

Diary of a Jewish Muslim

Kamal Ruhayyim

Translated by
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To Suzanne, wife and mother, and to the companion of my
childhood and youth: to the memory of my brother
Lt. Mohamed Ruhayyim, lost to us in the war for
liberation, the October War.



1

WE ONLY HEARD ABOUT MY father's death a month after the fact.

We heard two knocks on the window inset into the house's front door, and I tried to wriggle out of the grasp of Umm Hassan, the neighbor who had volunteered to nurse me along with her own son, Hassan, after my mother's own milk had run dry. She pushed me gently into her lap with a deft motion of her wrist. I ignored her, twisting my head backwards, eyes smiling at this newcomer, who I thought was my grandfather. It turned out, though, to be one of my mother's acquaintances, wearing a black dress and shawl. She was there to offer condolences on the death of my father, only to discover that no one in the house had heard the news.

She sat on the sofa looking from one to the other of us, wondering how we hadn't heard a thing until now; my mother stared at her, her face losing its bloom with every passing moment. She said she had only learned about it by chance herself; a distant cousin of her husband's had told her about it while visiting the day before yesterday. My father and some of his courageous fellow soldiers had been on a boat on Lake Manzala in the north of Egypt, heading for Port Said. There were quite a lot of them, double the capacity of the boat in fact, further weighted down with food, weapons, and supplies. The boat had capsized in the middle of the lake, killing my father and two others. She told my mother all that the cousin had related. He'd told of my grandfather, the village elder,

of the ceremonial tent erected for the funeral, and of the vast number of people who had poured in from every direction—some on foot and some riding donkeys—of the women weeping in their homes. And all the while, my mother stared at nothing, stunned, eyes lowered. She only managed to look up and speak after a long silence. She said in a choked voice, “Whatever did he go there for? What is this war to us, anyway? What is to become of me now? Where shall I go? What shall I do?”

The visitor bent and hugged my mother, who began to cry. Umm Hassan jumped up out of her seat, with me still in her arms. She leaned close to my mother, patting her on the head. “Patience is a virtue, my dear.”

“Patience? What are you talking about? Patience is for when you have hope! It’s been a year with no news of him, and I’ve been patient, never said a word. But now what use is patience? How could you, Mahmoud? Leave me like this? Leave your son, your son whom you’ve never even seen!”

The guest looked toward me, saying to Umm Hassan, “Great heaven above! Is this fine little fellow Mahmoud’s son?”

“Yes,” my mother said. “This is Galal. What’s to become of him now? What am I to do with him? The whole world conspires against me! The family, the marriage, the way we live—nothing ever goes right for me!”

The radio played loud in the kitchen, where my grandmother stood at the sink clattering and banging cups, plates, utensils, and everything she laid eyes on, occasionally letting out a sharp cough that offended my ears.

“Yvonne! Hey, Umm Isaac!” Umm Hassan yelled.

My mother gestured. “Not now, Umm Hassan. Not now.”

“She has to know, Camellia.”

“Listen to me. Listen to me: let it wait, now. I can’t put up with her needling—not now.”

Umm Hassan sat back down, murmuring, “Heaven help us.” She offered me her breast, but I refused. She patted my

back until I acquiesced and started to suckle on the delicious milk flowing into my mouth, deliberately not swallowing so that it dribbled out between my parted lips and flowed almost to my neck. A lugubrious silence fell, broken only by my grandmother's coughing from the kitchen; she had turned off the radio as soon as the Qur'an for the evening prayer had started at eight o'clock.

I must have sensed something, or been frightened by my mother's face buried in the chest of the woman visiting us, and her audible gasps as she drew breath; I looked up at Umm Hassan questioningly. Her eyes, too, were red, tears clinging to her eyelashes and about to fall on my brow. Her face looked unfamiliar; I had never seen her like this before. I pushed out her nipple immediately, and my body arched in fear. She took hold of my clothing for fear I should fall, but I squirmed out of her grasp and flung myself at my mother. Feeling Umm Hassan's attempts to get me back, I could only cling to my mother's neck and scream as loudly as I possibly could.

