

# In the Spider's Room

Muhammad Abdelnabi

Translated by  
Jonathan Wright



First published in 2018 by  
Hoopoe  
113 Sharia Kasr el Aini, Cairo, Egypt  
420 Fifth Avenue, New York, 10018  
www.hoopoefiction.com

Hoopoe is an imprint of the American University in Cairo Press  
www.aucpress.com

Copyright © by Muhammad Abdelnabi  
First published in Arabic in 2016 as *Fi ghurfat al-'ankabut* by Elain Publishing  
Protected under the Berne Convention

English translation copyright © 2018 by Jonathan Wright

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Exclusive distribution outside Egypt and North America by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd., 6 Salem Road, London, W4 2BU

Dar el Kutub No. 26459/17  
ISBN 978 977 416 875 8

Dar el Kutub Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Abdelnabi, Muhammad  
In the Spider's Room / Muhammad Abdelnabi.— Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2018.  
p. cm.  
ISBN 978 977 416 875 8  
1. Egypt—Social Life and Customs—Fiction  
823

1 2 3 4 5      22 21 20 19 18

Designed by Adam el-Schemy  
Printed in the United States of America

To my elder brother and the finest human being,  
Ibrahim Abdelnabi

What is love?

A nobleman fell in love with a boy who sold beer, and in pursuit of his love went wandering far from his family. Malicious gossip about him spread far and wide. The nobleman had properties and estates, which he sold to buy beer from the boy. After selling his property he descended into poverty, but his love for the boy increased. Although people constantly provided him with bread as alms, he was always hungry, because he sold all the bread to buy more beer.

Someone once asked him, “You poor, confused man, what is love? Please explain the secret of it to me.”

“It is to sell a hundred worlds of goods for the sake of a single glass of beer,” he replied. “And if this act does not make a man happy, how could he understand love and pain?”

Farid al-Din al-Attar

# 1

I CLEARLY REMEMBER HOW THE nightmare began.

Abdel Aziz and I were coming out of his apartment on Qasr al-Aini Street, walking along in an unusually serene state of mind, on our way to have a drink in a place near Falaki Square. Suddenly I had a whimsical desire to hold his hand. Something may have sent a shiver of fear up my spine, and I wanted to cling to him.

It might have been the first time I had held his hand in front of people in the street, and the strange thing was that he didn't move his hand away or discourage me, as I had expected. We held each other's hands and my fear, which had no known cause, evaporated. The next moment rough hands came down on our shoulders. We turned in surprise to make sure it wasn't just a prank by some annoying friends. They asked us for identity papers, still holding on to us as if we might run off if they let go. For a moment I felt guilty: maybe they had appeared out of nowhere to punish us just because I had reached out my hand to my friend and he had held it.

"May I know who you gentlemen are?" asked Abdel Aziz, before taking out his identity card.

He spoke excitedly and with confidence, while I was struggling to hide the fact that I was trembling.

"No need to hurry, my dear. You'll find out everything in good time," replied the one who seemed to be senior.

Then he looked behind him and we noticed there was a police truck not far off. The man called over someone called Hayatim. I recognized Hayatim from a distance—a pale, plump young man with thin eyebrows that looked as if they had been drawn on with a ballpoint pen. Hayatim, a name usually given to girls, was his nickname. I don't know his real name. He was their guide that night.

Hayatim came over, walking confidently between two security men in civilian clothes. "Which one do you mean?" Hassan Fawwaz asked him.

Hayatim pointed toward me without looking at me, as if he were slightly embarrassed. "But I don't know that other guy," he said. "It's the first time I've seen him."

The man in charge looked at me. "Are you *gay*?" he asked, using the English word and speaking rapidly in order to confuse me.

"What does that mean?" I answered in a trembling voice.

"Okay, come along with us, my dear, and we'll tell you what it means."

Then he looked at Abdel Aziz and gave orders to his men: "Bring that one too and we'll see what's up with him."

In less than five minutes we were inside the truck, among more than ten other men. Our gentle world receded into the distance with each passing moment while the nightmare spread its black wings over everything. I clung to my friend's hand in the darkness of the truck.

## 2

MY NAME IS HANI MAHFOUZ and I was an only child, pampered by everyone as if my mother were the sun and my father the moon.

But the person who pampered me most and loved me most was my grandfather, who was known as Khawaga Mida. When I was six years old I thought I had killed him, after seeing him in a dream. In the dream, he woke me up, kissed me, and touched my hair, and then opened the window, went through it, and rose up until the hem of his striped gallabiya and his bare feet disappeared into the darkness of the street. As soon as I woke up, I went to Mama's bed and told her about the dream, whispering in fear for some reason. She hugged me and told me not to tell anyone else, especially my grandmother Sakina, because "it would bring bad luck on your grandfather, and Grandma would be angry with us and would make a scene."

