

Tales of Yusuf Tadrus

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I said to the almond tree, “Speak to me of God.” And the
almond tree blossomed—Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*

Yusuf Tadrus says:

YESTERDAY I DREAMED OF THE resurrection rite.

The light was dim, coming from candles set in niches along the length of the wall. The silence was heavy, save for the faint sound of chants. There were about five of us. We were walking in a long line and wearing flowing gallabiyas, like the light ones farmers wear, made of coarse cotton. I was terrified. All I could think was: How had I gotten here and who brought me and there must be some mistake.

We entered a spacious, square room with no furnishings but a linen rug spread out on the floor. The abbot stood next to a small pulpit. We stood in front of him in a row, like in a morning roll call. He gestured for us to lie down on the rug. We obeyed as if hypnotized.

I was still baffled, thinking about how I'd gotten there. I knew it was too late and there was no going back. The sound of the chants grew louder and my thoughts deserted me. Only the fear remained. It was too late to turn back. I had to submit to my fate. Maybe my life here would be better.

We lay down, our backs to the ground and faces to the ceiling. I saw only darkness. I felt a sheet thrown over us, covering us from head to toe. I smelled the scent of linen and felt its roughness on my face. The chants grew louder. Funeral rites were performed, every step of them. I submitted to them. Then the voices gradually grew distant and a silence fell, so heavy you were afraid to breathe. Then the breath vanished and I no longer felt anything.

I don't know how long I stayed in the darkness of the veil. There was no time there. Silence and darkness. The veil lifted in a blur. The light shone from two candles on a high shelf. I struggled to orient myself, and then I heard prayer chants, as if the sun were shining. The flame of the two candles was fixed in place, as if there were no air here.

We stood in a line again, and the abbot descended two stairs holding scissors. After pronouncing each of our names, he left a mark on our heads with the scissors. When he approached me, his face was stony, lifeless, except for an overwhelming radiance in his eyes. He impressed the mark on my head and pronounced my name: Girgis. We began walking in the same line into a dark corridor, met with candles flickering in niches in the far distance. I couldn't look behind me. When I tried to remember my first name, I couldn't. I tried to recall anything about my former life and found only emptiness, as if everything I'd lived before had been completely erased.

Yusuf Tadrus says:

MY MOTHER WAS A MEMBER of the Holy Bible Association. Every month she was tasked with collecting contributions from all over the city. That was in the mid-1960s—the city wasn't like it is now. I still remember al-Nadi Street with a child's eye: the open space carpeted in sunlight that lit up the asphalt and made the houses sparkle, flooding the dried flame trees, the white wall of the club, and the footpaths I could see through the iron bars of the wall. The silence was thick, like the neighborhood was encased in glass. We'd climb the stairs in a new building, cool, the apartments tucked away behind gleaming doors evoking an air of velvet, different from the earthy air of the alley where we lived. My mother would knock on the door. A slim man would greet us and welcome her, taking his receipt and giving her the monthly contribution. We'd stop by doctors' clinics, law offices, shop owners, and merchants. Every month we'd make the rounds of the city.

I discovered my love of light on those trips. And I got my fill of the story of my birth. Every month, I'd listen to a life account my mother had told dozens of times. How she had dedicated herself to the Lord, but her father had insisted on marrying her off at the age of thirty. She had a hard time getting pregnant—the pregnancy wouldn't fix itself in her womb—and she went to monasteries and churches. When the pregnancy finally came to term and she was on the verge of

giving birth, she learned that pain is the Lord, and she loved her life and her pain, and gave birth to me.

This story left me with a vague restlessness; an uncomfortable feeling that my existence on the earth was a momentous happening, as if all those events and destinies that preceded it were staged for a certain purpose, so that this birth could take place. The story held a burden the thoughtless child did not wish to bear. There was something in it that weighed on my spirit. I tried to evade it all the time, but it dogged me. A ghost that inhabited my psyche and settled in. The story complicated my sense of self and left me with a nagging feeling that I was pledged to something I had to fulfill. It was as though I had to make some sort of sacrifice, as if my existence was not rightfully mine.