Later, when I had grown up, my mother told me that this was my usual habit. Whenever something happened at home—a sad or even a happy event—I would forget the whole world—food, toys, nursing, everything—and fling myself upon her breast. She would hold me, slipping her palm under my clothing, and rub my bare back until I calmed.

Umm Hassan held back a moment; then she slipped her breast back into her gallabiya, covering the hole up with her veil. My mother and the guest were too busy talking about my father's family to pay attention to her. I took to looking at her as she used her big toe to turn her discarded shoe right-side up, then as she tied her scarf more firmly about her head. When she leaned down to pull her other shoe from where it had slipped under the couch, I realized she was getting ready to go. At the last moment, though, my mother pressed a hand on her knee, urging her silently to stay and finish my feeding.

It was then that I stiffened, arching my back, and began to reformulate my plans.

Her hand still on Umm Hassan's shoulder, my mother introduced her to the guest as more than a neighbor, closer than a sister, and privy to all her secrets. Umm Hassan was the woman whose kindnesses could never, ever be repaid no matter what.

Umm Hassan's eyelids had sagged, without her noticing; her lips remained pursed for a moment, then she approached my mother, patting her hand and offering condolences. My mother gave her a grateful glance.

I stood erect in my mother's lap, playing with her and teasing her, pulling at her earlobe and at the collar of her gallabiya and slapping my little hands against her neck and cheeks. I remained aware, of course, of Umm Hassan's movements. I only started to whine when I saw her pushing her veil back and opening the button at her breast. Understanding what she meant to do, I bent my knees, trying to escape from under my mother's arm. Umm Hassan was quicker, though. She snatched me up, while I struggled and gasped with the force of my crying, and comforted and rocked me. Then she took me in her arms and held me close, her chest rising and falling as her breath mingled with mine.

I was more like a toy than anything else in her hands. Realizing that resistance was futile, I relaxed in her embrace, feeling her breast, and began to nurse again, never taking my eyes off my mother. When sleep overcame me, Umm Hassan laid me on the couch and left.

I do not know how much time passed after that; perhaps a minute, perhaps an hour. All I remember is waking, frightened, at the sound of my grandmother's voice.

She spoke in a nasal, fast-paced patter, incomprehensible unless you were ready for it and listening intently. It appeared that the news had reached the kitchen. She rushed in, standing

with her short, squat figure and red hair, wiping her hands on the apron she wore over her housedress and gesturing at me. “So who’s going to raise this little scamp, then?”

My mother didn’t answer. The guest started to look embarrassed; she half-stood, making to leave, perhaps hoping to avoid being the jury in my grandmother’s show trial, but was halted by my mother’s grip on her arm, lowering her to the couch once more.

My grandmother waved her hand. “Is it Papa who’s going to raise him, then? He repairs watches, and his income’s not stable! And you know perfectly well I can’t see well enough to be a seamstress any more! As for her—” she pointed to my mother, causing our guest to squirm in discomfort—“she’s been out of work since her husband made her quit her job at Bank Sednaoui!” It was not really a bank; that was what they called department stores in those days. She untied her apron, flung it impatiently onto a nearby chair, and sat beside me, putting her knee right next to my head. I lay stretched out on my back. I shifted carefully until I was a few inches away from her and rolled my eyes backwards so as to still see her.

At first glance, her nose from this angle looked larger than usual, but that was of no concern to me; what drew my attention was the familiar tic at the left corner of her mouth. It always came over her when she was spoiling for a fight. I knew too well what often came next. I found my attention being inexorably drawn to her hands, which never stopped moving. My eyes moved in circles with them as they rose and fell, her fingers closing and opening until she suddenly waved her palm at me. I thought she meant to slap my face and started up; I think I fell on my face, and I would have fallen off the couch but for my mother, who leaped up and snatched me away from my spot next to my grandmother, gesturing angrily at her to calm down.