Only a week or less later Grandfather died, and then I was surprised to find Mama herself revealing our secret and telling them about my dream as if she were proud of me. She declared that I was a spiritual, clairvoyant child with a touch of the divine in me. I didn't understand any of this, but I felt a change in the way they saw me, if only for a short time, before they completely forgot the subject—except for my grandmother Sakina, or Sikkina Hamya ("sharp knife"), as my mother and I called her in secret. She had started to

bribe me with candy and money, perhaps in case I dreamed about her death too and made her fly out of the window after Grandfather. This didn't relieve my sense of guilt. I felt I had killed him deliberately; that I had killed the person I loved most out of all of them, the only person whose heart had listened to me when I implored them to postpone sending me off to primary school for another year. He was the only one who loved me, and he had pampered me as if I were the only star in the night that was his life.

My grandfather's real name was Mohamed Mahfouz, and he was called Mida by the Jewish woman who had adopted him when he was in his twenties. She gave him a job in the small dressmaking business she owned on the first floor of an old building in Adli Street in central Cairo. It is said that when he came to her he was a complete oaf who couldn't even thread a needle, and she had taught him the art of tailoring. "And how to be charming as well," Grandmother Sakina would add, fluttering an eyebrow.

I imagine him as a tall, thin young man with a trim figure and sparkling honey-colored eyes, light on his feet, sweet-talking, and, most importantly, with a fine clear voice. In his later years, whenever he secured a short truce with his dry cough and his arthritis, he would sing to me in a voice that was gruff and yet pleasant: "Dawn has broken, the night is gone, and the sparrow has chirped." I sang it back to him, rocking back and forth in dance.

He had moved from Mahalla in the Nile Delta, almost a fugitive from his family, to break into the world of "art," as they called it—the obsession that spared almost no one in my family. He left behind him a poor family with many children. Most of the menfolk were workers in the textile factories and their lives were set out in advance, from birth to death, caught up in thread, cloth, and the cogs of machines, from which they could be disentangled only by death from chronic chest diseases, or by running away, as my grandfather

did when he let go of the thread at the right moment. Maybe it was because he was different from his brothers and other relatives, or maybe he felt this difference because of the particular admiration that those around him always showed for him—admiration for his appearance and his fine voice. In the end ambition seethed in his veins and drove him to the capital without money or acquaintances or any clear plan.

They say that on one occasion he waited at length for the actor Naguib al-Rihani outside a theater, and when Rihani appeared my grandfather threw himself at him and begged him to let him join his troupe or just to listen to his voice, if only for a minute. Rihani may have been distracted or upset for some reason, or maybe his troupe was going through a rough patch, and he was sharp with Grandfather.

“Is the morgue short of dead people?” he said. “Off you go, son, God help you.”

But when he saw the disappointment on the face of the pale young man as he walked away, he called him back and pressed a large coin into his hand, saying, “Find yourself another line of work, rather than die of hunger.”

From a job as an assistant in a coffee shop to selling nuts outside theaters and cinemas, Mohamed Mahfouz lived like a street dog, sleeping anywhere, eating whatever was available, and dreaming of glory on the pavement as he examined the posters. Then a woman who worked in the ticket office decided to help him. She took my grandfather to Mrs. Biba, dressmaker to society ladies of the upper classes, who took him under her wing. Biba gradually taught him everything: how to dress, how to speak and smile at people, and how to deal with her lady customers when he was showing them samples of new fabric. He was a quick learner, and after a few months he cut his first dress pattern by himself.

She gave him the name Mida as a pet form of Mohamed and because it sounded rather like her own name. His Egyptian friends later added the title Khawaga to the name on their

own initiative, because it sounded amusing or mildly derogatory. Her customers often thought that Mida was Jewish like the owner because he was the only person she trusted and he looked like he was the only person left from her family, since no one ever saw her with a husband or a child.

I imagine him visiting her in the evening after shutting up the workshop. He would take the elevator up to her apartment in the same building where the workshop took up half of the first floor. He would ring the bell and she would open it herself because the maid had gone. She wouldn't move far back from the door, but would just leave him a small gap to come in so that his body almost brushed against her soft gown. He would find waiting for him everything he might dream of as a young man away from home and pleased with himself—food, a house, a woman who was pleasing to the eye even if she was old enough to be his mother, and like his mother she delighted in his pleasant voice and laughed at his ready jokes. She bought him an oud, and arranged lessons so he could learn to play. Every Friday she looked up from whatever work she was doing and reminded him: "Lesson time, Mida."