My mother's tale was dreary and I didn't like it. I distracted myself by observing light and shadow, and my love of light grew in the escape from the oppressive story of my birth.

My mother was a woman of considerable girth. When climbing the stairs, her joints ached, but she considered it a toll she had to pay. Suffering purifies; it rids people of sins they'd committed long ago. She would walk slowly, reciting in a low voice humanity's journey since the first sin. This slowness and her hushed voice let me contemplate shapes. These images were impressed clearly on my mind, as if they were part of a novel I'd once read.

Her labor and perseverance as she climbed the stairs held an acceptance of pain and a desire for sacrifice, her tribute of suffering that gladdened her soul. She had toiled in her life and it took her five years to have children, a boy and a girl. The association was her place for sacrifice, which she had to do in penance for an old sin. Our salvation is dependent on every individual offering up his or her measure of suffering.

At the end of the day, we'd return to the association to turn in the money we'd collected. I'd leave my mother and head for the workshops connected to the association's office. The place

was an orphanage, and the donations were collected for the workshops: needlework for the girls and textile weaving for the boys. My infatuation began in that place. Every person has his own secret. It might not be a secret, but he carries it in his soul like a special jewel, a longing, compartments—I call them interior compartments. One feels all the time that this secret is what endows life with meaning. If he confesses it, he will have revealed his inner self. You won't believe it, but I know that's what makes you stand in front of the unfamiliar emotion in my paintings.

The carpet-weaving workshop was my secret. The wooden loom, the master preparing the yarn—the warp and the weft—and the pictures the yarn would later form. Sometimes I left the images midway and would return the next day to find a full carpet, as if a sorcerer had finished them. There was a stark contrast between, on the one hand, the vertical and horizontal strands, the gloom of the workshop, and the rough hands that arranged the yarn, and on the other the lovely images on the carpet. I couldn't believe that these delightful figures were the product of that tedious, daylong process. I wouldn't believe it until I'd seen the picture take shape.

My mother wouldn't let me stay, not even once, to see the picture come to completion. The unfinished images kept me awake. They made me rush through the collection errand so I could get back to the weaving workshop.

So I created my own myth. I thought that invisible creatures lived in the workshop. At night, after the doors were locked, they would awaken and start to draw and color, putting magical touches on linens and carpets. They would give the color red its warmth and to birds their abrupt movements in flight, making them more beautiful than the birds that would suddenly take flight from the top of the dome of the railway station.

That was my secret, and I lived it, which probably baffles you. My problem became how to stay longer. How could I

hide in the workshop to see the creatures awaken and do their work?

One day I hid behind a door. They locked up the workshop and the association, and darkness fell. My heart beat violently. The silence had an energy that touched my soul and whetted my imagination. I saw transparent creatures like a fog come out of their hiding places and move on tiptoe. The windows were high up, a faint light penetrating them, and I felt the yarn move. I was afraid and screamed. I screamed and screamed, until a worker at the orphanage came and let me out, by then nearly comatose. After that I saw my mother crying, her eyes red, and I knew she'd looked everywhere for me.

I was ill for a long time. Fear is an illness I still haven't recovered from. During the fever, I heard the recitation of incantations and the voices of priests, and I felt the fog of church courtyards and my mother carrying me on her shoulder. I'd hear snippets of conversation about Yusuf, who'd been possessed by a species of jinn. Yusuf had been possessed. Imagine! They were right. I've been possessed ever since.

I didn't completely recover. After I regained consciousness, I started thinking about how to set up a loom in the house. After numerous attempts, it became clear that it was difficult. I couldn't bear the failure and cried for a whole night. My infatuation with the pictures on the carpets and kilims produced by the association's workshop persisted. They weren't pictures of saints or monks. They were pictures of birds, animals, and small thickets of vegetation, but the feeling that enveloped them was indescribable. The magic of the colors imbued the images with joy, and the joy safeguarded the secret.