My grandmother paid her no heed. She half-turned toward our lady visitor, saying, “I told her, ‘My girl, this person is not

meant for us. Marry a Jew, like Susu your cousin, or Makram, our neighbor who lives at the top of the street.' But it was no use! She's hardheaded, just like her father. What on earth did you see in that Mahmoud? He's not worth a millieme to me!"

The visitor responded indignantly, "Let's not speak ill of the dead, now, Grandmother! He's a martyr, and that's no small thing to God!"

"A martyr, she says!"

"Yes, a martyr," my mother snapped back. "He was going to fight for his country, wasn't he? That makes him a martyr."

"War and martyrdom aside for a moment, what on earth did Little Miss Precious Princess see in that fellow? He wasn't one of us; he was of another religion . . ." My grandmother appeared to notice that she was embarrassing their guest and caught herself. "Heaven forgive me. Heaven forgive me. What have I said? I didn't mean it. I didn't mean a thing; I swear! I just mean that this miserable marriage was no good from the start."

Silence reigned. Finally the guest said, "Don't fret, Aunt. You know how much Camellia loved him, and how attached she was to him."

"Love! What good's love to us now? Now he's gone, and ruined the girl as well."

"Aunt, these things are fated—"

My grandmother leaned forward, wringing her hands. "Fate!" she muttered. "I tell her the girl is ruined, and what's her answer? Fate! I tell her this and that, and what's her answer? He's a martyr!"

"Mother . . ." my mother hissed. "That's enough!"

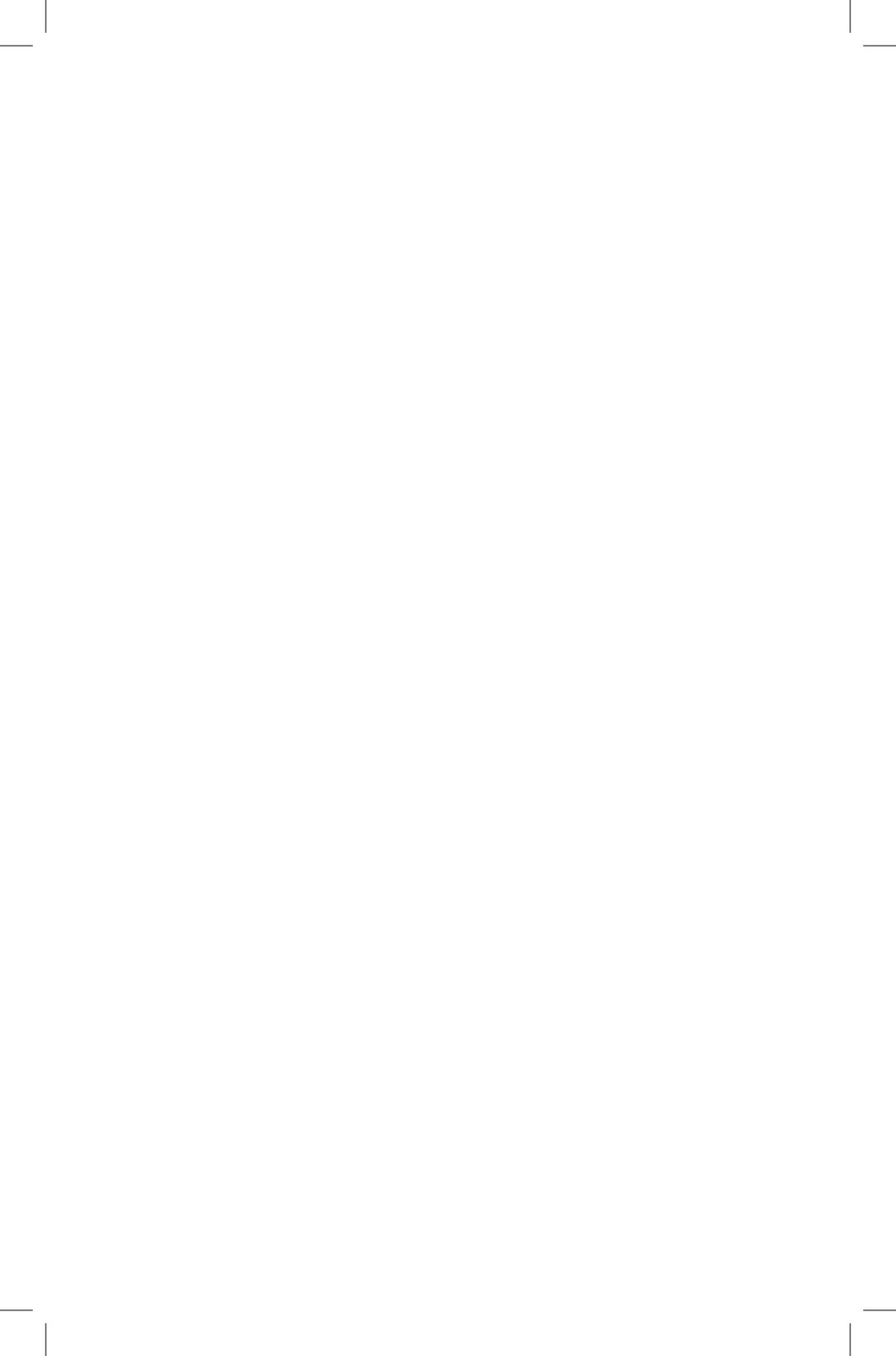
My grandmother, ignoring her completely, pulled her snuffbox out from beneath the sofa cushion, taking a pinch and tilting her head back, eyes clenched, nostrils red and slightly quivering. She immediately burst out into a violent fit of sneezing, the guest staring at her, leaning back as much as possible to avoid being hit by the spray. When she was done,