He rose in silence with a smile put on his jacket and fez, pick up the oud, and walk to Emad al-Din Street, where he met his teacher, a blind sheikh, in a coffee shop. The sheikh never ended a lesson without referring to "the lady," saying, "How is Mrs. Biba? Give her my best regards," or asking in jest, "I wonder whether you'll stay on as private oud player to the lady, or do you plan to turn professional, Si Mida?" Mida swallowed his teacher's sarcastic remarks in silence with a smile. That's how I like to imagine him now, shy and smiling and taciturn. In his smile there might be a certain disdain for people and for everything in their world, except for music, good cheer, and his patron.

I assume she didn't give herself to him suddenly. She laid her preparations and was patient. She didn't rush the fruit and pick it green and eat it unripe or too quickly like the hungry

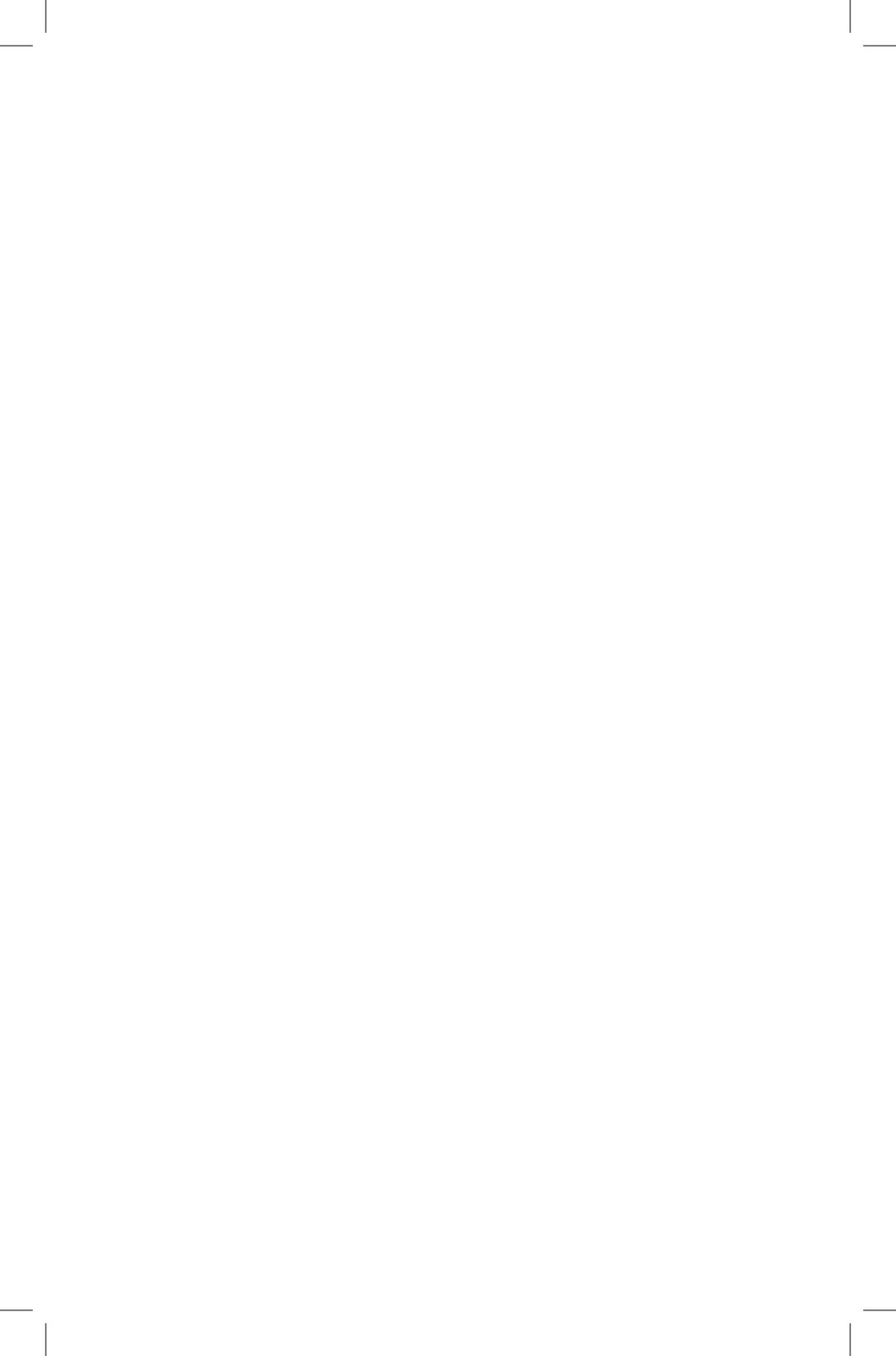
and deprived. No, she let him come and go in front of her big dark eyes, slowly losing his Mahalla accent, and warbling English and French words he had picked up from her and the customers. He knew how to dress, how to choose the color and size that showed off his slim figure and well-toned muscles. I imagine that the first physical encounter between the patient old woman and her young fancy man took place long after she adopted him, a year or more. I can see him now, sitting cross-legged on a comfortable sofa in her apartment, playing the oud and singing to her:

Light of spirit, he flashes his eyelashes and eyebrows.

