they’d swear to as if they’d know him since childhood—one of the entertainments of our Palace, built as it was on secrets and paradox. Stories from the world of hackneyed melodrama: on the run from a blood debt unavenged; no, his family had been killed in mysterious circumstances; no, they hadn’t been killed and there was no blood debt, either. It was simpler than that: he dumped them in order to live as he pleased. A family of exaggerated indigence, vast in number. A father whose favored pursuit was screwing his wife, siring seven more besides our man. Should Abdel-Qawi shoulder another man’s burden? Even nobility has its limits—and to describe him as cowardly just because he took a pragmatic view would hardly be fair. The long and short of it: he saves himself or they take him with them. And what good would that do?

People loved him, and they cared about him, and whenever he disappeared—on a mission or for personal reasons—our institution lost its soul. Even so, I found someone leaning in with a word of warning:

“Watch out for that one.”

One sentence sufficient for fear of him to meld with my friendship; for everything he did to take on an aura of awe and respect. Yet I was not wary. I represented no threat to anyone, him least of all. I played the part of someone passing through, and placed myself outside the fight. What I genuinely feared was the terrifying emptiness that surrounded him and into which he dragged anyone who associated with him: no history, no present, and no future—just the moment in which he was. And when he withdrew, it was like he'd never been.

After the curtain had come down, and while the players were bowing to the audience, it seemed to me suddenly as though the five years in which I'd known him had been a mirage. I would walk for hours and suddenly come to, almost out of my mind, without a single fixed memory—each frame erased before it could be linked up to the next. And not just memories of him, but of everything he touched, everyone who'd shaken hands with him, everyone to whom I'd told his story. Had it happened, or was it just a flight of fancy drawn out longer than was proper?

Does prison guarantee that your sins will be paid off? When we step outside the law, does this mean we have a debt toward society that we must pay? And why does the regime, too, not pay its debt toward society? Why is it not held to account as we are?

These are questions it is imperative to answer before undertaking any act of rebellion. Your conviction that you are in the right will grant you an incredible freedom of thought, such as you never dreamed you possessed, and will assist you in planning every detail—starting with selecting your victim, and by no means ending with how to emerge intact from various desperate situations and dead ends.

Mustafa Ismail
The Book of Safety

2

DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO.

An almost meaningless line, one that belongs on paper, in the pages of some novel or movie: a thriller's hero addressing his sidekick in Delphic terms, an indirect order to kill, to burn all the files.

Nothing to be proud of that this fantastic sentence is my father's legacy to me. No money, no memories, nothing but five words bequeathed to my mother, a woman no less peculiar than him. She considered them a message to me, one that I had to memorize, and from childhood on she drilled them into me, enunciating in a classical Arabic appropriate to a man who had dedicated his life to the love of poetry and the Arabic language, yet ill-befitting a witless woman who apprehended life through instinct alone.

And yet, after a journey that has lasted long enough, I find that I am proud of what I inherited and, like my father before me, I shall, unless I find someone stronger, pass it on to my daughter Hasna. I shall not leave her to live her life with no wise words to light her way in times of need.

At the time, I paid no particular attention to this part of Mustafa's confession. As far as I was concerned, it had no bearing at all on the overall story. That people have children is only natural. That they have Hasna, whom I would come to know, is not. Had Mustafa spoken more about her, perhaps I would have had the information I needed to be able to deal with her; and perhaps if I'd sought her out back then, much would have

changed in the approach I took to my book about her father. But I let the chance slip. After getting to know her, I went back to the case files, but in all I'd written I could find nothing about her save her name.