Grandmother pulled a black handkerchief out of her bra and commenced to pick her nose with it.

Then, leaning into the guest's personal space, she whispered at her usual frenzied pace, "Four years, my girl, four years of nothing but fighting! We see him for a day, then he's gone for a month! And when he came, she'd jump for joy and say, 'I'm so happy, Mom.' I'm so this and that and the other and a huge, long romance . . ." She paused for breath. "Then I'd take him aside and tell him, 'For heaven's sake, son, find an apartment for yourself and your wife instead of that garret you've got!' And he'd nod his head. 'Son, have you told your papa and mama that you have a wife, and that she's pregnant?' He'd nod his head! 'Son . . .' Always with the nodding. And I never found out whether he told or whether he didn't. 'Son, have your papa and mama drop by for a visit.' And he'd nod! 'Well, how about we go pay them a visit?' And he'd nod! Whatever I said, he'd nod! Whatever I said!"

My mother had slipped away into her room. I could hear her weeping. I tried to get off the couch and crawl to her. I cried, too.

At midnight, my grandfather arrived. My grandmother told him the news at the door. He bowed his head. "Merciful and Compassionate God, be with him!" And he opened the door to my and my mother's room, his eyes troubled.



2

THE HALL OF THE HOUSE we lived in functioned as a living room. It only had two old-fashioned armless wooden couches, placed facing one another and upholstered with cheap cretonne that sported a number of cigarette burns from falling ashes, especially where my grandfather usually sat. At the start of the passageway leading to the kitchen sat two cane chairs, partly hiding a Singer sewing machine that had remained locked for ages. A small woolen kilim rug barely covered the space between the couches. It was worked with a black circle at its center, from which multicolored lines branched out in all directions. At one of its corners were two tears that my grandmother had failed to repair, having grown too old for the job. They were very obvious.