She stands up and goes over to sit next to him, close enough to stroke his curly, shiny black hair with her hand. He keeps his eyes closed and smiles till the end of the song, then turns toward her, happy that the moment has come that he has awaited so long. He sets the oud down nearby, turning it onto its front, and sees that her eyes are tearing up and fluttering. He embraces her tenderly and gently, as if afraid of breaking her fragile bones. At that moment, Mohamed Mahfouz or Khawaga Mida might have grasped the real reason why he ran away from his hometown and family—not from fear of death through some chest disease, not in pursuit of the glories of art and fame, and not in search of adventures or to discover the world. He had come here, to the great city, only to go back to his real home, promised to him long before, in the body of Biba.

On that tender night maybe she said to him: “I don’t want you to do anything against your will.”

And he answered in a voice that had the swish of silk: “This is what I want, madam.”



### 3

IN THE FRIGHTENING DREAM EVERYTHING looked real. I was touching things and smelling them, and I could see sizes and colors and faces. I suddenly had an urge to tell my dream to someone and, without thinking about the embarrassing content, I found myself looking for my wife Shireen in the apartment. I moved slowly and calmly, like a homeless person who has broken into a stranger's house, though I wasn't embarrassed that I was naked.

She was sitting alone at the kitchen table, busy reaming out zucchini with a corer as bright and sharp as a knife. I started to pour out to her everything I'd seen in the dream: how I had been walking alongside Abdel Aziz, then my sudden fear, and how I held his hand and we were arrested, Hayatim the informer, the police truck and the cell, then the release of Abdel Aziz and how he had left me there alone. She worked the corer more rapidly, and I felt a strange and embarrassing desire throbbing below my waist. I simply reached out, took some of the pulp from the zucchini, and put it in my mouth. It was indescribably delicious, but then I found that my hand had been cut by a careless turn of the corer, and the little cut produced as much blood as you would expect from a bullet hole. But when I looked to Shireen for help all I saw in front of me was Aunt Husniya in the prime of her youth, calmly smoking a cigarette and laughing with abandon, and she soon started to sing the opening line of one of her songs: "Who

will guide the stranger to the land of his beloved?" And as she sang, she raised her knee little by little to show her skeleton, bare of skin and flesh. I ran out of the apartment in horror at my dead aunt and her voice, which was a harrowing wail. Or perhaps I was trying to bandage my finger, which had covered the floor of the apartment with so much blood that I nearly slipped in it several times. I soon realized that I was wearing wooden bath clogs and that steam was rising around me and Abdel Aziz was sitting next to me, patting my shoulder and trying to comfort me with friendly words, and when I wanted to show him my finger I couldn't find any cut, and he said he had to go now, and I found the steam around him was consuming him from bottom to top so that he gradually began to fade away in the billows. In the end the features of his face dissolved as he smiled in pity and embarrassment.

The first massive black spider appeared. I don't know where it suddenly sprang from, but it headed toward me, and behind it marched two others, then five, and then I could no longer count the vast army of spiders, and I didn't know where to hide from them, and then I felt the first of them climbing up my naked body. I screamed, but no noise came out, and I woke up to see the terrified faces of my fellow detainees.

## 4

IN THE HANDS OF HIS patron Grandfather matured with time into a handsome man. His passion for theater and music abated; he played the oud and sang only as a pastime in his spare moments or when he was alone with Biba. Without hesitation he turned down an offer from his teacher to work as an oud player in a reputable group. He must have loved Biba, and he also loved his new trade—in his hands cloth was transformed into objects that almost breathed when they swathed the bodies of women and girls.

He stayed with her as she advanced in age and gradually lost her looks, like a wilting flower. In the end Mida became her nurse and masseur, and it was she who encouraged him to marry Sakina, the girl who did the embroidery, after she noticed that he talked about her and after she heard him arguing repeatedly with the girl. She helped him rent and furnish the apartment in Abdin and then welcomed their only son, my father Ahmad, like a kindly grandmother. My father had confused memories of his visits to the old lady on feast days and his disgust at kisses from her moist lips, which he wiped away immediately. As she approached the age of ninety her health no longer permitted her to leave the apartment and go downstairs to supervise the workshop, which still bore her name though Mida was now in full control.

When public opinion in Egypt turned against the Jews, angry young men threw firebombs at the workshop window.

The damage was slight and the fires were put out as soon as they started. Grandfather suggested she wind up her business and migrate to some other country, as many Jews had done, or that she move in with some of her own people who had stayed. “What do you mean, my people?” she replied bitterly. “You’re the only one I have, Mida. I have one niece, who’s like a scorpion waiting impatiently for me to die.”