I was drawn to Mustafa and his grand style:

My father died when I was nine. Nothing of him remains except a single, terrible scene: I stand beside my mother, leaning against the wall that has been hastily thrown up across the entrance to the houses as part of the protection measures ordered by the army. He waves farewell to us, but the sun is glinting off the medals that adorn his uniform; it flashes into my eyes and I do not see him. Off he went to turn back the Tripartite Aggression, and nothing now remains of him save that glare and an open-topped truck that whisked the dust up in our faces. He left me in the care of the fool he had married to score the double: God's favor and a young body he could enjoy as he pleased without the domestic give-and-take that comes with an equal match. This was common knowledge in the neighborhood where I was raised, and as I grew older I learned of it, too. I would hear it alluded to at all manner of events and occasions. The first time I heard my circumstances so described was at the conclusion of a boyhood squabble over the result of a football match. We had disputed a goal with the opposition. They said that the ball had passed inside the post of piled bricks, and we insisted on our view, while the referee—because he was the least physically robust of us all—stated that the incident had taken place some distance from him and so he was unable to say one way or the other. As captain, I was obliged to stand fast and defy. A member of the opposition shouted in anger:

“Son of a retarded bitch, just shut up, you don't understand anything!”

When the time is right, the meaning of my father's counsel glitters like a jewel. The lot of the one who insulted my mother was a rock to the head. His blood flowed as he fled, screaming out the second truth:

“You really are a bastard!”

Would you care to know everything about my past, or just glimpses? Shall I tell it to you as an entertaining story, leaving you with nothing but the pleasure of its telling, or would you prefer it served up with what it

betokens? If so, you will have to shoulder some of the pain that accompanied the tale's unfolding. What do you want? The burden of choice falls on you, and you alone must bear its consequences.

This question leads us to another. My apologies. Bear with me. One's life, if you weren't already aware, is a chain of question and exclamation marks all linked together; summon one and the rest snowball after. And so: would you like the story from the beginning or the end? I can tell it both ways, with my assurance that no errors will creep in. I ask, because there are those who only like to look at the end once events have unfolded. These individuals are blessed with a great deal of childlike naïveté, which leads them to resent the flashback—not just because it spoils the pleasure of surprise, but because it forces you to use your mind, to become an active participant, anticipating events according to the end that you have glimpsed. The flashback is the desire to intervene in the divine plan.

Would you like to know your end, then arrange your life accordingly?

This question was the true beginning of my relationship with Mustafa Ismail. I had heard dozens of confessions, and none had affected me as his did. One might reel me in with its romanticism, another with its violence, but neither would be more than a story—transcribed professionally and as tantalizingly as possible, yet dead. Soulless.

The records stated that he was over fifty, but his face and body paid no heed to the records. Powerfully built, he was possessed of a considerable charisma which stemmed from an unfeigned gravity of manner. Like the heroes of legend, something in his expression gave the impression of a deep-rooted grief, and in the very instant of our meeting I realized that the descriptions of facial features which are always attributed to these heroes were no laziness on the part of scribes, as I'd assumed, but rather that faces are shaped by the roles appointed them.

Nabil al-Adl treated the question as he did the majority of Mustafa's confidences: as blasphemous, and a cunning

attempt to divert us from the case by turning it into a debate over fundamentals.

“And anyway, what end?” al-Adl asked, reading through my transcript. “Death? The final reckoning? Eternal repose? Getting pensioned off, perhaps? Divorce? They’re all ends. Which one does His Lordship mean?”

“You’re right.”

I whispered the words with a lack of conviction not lost on him. Ever since I had started looking through the case files in order to draw up the guidance report that would help us deal with him, a special bond had developed between Mustafa and myself. I have a talent for discovering other people’s weaknesses. I could hand Nabil al-Adl the shortcut to the character of whoever was brought before him, so that he might extract what information he needed without effort—but confronted by Mustafa’s personality, I found myself baffled. He seemed exemplary.

“It’s good that you believe him, in any case. It adds some balance to the case. But I would like to draw your attention to something: you have to draw a line between yourself and those we deal with. Never forget whose side you’re on.”

Another stern warning from the chief. In recent times, I had heard more than one warning, and this had been the roughest. I was aware that I was on the verge of severing my links to the place and to its laws, but I had nothing to dissuade me from this course. Al-Adl would never understand that anyone capable of framing a question like Mustafa’s has the strength to make it a reality. I understood; and I understood, too, that I would not be granted the opportunity to get Mustafa’s response. We would not be friends or partners. I must be content with my role; and yet I set down his words ashamed that I was cast in the role of his enemy. It is the case that if we do not possess the courage to evaluate our selves and place them in the setting they long for, the world will toy with us and make itself a farce.