I don't know when those images took shape as a secret. When did the trips to collect the contributions and the images from the carpet-weaving workshop become an interior light? You won't believe me if I tell you that the sunlight that I see with the old clarity gives me strength; it illuminates a patch in my depths. What led me to lock it up, like a lamp that would

be extinguished if I spoke of its existence? And here I am now, speaking of it, so it can be snuffed out. I'm tired of its interior light, tired of keeping it inside me. I should let it light up a place broader than that darkness. Maybe in the open space it will shine more brightly.

When I was fourteen, I started collecting the monthly contributions in my mother's stead. People had come to know me. Their respect for her was imprinted in the way they treated me. They'd always ask about her kindly and say they'd drop by to visit. She left a sweet feeling behind, and love. I remember her whisper, as if she were talking to herself, when we'd approach a clinic or a home. This is Doctor Munir Girgis—his father was a goldsmith and he's a good man. Once he donated enough bolts of fabric to wrap a skyscraper. That's the shop of Foreman Farid—he spent his youth in Alexandria and came back with a large fortune. Small tales that looked for the bright side in people.



Yusuf Tadrus says:

MARY LABIB, THE ART TEACHER, was my first love. I hope you're not shocked by love stories. Your brother Yusuf loved and was loved everywhere he landed. It's my fate. Mary looked like the movie star Maryam Fakh al-Din. Her hair fell on her shoulders with a slight flip at the end. I was young. Even so, I declared my love to her and asked her to marry me. At my uncle Subhi's apartment, in the old house, they all laughed. I was serious, crying.

"Yusuf's really in love," my mother said, puzzled. "His eyes are red."

The word *red* appealed to me. I headed to the bathroom mirror and looked at my face. My eyes weren't red, but they were dull. That person looked at me angrily in the tilted mirror and told me something inscrutable. I immediately understood that I had to guard my secrets. I knew matters of love and emotion had to be guarded like jewels. A simple moment in front of the mirror, but it was a brief insight from the questioning voices I hear at times to this day.

One day Mary gave me a sketchbook and a box of crayons. Mary Labib Dimyan. I'll never forget her name. I'll keep remembering the full name, its edges fringed by a clear scent, the primary-school balcony, the sun illuminating the sand-covered schoolyard, Mary exiting the art room, trailing a scent I'll never be able to pinpoint. She'll remain a living portrait: a translucent smile, a striped dress fitted at the waist,

butter-colored shoes with stiletto heels, a click on the tiles whose melody I'd never mistake, not even once. She'll remain alive in my depths, saying, "Paint what you wish. Don't be afraid, paint."

Maybe I've associated painting with a lack of fear ever since. Over the years, the phrase was translated into "painting delivers you from fear." I'll keep painting whenever I'm afraid. I'll keep painting as long as I live to rid myself of fear, which gets thicker and darker the older I get. Even after the worries began to lift—after Michel went to America and Fadi went to work in the jewelers' district, and it was just me and Janette, face to face, after a tempestuous journey—the fear was there flickering behind the scenes, unshakable, like the lining of the human heart.

Painting does not rid a person of fear, but it makes fears trivial, tolerable. From the moment Mary said "Paint what you wish. Don't be afraid," painting has been the good thing in my life. Even though I've abandoned it for long spells, I never for a moment stopped thinking about it, as if Mary's words were secretly guiding me. How can a child's love for his teacher stay alive all these years? Humans are as wondrous as life.

I'll never stop contemplating the sight of her. Of course, I won't paint it—if I paint her, she'll die. I only paint fears so they'll die. But Mary—her, I will not paint. If I did, she would fade into a picture. I'll leave her there, alive in my consciousness, like a candle in the window of Our Lady the Virgin. I'll keep her alive as long as I am.