The walls were almost colorless; my mother told me that she had never, not since she was born, seen anyone take up a brush and paint them. There were holes in the wall, holes that had once held family portraits: my uncle Isaac, who had left and of whom we had had no news at all; my uncle Shamoun, who had taken his portrait to hang in his new apartment. The two remaining photographs were of my aunt Bella standing there in her school uniform, my grandmother sitting next to her in a leather armchair, and the other of my grandfather, Zaki, in a worn golden frame, wearing a most uncharacteristic frown. His tarboosh, the traditional tall Egyptian hat sometimes called a fez, was canted to the left, and you could see one

side of his navy blue jacket collar and gray tie; come winter or summer, he never wore anything else.

To the right of the hall were two rooms: one was my grandparents', the other mine and my mother's. At the door to each lay a brown sheepskin rug. No one else lived in the apartment; my uncle Shamoun lived at the top of the street with his wife, Sarah, and Aunt Bella, my mother's sister, had gotten married last year and gone off to live in Port Fouad with her husband and their daughter, Rachel, whom she'd been pregnant with before she was married. Most of the rest of my mom's family had emigrated; there was only one family who lived by the Primus stove store in Ataba and a sister of my grandmother's who lived alone on Cioccolone Street in Shubra.

My grandfather was always the first to wake in our home. I would hear his movements in the hall on his way to the bathroom. Looking at my mother and finding her asleep, I would commence my attempts to dangle off the bed and thence drop off. They were usually successful, but sometimes I would fall on a knee or twist my leg, whereupon I would break into loud shrieking, making no effort to muffle it, until a pair of arms picked me up off the floor and rocked me and kisses rained down on the source of the pain until I was satisfied.

The hands usually belonged to my grandfather, Zaki. He would rush to my side from wherever he happened to be in the apartment, even before my mother woke. After skirmishes with my mother and attempts on her part to make me go back to bed, I would crawl out of the room to find him sitting on the couch. He would smile at me, whereupon I would crawl faster until I reached his feet. Astonished by how huge they were, I would sit on my rear end in front of them, lost in contemplation of what I was to do with them! I started by pummeling them while my grandfather looked down from on high. The more satisfied he looked, the more

enthusiastically I pummeled, until I was breathing hard, my hands stilled, only my chest rising and falling rapidly.

In a few seconds, I would be entranced by the black hairs growing out of his big toe and bend over them, seeking to pluck one. The hair would obediently slide through my fingers but quickly escape my grip. I would try again, once, twice, seven times, until I grew bored with it; then I would have to try the easy things, like scratching my fingernails against the arch of the foot or placing anything within my reach between the toes: a matchstick, a shoelace, or even the remains of a piece of caramel in my pocket.

My grandfather would pick me up, laughing, and adjust my clothing. When he found I had wet myself, he would search in the closet, beneath the chairs, and sometimes in the dresser drawers for clean, dry pants, all while my mother slept on.

As soon as my grandmother awoke, my mood changed. I became instantly alert as she emerged from her room, hair wild, usually clutching a hairpin between her fingertips. She would stand close to us for a few moments, tucking it into her hair. I would fall still, leaning back against the edge of the sofa, eyes on her. She would greet my grandfather, say a few words to him, and leave; she ignored my presence, and I, for my part, avoided her. If the hem of her gallabiya brushed against me on her way past, I would consider this a kind of harassment and begin to whine. My grandfather would catch me, picking me up off the floor and placing me in his lap, tossing me into the air and catching me, or grabbing all the old odds and ends in the house and heaping them up for me to play with: bottle caps, a watchband, an old whistle, a broken plate, some empties.

When the balcony called, though, I would suddenly abandon my play and head for it. Once it had called me, I would drop everything and crawl toward it, heedless of any attempts to pull me away. They would call me, but I ignored them.

They brought out the ‘dwarf’—their name for a doll I liked—to change my mind, but it was no use. They would take hold of me by the waist and legs; I would keep crawling on just my hands. My mother would slap my behind, but I would just scream, never giving up my quest. Growing tired of me, they would allow me onto the balcony, but my grandfather, in particular, never took his eyes off me.