Behind the children's park was my place of work. A place unknown and unvisited by all but those fated to embark on a most unique experience.

The Palace of Confessions.

My private name for it, telling myself, as the microbus conveyed me from Shubra in the city's center to the furthest inhabited spot in the eastern suburb of Medinat Nasr, *Khaled's off to the Palace of Confessions to have some fun.*

The spacious park lay between the Palace of Confessions and a modest huddle of residential buildings, the greater part of it fringing a vast area ringed by a dull gray wall. No buildings could be seen behind the wall, only hillocks of sand, and it was topped by signs warning against approaching and taking pictures. From here, the park narrowed, terminating at a path wide enough for two to walk abreast and lined by cacti. When the employees all arrived at the same time, they were obliged to form a queue beside the cacti, one plant per employee. The door would only admit one person at a time—after the security device had checked their ID and allowed them in—but the throng I'm picturing never came to pass, not once, perhaps because there weren't that many employees to begin with, or perhaps because I would arrive late, choosing to linger in the park, to take time out amid the dazzling hues of its flowers and plants—so captivated, indeed, that I was increasingly convinced that Chagall himself had arranged them, the only person capable of playing with color thus, of combining it to bring such joy to the heart of those who saw it.

Yet, for some reason, this joy was absent in the children there, their numbers never rising or falling; they seemed distracted in a way quite at odds with my assumptions about childhood. I've no experience with children, but generally speaking, shouldn't they seem joyous and uninhibited? These ones weren't like that. They played with a busy discipline that made it appear as though they'd been drilled. One would come

down the high slide, then turn and pad back to its ladder, waiting his turn like an adult who has learned that the system is the way to get what he wants. No shouting. No fighting over toys. I memorized their faces. No names. I never got to know them, because the mothers on the wooden benches never called them. Not one ever shouted for her child to take care, or dashed wildly toward their fallen offspring. They sat there contentedly, in their faces the placidity that comes from certainty. Women in their thirties and forties, elegant in the beauty-free way of wealthy women from Medinat Nasr, immersed in hobbies from their mothers' era: three or four crocheting, a similar number flipping through fashion mags, while a lone blonde, younger than the rest, sang outside the flock and read books with old covers. Most likely their husbands worked behind the dull gray wall, pursuing mysterious callings in nameless buildings, or else were colleagues of mine I hadn't met.

The ground floor of the Palace comprised a reception room where an ancient functionary passed his time solving crossword puzzles. My relationship with him lasted the seconds it took for my bag to pass through the scanner. I'd greet him and he'd pay me no mind. He couldn't even see those passing him by. He'd been programmed along with the machine—and provided the row of lights on top didn't turn red and its tiresome siren didn't sound, he had no cause to lift his gaze. I was tempted to put a knife in the bag so his scanner would scream and he'd be forced to notice me.

The old man was the lobby's center, surrounded by four flights of stairs, each running up to a different department, and behind his desk a flight down to the basement where the guilty were housed: comfortable little cells, tidied and searched each morning while their occupants took breakfast in the small cafeteria next to the games room. They were free to move between their cells, the games room, and the café. There was no fixed schedule and no locked doors, but the basement was their world until the interrogation was over.



Mustafa brought us a fearsome list of his victims: ministers, diplomats, artists, religious leaders, businessmen; people and crimes for which he provided the proof, the individuals concerned having preferred to make no report out of embarrassment or the desire to avoid scandal. Who would welcome detailed discussion of what went on in his bedroom? Who could ignore the many warnings designed to stop him telling? Documents vanished, and it was best not to bring it up. Private pictures of husband or wife, carefully concealed from the spouse, now laid out before sensitive eyes; the hidden revealed. Threats whose attendant instructions it was impossible not to obey. Nabil al-Adl himself had gone against his own creeds and convictions in order to keep hidden the photograph of his sister-in-law, Sawsan al-Kashef—near-naked and sprawled in her lover's arms—which had confronted him one day, and written beneath it in fiery red ink, a warning: *Don't squeal.*

What frightened the authorities, and got Mustafa's file referred to the highest levels, was not simply that his victims included names whose homes were fiercely guarded around the clock. More pertinently, one of these names, the major general whose apartment Mustafa had been robbing when apprehended, headed a team responsible for updating strategic plans for guarding the president himself—a fact itself outmatched by Mustafa's confession that he'd been planning to rob the president's residence, and that he'd intended it to be his final job in this country. If brought off successfully, he explained, it would have meant there were no challenges left for him here, and the time would have come to test his skills in other, more stimulating climes.