I was sitting on a chair next to the window, drawing. A teacher named Talla Farag passed by and looked at the paper.

"What's this, Mary?" she said, pointing to the figure I'd drawn. "Is all of that a person?"

"Shush. Be quiet," Mary said. Smiling at me, she said, "Go on, finish it." She lowered her face kindly, with an understanding smile. I've looked for this feeling everywhere—a friendly smile that tells you to keep going; whatever happens,

finish what's in your hand. There are no standards there. There's nothing but finishing. Finish what's in your hand and you'll make it.

Mary knew. Those coal-black, keen, encouraging eyes look down on me whenever I sit down to paint. From behind they encourage me: Keep going, don't be afraid. I'll never voluntarily paint her. However great my longing for her, I won't paint her.

In middle school, I hated drawing because of a supercilious teacher who used to curse our families. He made us clean up the art room and line up the paints and colors, everything brought to meticulous order. At the end of school, the art room had to be neatly arranged, ready for the inspector's visit.

But my desire to make my fears concrete in images continued to mutate and found other paths. After I returned from the collection errand, I occupied myself with drawing carpets and fashioning wooden boxes. From plaster I made guns and other things that fulfilled my desire to produce figures. That period of not drawing was difficult. I remember it as an unending summer. Tedium and hollering and a sense that there was nothing to do but give yourself over to the life of the alley.



Yusuf Tadrus says:

MY MOTHER WOULD WAKE UP at six a.m., before everyone, my father asleep in the interior room and my sister Nadia tossing in her bed, as if sensing her mother had left the house. I'd feel her opening the door and leaving. In that pleasant drowsiness in the winter months, the sound of the door was both calming and rousing. She was awake, anxious to meet the day, going to fetch the morning beans and porridge, the *al-Akhar* newspaper and *Sabah al-kheir* magazine.

I was devoted to *Sabah al-kheir*. I loved the elegant, delightful drawings by al-Labbad, Bahgoury, Bahgat, al-Leithi, and other illustrators. Of them all, I was especially devoted to George Bahgoury. I'd wait for his illustrations and spend a long time poring over them. I wanted to draw like them. One day I read a sentence that filled me with extraordinary vigor: "George Bahgoury paints from Paris."

Look, this sentence—"paints from Paris"—put a spell on me. A warmth and luminosity pervaded life there, on the other side. What's that? Oh, a painting drawn in Paris, filled with warmth and sun and frittering the days away.

Hope blossomed from that sentence. When would it be said "Yusuf Tadrus paints from Paris"? Would that day come? I had a lot of confidence in myself, and my sense that life would reward me was growing as I was, especially when I noticed that girls were attracted to me.

I started drawing again, imagining the Paris cafés that George drew. I drew the things he did as if I were him, as if I lived in Paris. A lesson in identification that would later help me understand things—understand the spirit of the chairs, tables, stones, and windows. I would have secret ties with things from that moment. I'd befriend the lamps, glasses, empty bottles, and small vases—what they call “still life” in English or “silent nature” in Arabic. Why do they say it's silent? If you only knew how much I liked this expression when I first heard it. A speaking nature and a non-speaking nature. Of the two, I loved silent nature. You see, I'm painting my dreams after all these years. My paintings are dreams that flood my waking hours.

After drawing people at Paris cafés for a while, I drew George Bahgoury himself, and I mailed it to *Sabah al-kheir*. Two weeks later, I found my illustration published in the young artists' section, my name below it. Magic and wonder flooded over me—I hadn't expected this twist.

I called for my mother: “Come see my painting!” Her pale face beamed with joy and she kissed me, the tears springing to her eyes. This turn of events gave me more confidence and cemented my sense of specialness. The tears shining in my mother's eyes unconsciously turned my thoughts to my responsibility.