To ward off evil, they merely changed the name of the place to Atelier Mida, on her insistence, and at the time Grandfather didn’t know he had become the real owner in the official documents, even before they put up the new sign. At least that’s what he claimed. A few months later she passed away in her sleep. The night before, he had been sitting with her and singing an old ditty that she loved:

We died for love of you, light of our eyes, and survived.  
As if, full moon, we’d really done nothing at all.

He stopped when he felt she had fallen asleep and heard her snoring gently. He looked at her smile, twisted at the side of her mouth, then lightly kissed her smooth, waxy forehead.

After Biba died, everyone was surprised to find she had left the workshop to Grandfather. He was surprised too, or at least he pretended to be, but no one believed him, least of all Biba’s niece. The niece sent her lawyer, who put Grandfather through hell before admitting that the contract was valid. Did Mida still feel ill at ease despite his joy? Or is that how I like to portray him, not as my father or grandmother depicted him, in a version that’s different from this gentle love story? They had a less romantic version that can be summarized thus: the shrewd and handsome young man tricked the childish old woman and won her over with sweet words and a laugh, then with a wink and one song after another in his fine voice. Then the door opened that led to a garden of pleasures, and in the middle of the garden he came across a well, and the young

man had a long and skillful tongue and he started licking and licking until the water in the well trembled and overflowed. The woman who owned the garden gasped, and muttered in a stifled voice, "I'm all yours, Mida. Do with me what you will."

And so she wrote out the contract handing over ownership of the workshop to him, at a time when she was in raptures in another realm. I don't imagine it that way, maybe because I came to know him after time had rounded off his edges and shaken the last feather off the peacock he had been. I also didn't have much confidence in my father's and grandmother's accounts of him because of their constant disagreements with him.

I have distinct memories of him that I didn't borrow from anyone else. He used to take me with him to the workshop, before he raised the white flag of surrender to arthritis and left everything in my father's hands. I was five or six years old at the time, and looked like one of those dolls that they put in shop windows or in commercials for toys or dairy products. My mother worried about me, and she hung a charm in the shape of a blue glass eye around my neck and stuffed an amulet under my clothes that hurt me like a large pebble. But none of this could fend off assault by the evil eye: I fell ill and had fevers, and then she would burn incense, cut out paper dolls, and stick a needle into them as she named possibly malevolent people one after another. In the meantime I was under the covers and the cold sweat felt lovely on my skin, and I imagined all those people hating me for some reason, maybe because I was a boy or because I was pretty. I felt there was something wrong with me that made those around me want me to suffer, to fall ill and die.

The fever would pass every time and I would get up hungry. I would go back to being a shiny china doll, with masses of soft black hair that fell over my forehead and shoulders, and again I would cling to Grandfather when he went out so that he would take me with him, indifferent to my mother's

opposition, my grandmother's orders, and their anxiety for my sake. In the workshop I went back to playing with the scraps of colored cloth, looking through fashion magazines, and delighting in the smell and sound of the steam iron. I daydreamed as I played with little mannequins, headless or standing on one leg like a stick, imagining them as bewitched women from the stories my mother told me. Sometimes I imitated Grandfather, holding the tape to take the measurements of beautiful women as far as I could reach up their bodies when I stood on my tiptoes. Some of them would suddenly notice the little angel running between their feet, his head hardly reaching their bare knees. Some of them were well-known stars. Once one of them bent down, picked me up, looked at me with a surprised smile, gave me a hug, smothered me in kisses, and said, "What a pretty boy! And what's your name?"

"Hannoun," I said.

She was the actress Madiha Kamel, in the prime of her youth. Her laugh was slightly husky and her eyes sparkled. I went home that day laden with a small fortune in chocolate and told them I was going to marry Madiha Kamel. When they asked me why, I said because her face was like an apple and she smelled nice.

## 5

I SOON GREW USED TO Grandfather's absence and looked to my father to provide me with an alternative or a substitute. Some days he would forget me and then suddenly notice I was there, as if I were the child from next door who just happened to be in his house, and he would invite me to go with him to the coffee shop or to work. I loved going back to Grandfather's workshop. I loved the tension that ran through the place, with the girls behind their sewing machines or busy finishing off pieces with needle and thread. People never stopped visiting my father, especially when evening fell and the women workers were gone.