More surprisingly, however, his statements transcended mere confession to reach the level of theory:

The heavier the guard, the easier it is to get through. The higher the wall, the easier you feel on the other side of it, no matter how poor a climber you might be.



Why? If the question could be asked of any man and remain unanswered, it meant that he would be referred to us, for us to eradicate and remake it—innocent and free of question marks—as ‘Because.’ His coming to us was an admission that he was the best and most skillful in his field, a special breed of man who belonged with his ilk: unseemly geniuses, outcasts from the paradise of lawfulness.

The purpose of our research was to uncover the aims of Mustafa’s organization and find any followers that he had not identified. There was concern that his ideas might spread and though his most senior assistants had been detained and had given detailed confessions, the suspicion that even one individual with the same mental powers might be lurking out there compelled our attention. Those who had been arrested were dangerous criminals. That was something we could accept. They were not particularly convinced by his views and credos, but had gone along with him in the pursuit of gain. It was quite possible, they said, that their criminal operations might have continued undiscovered, because the plans he laid adhered to a principle of absolute caution and were based on what he termed *The Book of Safety*, a volume containing hundreds of observations on the most propitious times to commit a crime, the risks that must be avoided, lists of addresses, the names of occupants and their professions, the phone numbers of state officials, escape routes and hideouts, instructions for issuing threats, and blackmail. It was a book he had fashioned with patience and love out of his experience and the experiences of others. He loathed error, seeking an ideal state in which he might attain absolute self-possession and control circumstances around him—a dream of perfection. En route to this state, he had managed to convert ordinary citizens into partners, some unwitting and others sympathetic to his ideas and dreams. What he hadn’t realized was that error occurs precisely when we are taking care to avoid it.

Even so, he would never have allowed his ideas to disappear, hence the fundamental question: to whom had they been passed on?

“We concluded you were trying to revive the legend of Robin Hood.”

“What do you mean by that? You’ve been unable to deal with us using the standard methods, so you’re taking refuge in myth? Or is this an honor reserved for me?”

For all his intelligence, Mustafa didn’t know what to make of the place in which he found himself. He attempted to conceal his nerves behind insouciance and grit, but there is no strength of will too tough for taming. The system grinds on, and has all the patience and all the time it needs to reach its goal—while Mustafa was a romantic who didn’t understand that it wasn’t the Sixties any more. He lived according to that era’s vision of the world, trying to assume the guise of a god. And the upshot? He had fallen into an elementary mortal trap. And like they say, you only need to fall the once to go on falling forever thereafter. I observed his bafflement in sneaked glances; skillful forays slipped into the flow of his words to keep his secret burnished. One day, al-Adl had gone out of his office, leaving us together. Dropping his impersonal air, Mustafa asked me directly, “Where are we?”

I was flustered by his boldness. We had never exchanged words before. I attempted an answer, filled with pride that he had noticed me, but most likely he knew that I was no less confused than he. For his part, Nabil al-Adl was intent on intensifying the mystery surrounding our location—his way of meeting Mustafa’s challenge to his authority:

“My job is not to condemn or exonerate. When it comes to our concerns, your guesses are wide of the mark. You cannot imagine the sheer number of unusual situations that we come up against and that oblige us to update our research techniques. Which is why, when I say that you are trying to revive the legend of Robin Hood, this isn’t some

whim of mine, but a statement based on a report on you which has been specially prepared by an educated and experienced operative.”

I was the educated and experienced operative Nabil al-Adl referred to, and his kind words were not meant as a deft little summation of my person, but rather as the shot from the starting gun at which I must spring forward, must bite to inject the poison, the victim anesthetized so as not to cry out when he was skinned. Neither pain nor blood held any pleasure for us.

“We are the most refined and respectable level of sadism.”