I started looking for my own special subject. I started a fresh sketchbook and wrote on the first page: “Yusuf Tadrus draws from Ghayath al-Din Street.” Then I drew the upholsterer, the tinker, Amm Ads the bean seller, and everyone I met. Maybe one day I'd paint from Paris. The notion spurred me on, and the desire to draw seized me, as if I'd reach Paris tomorrow. A fresh sense of life pulsed in my fingers. The pictures didn't look exactly like their subjects, but they were good-natured, with a playfulness and childlike sensibility that came from empathizing with the subjects.

On Ghayath Street, the door and window frames were made of plaster. When pieces fell off, it was material to make small figurines: girls and horses and knights, creatures in the

vein of the mulid sugar dolls. I'd scavenge the plaster pieces like they were treasure and sculpt my figures with an old knife and a nail: primitive sculpting tools. I created my world of creatures. One day, I fashioned a small gun. My friends liked it and haggled with me for it. I made more, and they became our favorite toys.

Because of the sculpting and drawing, I had some standing among my childhood comrades in the alley and the nearby streets. They wouldn't play until they'd first passed by my place. When we were in the third year of middle school, they'd stand at the entrance to the alley in the evenings and call for me to come study with them at Sayyid al-Bahiy's house on the corner. We'd go in the back door, from the alley, not the main door on Ghayath al-Din, then cross the vast garden where the plants had shriveled up, and study in the small room in the garden. We'd stay up until the end of the last screening at the cinema and hear the clamor of people leaving, dispersing in the streets. We'd get bored with the room and go sit under the lamppost in the street, studying and talking. When the night began to leave and the morning broke in the distant sky with its pale-blue phantoms, someone would propose praying the dawn prayer at al-Sayyid al-Badawi Mosque.

The streets were still and voices rang out, a translucent fog confirming the coming of the dawn light. When we reached al-Sa'a Square, I'd usually suggest walking in the silence of al-Bursa Street then taking a right on al-Athar Pass. Faint light coming from an open house that had left the entry lamp on; two-wheeled carts resting on the side of the road, their shafts leaning on the ground like weary sleepers; the wooden shop doors shuttered with a slanted iron bar, a brass lock gleaming in the middle; cats crisscrossing the street—the street appeared at odds with the clamor of daytime with the scent of spices and apothecaries and seed shops. By the time we reached the Ahmadi Mosque Square, a silvery glow permeated the light.

Joking, al-Sayyid al-Bahiy would say, “Come on and pray with us.”

“Say hi to the crocodile for me,” I’d say.

I would wait for them on the marble steps until they came out from the prayer.

At that time, I didn’t distinguish a difference in religion from a difference in features, families, and names. People couldn’t have the same name or features, and the same went for religion. On Fridays, when we’d climb the wall of Dr. Murqus’s house to pick mulberries and play until prayer time, I wanted to go to the Aziz Fahmi Mosque to pray with them. On one of those days, Sayyid al-Bahiy invented a story, the gist being that there was a large fountain in the mosque that held a big crocodile that recognized Christians by their smell and would gobble them up. Every time they went to pray, I’d wait for them, hoping I’d get a chance to see the fountain and the crocodile, just like I wanted to see the creatures that finished the carpets in the weaving workshop.

Yusuf Tadrus says:

MY FATHER'S A WHOLE OTHER STORY. He thought a lot of himself and would speak his name with pride: Khawaga Tadrus Bushra. But he was ashamed because he couldn't read and write very well, so he took great pains to write his name with care and sophistication. He would sweep the tail of the *a* to encircle the entire name. Maybe because contracts are so important and a man's signature at the bottom of documents is a grave thing, he poured his interest in the written language into signing his name. A name is man's image on official paper, and he should be conscious of this fact. He's got to pay attention. Yes, he would skim the newspapers, but the important thing was that he could write his name with the sophistication befitting a signature.