The place changed with time. The movie stars in high heels and with bare knees stopped coming, and gradually the business started to attract civil servants and mothers preparing trousseaus for their daughters' weddings. My father also worked with television celebrities and producers of low-budget movies. He had met many of them in his tumultuous youth when he had delusions of a career in show business. He would reach an agreement with one of the production assistants on what was needed, make some preliminary sketches, then give instructions to the seamstresses and leave them to do all the work, freeing himself to manage the business and party at night with his show-business and bohemian friends. I don't think he had inherited Grandfather's flair for cutting cloth, sensitivity for the female form, his artist's wandering gaze,

or fine voice. Even so, behind his immersion in the world of show business there maybe lay an enthusiasm inherited from his father or an envy that he harbored toward him.

In his early youth some of his low-life friends in the artistic world convinced him he could become the new screen idol if he were given the right opportunity. He did make some efforts, but his sense of dignity prevented him from accepting any minor roles. In those circles he saw a young woman who pleased him and he thought of marrying her, although she was only a small-time actress. She was my mother, Badriya—or Badridar or Badara, as I sometimes called her—who had been brought up in Old Cairo. She and her elder sister Husniya, or Husna as she was known to her fans, had run away from a troubled background that was not very different from the plots in the movies that drew them to the bright lights. The younger sister was prettier and more congenial. My father saw her in Studio Galal and made overtures to her but she rebuffed him emphatically. “I came here to make a living, not to have romances. Is that clear?” she said.

He went back to his father in a rage the same day and asked him to come with him at once to Studio Galal. Grandfather made fun of him, saying, “Good news? Are they going to sign an exclusive contract with you? And they want your guardian?”

Upset, my father told him he wanted to marry a small-time actress who was acting in a film there. He persuaded Grandfather only after Grandmother Sakina had pestered him for days and nights. In the end he gave in to them, in the hope that the marriage would put his wayward only son on the right track. Father was already over twenty but he had no job or qualifications and spent most of his time chasing women or in bad company.

Badriya and her sister had left their home in Old Cairo a long time ago and moved into a cheap hotel in the city center—two branches cut off a tree, with only an elderly uncle

who was already descending into senile dementia. So Grandfather couldn't find anyone he could ask for approval of the marriage, other than the director Fatin Abdel Wahhab. He went to see the director with my father in the place where he was filming his last movie, *City Lights*, and Shadya and Ahmad Mazhar are said to have congratulated the couple on their engagement, or so the family story goes.

My father stipulated that his bride must cut off all relations with acting and the world of show business, and she agreed without hesitation. I think Badriya said to herself, "Better to marry than to live alone," or maybe she had taken a liking to Ahmad, who was dark, adventurous, and amusing. She had always seen acting as just a way to make a living. But she knew that people saw it as suspect, so maybe marriage was an alternative that would protect her reputation. Maybe she hoped her elder sister would also find her own Mr. Right, and she started praying that would happen once she had tasted the benefits of security.

When Aunt Husna visited us in the apartment in Abdin, all my father's family would suddenly disappear on urgent errands or shut themselves into various rooms. No one welcomed her except her embarrassed sister and her beautiful boy. Maybe that was because she wore short skirts and dresses, laughed loudly, smoked like a man, and raised her voice when she joked with me. "If it wasn't for you, sweetie, I would never have set foot in this house," she would say.

The more my mother advised her to be sensible, the more outrageously she behaved, especially after she started singing in third-rate vaudeville theaters. Apparently my father would hear reports of her behavior when he was partying with his friends—the reports were exaggerated for effect, and he would annoy Mother by passing them on. Maybe this was what encouraged him to make advances on Husna one day when she was visiting us and Mother was in the kitchen. My aunt raised her voice and insulted him in front

of his wife and his mother. He didn't take that lying down and they swore at each other. She stormed out, leaving the house in turmoil, and came back to visit us only after my father had died.

The flame of love between Ahmad and Badriya died down as fast as it had flared up, and he went back to his old ways, with endless partying and making merry, some of which I witnessed whenever I managed to tag along with him when he went out. Once I saw him arranging sticks of hashish in an elegant wooden box inlaid with mother-of-pearl. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye and said with a wink, "This is what the pashas smoke for pleasure, Hannoun. When you grow up, you'll try it and discover why."

How I longed to grow up and try it and discover why. Another time I saw him going into the bathroom after one of the girls in the workshop, and come out a little later wiping his mouth. I was sure they had been doing what actors did in the movies, and for that reason too I was impatient to grow up and try it. Probably because of the hashish, my father shared the workshop with the owners of other workshops, and it became as public as a market.

I can see myself, aged about ten or so, sitting by the small window with thin metal bars to breathe some fresh air rather than the air in the room, which was thick with whatever the pashas smoked, my head spinning slightly. That window allowed me to play my secret game, because it looked out on a small corridor and in the corner there was a urinal that some of the workshop owners had installed because most of them worked in one or two rooms without a bathroom. I loved to sit in this corner, because there I was invisible to my father and his friends, and also because I could snoop on the men who were urinating. No one would notice the boy slouched indolently behind the window. I would have a peek when I caught sight of a man standing at the urinal and taking his penis out from under his clothes. Furtively I looked at all these

hamamas, doves, as they called them, and wondered what lay behind the name. Did they fly like doves?