This would be my answer to the meaningless definitions of our trade bestowed on me by Abdel-Qawi.

With childish malevolence, al-Adl was trying to embroil me in an enmity with Mustafa, but I ignored it. I didn’t enter into the conversation, hoping that Mustafa would be aware just what I was offering him. But he did not take the bait. Instead, he set about destroying my pet theory, giving al-Adl what he was after:

“I’m no reformer or political leader. I just rob rich people because they own what’s worth stealing, and maybe because they don’t miss what’s gone missing. I don’t mean whether or not they’re psychologically affected, of course. That’s not my point. It’s just that with a little pressure they manage to turn a blind eye to what’s been stolen—and they don’t report it, which is how I manage to avoid situations like the one I’m in right now.”

“But our investigations show you gave some of the money you stole to the poor. That proves you were attempting to turn yourself into a legend, to be whispered about by the people. . . .”

“Contrary to what you believe, I’ve no sympathy for the poor. In my view, they are largely responsible for their condition. There is something called the human will. If those who possess it don’t use it to escape their predicament, then they’ve no one else to blame. I worked harder than you would believe

to plan and carry out each theft. Do you think I'd do all that for the sake of some pauper who just sits there whining day and night? Plus, I don't consider what I've done as something wrong that I must atone for, nor am I so dead to the wellsprings of satisfaction that I have to get it from making others happy."

The interview would come to an end, and his words would echo in my mind, so that it was no hardship to rewrite them when I returned home, adding to them my own interpretation of how the interrogation was proceeding, the questions that Nabil al-Adl should have asked or that he'd asked at the wrong time.

How did you come to take up thievery?

How did you come to justify it?

The truth is that it becomes easier when you define your options quickly. Abandon whatever resists you and take what comes to you. To turn failure into success—to transform from one thing to its polar opposite if need be—is a power you gain by looking hard at your disappointments. Where does it come from, this power of transformation? From university professor to thief. From lawful to illicit. This is our nature; if you are not aware of it, you will be lost—an astonishing mix of earth, and water, and fire. I am testing myself, nothing more. Later, perhaps, I shall become something quite different.

Can this be mine? Can I transform? I appreciated how difficult it would be, the transformation that Mustafa—who, for all his symbolic violence, was a traditionalist—had made from good to evil. A human story repeated a million times over, his own personal contribution a reversal of mankind's general law: the evildoer who gropes his way toward good. He had his own private concepts, and there were no ethical concerns to hamper his transition from one code of conduct to the next.

I proceeded in a daze: no signpost to teach me good from evil. Over and over, I reread the thoughts of the philosophers and thinkers, yet the distinction remained elusive. And I came

to believe that they, like me, had not been able to separate the two principles. Then I understood that to rise above this system one must first pass through it, one must experience good and evil for oneself, and that I'd been nothing but a fool to believe that observation and reading could be fit substitutes for getting involved. Such lies. Writers are liars. Fools like me. They stick to the shore and write down their fantasies—and those fantasies took me in. I thought them the product of experience, when they were just the product of impotence and fear.

In your victim's home, do not act like a blundering thief driven by resentment to wreck and destroy.

Treat the site of your burglary as though it were your own home. Do not hurt the feelings of others by violating their privacies unless you must prevent them reporting what has happened.

Maintaining a respectful distance between yourself and those whose homes you invade ensures that you retain control over feelings that should not be allowed to guide you in those moments and thus spoil your work.

Mustafa Ismail
The Book of Safety

SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

Otared

by Mohammad Rabie, translated by Robin Moger

Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge

by Ezzedine C. Fishere, translated by John Peate

The Baghdad Eucharist

by Sinan Antoon, translated by Maia Tabet



hoopoe is an imprint for engaged, open-minded readers hungry for outstanding fiction that challenges headlines, re-imagines histories, and celebrates original storytelling. Through elegant paperback and digital editions, **hoopoe** champions bold, contemporary writers from across the Middle East alongside some of the finest, groundbreaking authors of earlier generations.

At hoopoefiction.com, curious and adventurous readers from around the world will find new writing, interviews, and criticism from our authors, translators, and editors.