As soon as I was through the balcony doors, I would pause for a few moments to rest. My eyes would always go to the rail; if there was a fly or a cockroach, or if the garlic hanging in the corners was shaking in the wind, I would watch it avidly. But then, remembering the mission I was there for, I would come back to myself; first, though, I would look behind me, in case I was still being followed. I would struggle to stick my head out between the iron bars of the balcony rail. A joy, magical in its intensity, came over me. I could see the people, the boys and girls; Amm Marzouq the pie seller’s shop; the spice store owned by Hagg Mahmoud, Umm Hassan’s husband; Abu Agwa’s bakery; Khawaga Cavores’s grocery store; and Abu Auf’s café.

Sometimes I would catch sight of Umm Hassan walking in the street. I could recognize her from afar, and I would gurgle to her and drool on my bib. If she looked up and saw me, she would wave, and I would laugh aloud, drumming on the balcony tiles with my feet. What fascinated me more than anything else, though, was the sugarcane juice store opposite our building. I adored the sight of it, especially when twilight came, and it was lit up with white, red, and green neon lights blinking over and over as I stared in wonder, waves of pleasure clawing at my entire body. No one, come what may, could tear me away from that sight; I would scream so loud that they would leave me to it, only later, when I fell asleep, picking me up and carrying me carefully to bed.

My mother told me many stories of those days, especially the night when my grandparents decided to celebrate their wedding anniversary on the balcony. My father bought a dozen

French pastries from a sweet shop in Midan al-Geish, biscuits with dates in the center, ghurayiba cookies, petits fours, and breadsticks with sesame, plus two bags of peanuts and sunflower seeds. And upon my grandmother's request, he brought a bottle of beer from Cavores's grocery store—the large size.

My mother poured the tea with milk and they placed everything on the table, but my grandmother was displeased by my presence and by my attempts at standing on my grandfather's lap to partake of this feast. So she swore by all that was dear to her that she would not start the revels until my mother had put me to bed and I was asleep, by force if necessary.

The sounds from the bedroom stilled, bringing a smile to my grandmother's face, but not a quarter of an hour passed before they found me crawling back to join them, pacifier dangling cheerfully from my mouth. It was my mother who had fallen asleep! My grandfather laughed loud and long, picked me up, and dandled me on his knee.

It was a miserable night for my grandmother: I would pull her plate away, I would throw the rest of my cream puff at her. As for the bags of peanuts and sunflower seeds, one swipe of my hand scattered them irretrievably about the floor. And when my grandmother started drinking the beer, I stopped breathing, staring at her in astonishment as she raised the bottle and poured some into her glass. When the liquid splashed, my pupils would grow wider, staring as the foam bubbled up with a gurgling noise, until it overflowed from the rim of the glass, whereupon I went completely insane.

My grandfather was unable to hold me back as three-quarters of my body lunged across the table, my hands grabbing for her glass, resulting in a fight. The night was not a success, with losses sustained by both sides. She pinched me in the arm, leaving a bruise that lasted a week, and I smashed her glass into fifty pieces. After that night, she swore never to let beer into the house until I had grown up. She drank wine instead.



3

UNCLE SHAMOUN CAME TO VISIT.

My mother let him in, then flew to her room. Another guest came in with him, and the two men sat side by side on the couch while my grandparents came out of the other room. My grandfather was freshly shaved, which was not his habit for a weekend. He held a fly whisk, wore a navy blue jacket over a white gallabiya, and had his tarboosh on—the same attire in which he went to synagogue on Saturday. My grandmother wore her wine-red velvet dress that she saved for special occasions. They sat on the couch facing my uncle and his guest. Only my mother stayed in her room.

I was in the hall with a goodly collection of odds and ends and in the mood for play. I punched the doll in the head several times, then pounced on him and bit him in the stomach long and hard, hoping he might cry or make some noise, but he didn't. I set him aside and blew into an empty bottle, occasionally rolling it back and forth or pounding on an old watch discarded by my grandfather.