No one noticed me spying except Ra'fat. Ra'fat worked as a cutter. He was a young man with a thin, straight mustache who parted his thick black hair to the side. I remember that he always wore a red sweatshirt of some shiny material, with a high neck. He must have liked it very much. I never saw him in the kind of dirty or ragged clothes most of the men in the other workshops in the building wore, and the sound of his clear laugh would ring out on the stairs. He was the only one who noticed me snooping. In fact, he liked me looking at his penis but he pretended that he couldn't see me. Over time he began to go a step further and play with his soft white penis until it stiffened and I saw for the first time the miracle that took place. His hamama inflated as though it were going to take off. Would it coo like the doves in the light well at home? On one occasion, he unexpectedly looked at me and caught my eyes feasting on the sight of his penis. I had been discovered. I anxiously expected he would complain to my father, but he never did.

The next time he stood there, as soon as I could control myself and look at him, he gave me a slight smile and made a little nod as if inviting me to carry on playing with him, but I looked away, my heart beating violently. I could feel my heartbeats in my arms and legs and the pictures in the magazine I was holding dissolved into meaningless blotches of color. Then I noticed my father chuckling because someone was making ribald fun of one of his friends, who was stoned and talking incoherently. Father might suddenly notice I was there and ask me to imitate Farid al-Atrash for them. When he did that I put my magazine aside, jumped up off the armchair, and stood among them in the middle of the room, my face and mouth in contortions, reproducing the sighs and laments in Atrash's performances. Then I would sing comically, inspired by Lebleba when she was a child, because I had seen her on television imitating singers:

That's not enough, my love, not enough.  
I want you, I want your heart.

Bursts of laughter broke out around me, like the firecrackers people throw on feast days, and sometimes Father would say, both proudly and in jest, "Acting runs in his blood on both sides of the family."

On those occasions Hani turned into something else—the court jester and the center of attention, something for the men to laugh at and gaze at from under drooping eyelids. For ages I loved playing this role and identified with it. From time to time, when I was wrapped up in playing my game with my father's friends, I caught sight of Ra'fat's face behind the little window, standing there, following the free show, and smiling like someone who keeps a secret.

## 6

THE FURTHER MY WRITING ADVANCES, the bigger this small room grows and the more the walls recede. Eventually they disappear completely. The notebook in front of me is the only place left. I prevaricate. I take memory as far as it can go, to put off the confrontation. I feel as if I'm saying goodbye to my life by shrouding it in lines and words. I haven't gotten close to the open wounds yet. I'm still twisting and turning on paper, in the same way I walk around in the downtown crowds every night, letting my body lose its way.

Two days ago I went out for my evening roam and realized I'd forgotten my dark glasses and had gone out with my face uncovered. I raised my right hand to adjust my glasses on my nose and was surprised to find that they weren't there. I felt as if I'd gone out in the street with nothing on. I had gone only a few paces from the door of the building that includes the hotel on its top three floors. I looked around quickly, just to be safe, and didn't see anything suspicious. Even so I found myself shaking—at least my fingers were clearly trembling. I pretended that everything was normal, on my guard for anyone monitoring me, as though a great big eye, open day and night, were watching my slightest movement, and maybe my thoughts as well. I felt that I wasn't alone and hadn't recovered yet. I looked through the pockets of my coat and pants, though I was sure the glasses were still on the glass surface of the dressing table in the room upstairs. I behaved as if I had

forgotten something, just to send the right message to that hidden eye. I turned and went back, almost tripping over my feet. All this happened in less than three minutes, but it was enough for me to know I was still a long way from full recovery.

I still wake up in panic in the middle of the night. I don't know where I am. In one of these suffocating fits I went and looked at the packets and strips of pills in the drawer of the bedside table, tempted to take them all, to put an end to everything and find relief. Holding back my tears, I reached out for them and started to tear off the plastic bubbles over the Xanax tablets, which were a sad, pale pink. My only friend turned up right then—the little black spider I had met in the same room weeks ago when I came out of prison. It started to climb up my fingers casually and affectionately and without fear, as though it were holding back my hand, trying to stop me from taking the pills and whispering to me to calm down and think again. I backed down and watched it walk over my wrist and the palm of my hand, and then I went back to writing, imagining myself as a dumb spider spinning a frail web around himself to protect himself from destruction.