He was embarrassed by the idea of a stamp or a thumbprint, saying with some uncertainty, "True, my education is modest, but I'm not one of those people who signs with a thumbprint."

When a discussion with his fellow dry bean and seed traders would grow heated, he would stand, leaning his arms on his desk, and say with pride, "Khawaga Tadrus Bushra is not a wrongdoer." Saying that, he'd feel that his name alone was enough to place him beyond reproach for any fault. In those moments, he would pronounce it in dulcet tones, as if he were signing it and looping the tail of the *a* around it.

During the long periods he spent at the shop, he was careful to keep the newspaper spread out in front of him on the

desk. He'd look at it, his eyes picking out a word here and there, and beam with self-importance when a trader would come in and find him with the paper open. Then he'd get up from his chair, adjust the collar of his Saidi gallabiya and his headgear—a wool skullcap wrapped in a white scarf—and extend his hand to welcome the guest.

In my childhood, I would go to the shop—he called it “the exchange”—on Fridays after the prayer, to help with the crowds buying lentils, fava beans, and chickpeas, inspecting the bigwigs visiting from the countryside. Mulids and feast days were jam-packed and I had to spend time there. One bark from Khawaga Tadrus would nail you to your spot and turn your limbs to jelly. I'd stand with the workers in the display line until he gave me permission to leave. His shop was his pride and joy because the rural dignitaries trusted him and didn't hesitate to leave their goods with him for safekeeping. But his eyesight started to go and he began submitting himself to Futna, my older sister.

Under the glass on his desk were several newspaper clippings. A family obituary from Upper Egypt, relatives in Alexandria. He never cut his ties with his family. Every year he had to travel to Upper Egypt, the Said, to make deals for dates and seeds and he would revive the bond that should never die with time. Once he showed me an old photo under the desk glass.

“You know who that is?” he asked me.

The photo showed a foreign soldier in military uniform and a short, slim, bareheaded man standing next to him wearing a country-style gallabiya. When I remained silent, he said, “Your father, Tadrus Bushra.”

He told me that when people left Alexandria during the Great War, when the Germans were at Alamein—at the gates of Alexandria—he went there to make his fortune, which he used to open the exchange.

Every time he saw me drawing, he'd get angry and say that I had to learn to read and write. I had to study so I wouldn't be

a disappointment like my sister Futna's kids. He thought reading and writing, not painting, were the light of life. Drawing was child's play.

It was his experience talking. In Alexandria, during the Great War, he had realized that writing was important when he went looking for work at the English base.

"You're no good for work with us unless you know how to read and write," the soldier told him.

That same day he went to his cousin's in Muharram Bey and spent three full days and nights without sleep trying to learn how to write. He failed. He went back to the base exhausted and told the English soldier what he'd done. Laughing at his naïveté, the man hired him, on condition that he keep up his studies. He hadn't known that learning to read and write was so difficult. Since then, he had revered anyone who could read and write, especially scholars who read complicated books.

The soldier let him work selling scrap from the base, and a few small transactions allowed him to save some money, which at that time was a fortune. The war ended and he returned to Tanta feeling that he had truly become Khawaga Tadrus Bushra, known far and wide.

Sometimes he would fix his gaze on the photo and chew over "the days of youth," thinking he'd accomplished what no one else had. In fact, he hadn't gone to Alexandria by choice, as I later learned from Futna. He went to escape his grief after his son Michel drowned in the Nile during the mulid of the Virgin in Minya, followed soon after by the death of his first wife. A year later, he came to Tanta to live with his uncle, bringing seven-year-old Futna with him. He refused to take her with him to Alexandria. The world's a dangerous place, and she had to stay with his uncle until things settled down. He returned a few years later, opened the shop, and bought a house with all its outlying rooms in the alley where we lived, near Ghayath al-Din Street. All grown up now, Futna became

his companion and household manager. When it came time for her to marry, he cried like a child. He couldn't imagine living alone between four walls.