My psychotherapist, Dr. Sameeh, said, “Write, Hani, please. Send me emails regularly, or even text messages on the cell phone. You may have lost your ability to speak but you can still write. Whenever you feel you're suffocating, write. Say on paper what happened, if only for yourself. Purge yourself of everything that made you feel dirty there.” When he said “purge yourself,” I felt he could see inside me. Maybe he knew that since coming out of prison I've spent a long time under the shower trying to get myself clean. I started thinking seriously about his suggestion. I wrote the first sentence that night on a page in one of the little notebooks I use for communicating with other people: “My name is Hani Mahfouz,” I wrote. But I tore it up and threw it away, then took a sleeping pill and was out within minutes.

I sleep. I sleep all the time. I sink into long periods of stupor interrupted only by the need to stay alive. I'm woken by

thirst or by the need to urinate, or by nightmares, of course. I hardly remember anything of them other than the shock of how they end. I might have ordinary dreams sometimes. Some of them take me back to prison, back to the most intricate details of the cell and my fellow prisoners, and during those dreams I feel a warm familiarity, like someone who's finally gone back to his home and family. I still haven't come out of the long nightmare, though physically I have distanced myself. The black bird is still perched on my head. I avoid looking other people in the face, in streets and public places, and if any of them stares at me, even for a few seconds, I get flustered and look away, and then I move off quickly, my fingers trembling and my throat dry.

I've confessed to Dr. Sameeh in an email that sometimes I imagine the worst possibilities. I seem to enjoy being frightened and sinking into the dark oozy mud of my fear. When I'm walking around aimlessly, I imagine a heavy hand landing suddenly on me, a living pincer on my neck. I expect it to come down on me at any moment and at every step. I feel it's a small victory when I manage to ignore this threat and steer my thoughts away from it. But within five minutes it comes back to me again and I can sense that unknown person coming up to me, pinning me down and taking my glasses off my face in a single violent gesture. The glasses fall to the ground and other people gather around us in the blink of an eye. Some of them recognize me or he introduces them to me, like a hunter who's happy to have finally found his prey. I see them taking his side, all of them without exception, some of them laughing, and others upset and disgusted when they find out the truth about me. One of them takes part in the public performance with a well-aimed spit right in my face, and another with a firm slap on the back of my neck. Then the others pull at my clothes, which tear easily in their hands and fall off my flesh like paper handkerchiefs. I'm soon naked among them. I try to cover up my genitals but they prevent me. I curl up

on the ground while they kick me. The exquisite horror keeps toying with my imagination. Cigarettes are stubbed out on my back and stomach, stiff fingers reach toward my asshole, and I don't even have the energy to scream or cry. I scurry between their legs on all fours like an animal, looking for a gap, but there's no way out.

I don't describe these imaginary scenes to Sameeh in as much detail as I do here. There's also a clear distance between what I write to him by email and what I write for myself here in my notebooks. In one of his messages he said I was trying to overcome my fears by imagining them and magnifying them as much as possible, which is a good start but not a proper solution, and he again encouraged me to write.

When I'm writing, facing the dressing-table mirror yet trying not to look at it, I succeed in forgetting—forgetting not just what has happened to me over the past few months, but also what I have to do now, and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, and on all the days that I'll have to bear on my shoulders until death brings me relief. I avoid the pressing questions and escape to the happy past, to my grandfather and the workshop and the family house in Abdin and my first relationship. But as soon as I go out roaming every evening, questions circle around my head like birds of prey with horrible screeches. What will I do with my life? Should I emigrate, as some of the people released with me are trying to do? If I wanted to leave the country, how could I go through with the procedures when I'm still completely unable to speak. I'll have to get my voice back first, and to get it back I'll have to have regular therapy, follow Dr. Sameeh's orders, make an appointment to see the speech therapist he recommended, and do countless other things. Thinking of all this, I feel like a dead man walking, a corpse that fights the smell of its own decay every day, and does nothing but this rabid wandering every night.

When my feet tire, I head to the small local bar I recently discovered. It's not one of the places I frequented in my

former life, before the nightmare. There I drink one beer after another, and my hand sometimes loosens up enough for me to write in the little notebook I keep with me all the time. The damned questions keep swarming. As soon as a new question is born, within seconds it branches out into other questions, each one hurtling off in a different direction, until I envision a network that branches out to infinity. The new question becomes in turn a hub from which further questions branch out, and so on. It's not like the web that would be spun by my friend the little spider that I check up on every now and then in his place in the drawer. I once addressed him without speaking. "I would have liked to sing to you, but now I can't even speak," I said.

## SELECTED HOOPOE TITLES

*The Televangelist*

by Ibrahim Essa, translated by Jonathan Wright

*Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge*

By Ezzedin C. Fishere, translated by John Peate

*All the Battles*

By Maan Abu Taleb, translated by Robin Moger



**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](http://hoopoefiction.com), curious and adventurous readers from around the world will find new writing, interviews, and criticism from our authors, translators, and editors.