He threw himself into his business and his travels to the countryside to buy crops, as if fleeing his solitude at home. That's when Futna got the idea to marry him off. She knew how stubborn he was, but she knew his weak spot too.

Trying to convince him of the marriage, she told him, "One, she's a light-skinned woman. Two, she's God-fearing. And three, she knows how to read and write."

He lifted his face. "She really knows how to read and write?" he said in a quiet voice. Then he was silent and shifted his gaze upward, and Futna knew he'd agreed.

Khawaga Tadrus married a second time at age forty-five. When I was born, his feelings were different from my mother's. He didn't come near me or speak to me. He treated me oddly. But I know now that his feelings toward me were driven by the fear of death. Futna told me that when he heard me crying at the moment of birth, his face clouded over, as if he were about to face the same pain yet again. He didn't want to experience the infirmity of bone and the fragility of resolve caused by grief. He didn't approach me or call me by name—"Boy," he'd say—turning me over completely to the instruction of the Sitt, the Lady, Umm Yusuf, as he called my mother.

With me, he acted the opposite of what everyone expected. Futna would joke with him: "I told you God wouldn't forget you. He's made it up to you and gave you back His gift."

"Stop with that worthless women's talk," he would respond angrily.

She'd laugh, knowing his quick temper. She was the only one who could claim that she saw into his heart, but because of his steeliness and his skillfulness at concealing his feelings, even she started to believe that he didn't care about her younger brother. That piqued her self-regard: though he was

given the son he'd wanted, she would remain the beloved, the daughter of the beloved.

He fortified himself against the tenderness of the heart—that should be left to women—but the anxiety never left him. It was like he knew the capriciousness of the world and didn't believe its sparkle.

And then the day came when they told him, as he was standing at the door of the exchange, that Yusuf had been run over by a truck on al-Nahas Street. That was the day the fog descended over his eyes. The moment he'd feared for so long had come. He heard Sadiq, a worker in the shop, say, "Let's go to the hospital, sir." But he couldn't walk. He sat down on the wooden bench next to the door and said in a voice that puzzled the worker and even himself: "Make sure Umm Yusuf is okay."

The afternoon of that Friday metamorphosed into dusk. Needling him later, they would ask him about Yusuf's boy-hood accident—did it happen during the afternoon or at dusk? He would insist that it was dusk and they'd laugh, and he would curse them and say they were cattle who couldn't tell broad daylight from dusk. He wasn't joking. He had absolutely no doubt that the accident occurred at dusk, though it actually happened on a Friday afternoon. He would curse them, saying he saw better than they did, that they were the blind ones.

The fog that settled over my father's eyes was, in his view, fleeting—a brief muddle that would resolve itself soon enough. He waited a long time for the fog to lift, for shapes to be revealed and some of their clarity to return. But it did not happen. To prove to himself and those around him that his eyesight was fine, he would leave the house every morning for the exchange, walking in the fog and stubbornly refusing to rely on anyone, convinced the fog would clear. But one day he felt unsettled. The streets seemed to be shaking and he realized he wouldn't be able to make it alone.

“Stop me a carriage, Umm Yusuf, to take me to the exchange,” he said with unpracticed nonchalance.

From that day, Futna began leaving the chickpea stand next to al-Sayyid al-Badawi Mosque and coming to escort my father to the exchange. She’d carry dinner to him in the evening and chat with him about his hard work, telling him he should pack in the business and relax, and because he was nettlesome, he would hold his tongue and then say with a seriousness that would silence her, “Getting greedy, Fatin?”

When he said her given name, she’d know what kind of mood he was in and stop talking.

SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

No Road to Paradise

by Hassan Daoud, translated by Marilyn Booth

A Beautiful White Cat Walks with Me

by Youssef Fadel, translated by Alexander E. Elinson

The Longing of the Dervish

by Hammour Ziada, translated by Jonathan Wright



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