Suddenly I was startled out of my play by an exciting spectacle: one of my grandmother's slippers, the orange one topped with a red bow. It was the very same one she would lift up high and threaten me with, making me run away in fear—the horrible one with the pointed heel for which I had a healthy respect indeed. It had come off her right foot completely and dangled from her big toe. My grandmother,

absorbed in staring at the guest, was swinging it monotonously back and forth.

The sight provoked me! Without conscious thought or planning, I found myself crawling carefully toward my grandmother. I snatched it off her foot and quickly crawled back to my original spot, my eyes shining with triumph. As soon as I got my breath back, I flung it with every ounce of strength I had through the balcony doors, then went back to playing as though nothing had happened.

Uncle Shamoun chuckled at what I had done, and the guest smiled. My grandfather, though, could not contain himself; he burst into uproarious laughter, head and shoulders shaking with mirth. He only stopped when my grandmother raised her left eyebrow and gave him a look; apparently she had poked him in the behind with some sharp, unseen object, perhaps a needle or a pin, for I saw him suddenly leap forward, then teeter back and forth on the couch, moving away from her, placing a hand on the site of the injury.

Because we had company, and so as not to give the guest a bad impression of me, she did not shout at me but merely indicated to my uncle that I should be taken inside with all my paraphernalia. I immediately sought refuge with my grandfather. He placed a hand on my head but did not lift me into his lap or up to his side as usual. I divined that the wind was not blowing my way, so I sat at his feet quietly, hands in my lap, not moving so as not to further provoke my grandmother's wrath.

"Mr. Labib Qattawi," Uncle Shamoun said to my grandparents by way of introducing his friend.

"Pleased to meet you," they said in unison.

"He is a cashier at Chemla Department Stores," my uncle went on, "and his father has a pastrami factory in Faggala." Waiting a moment, he added, "And he's asked for Camellia's hand, too. He knew her when she worked at Sednaoui, before she" He broke off.

My grandmother caught him, smiling at Mr. Labib and asking him if he was one of the East Abbasiya Qattawis. He said that he was not related to them, and she clarified that she did not mean Qattawi Pasha's family, but the Qattawi family who were silversmiths.

He gave no answer, sticking out his lower lip. She cleared her throat and fell silent too.

Mr. Labib had thinning hair; the front third of his head was almost completely bald, although he was still young. He was quite strikingly short, only a little taller than an older boy; his feet did not comfortably touch the floor. Only his toes reached the rug, soon lifting up to about an inch above it. Mr. Labib had to shuffle forward a little until his feet landed on the floor easily.

He looked at me and found me looking at him; he turned away, looking around at the inside of the apartment: the clock on the wall, the top of the sewing machine, and a little cockroach crawling down the curtain that hung by the passage to the kitchen, heading in his direction. But the thing that drew his eye the most was the photograph of my grandfather on the wall facing him. He peered at it, then his gaze traveled down to my actual grandfather, sitting beneath it, staring as surreptitiously as he could at him, as well. For a moment, Mr. Labib seemed to be comparing the photograph to the original; then his head drooped, and he fell so still I thought he had gone to sleep.

My grandmother got up and knocked at the door to our room, saying a few words to my mother through a crack in the door. Then she hurried into the kitchen. Before my mother closed the door, she caught sight of me, staring wide-eyed at her; she smiled, and I laughed aloud back at her. Her face was strange, not as I usually saw it; her skin was sparkling with powder and makeup, and her delicate ears bore large earrings, each in the shape of a six-pointed star.

My grandmother returned bearing a tray with a jug, two bottles of fizzy drink, and empty glasses. Mr. Labib took the

red bottle, and my grandfather reached for the second. I was fond of red. I surged to my feet, taking a step toward it, then fell on my face. This was my first attempt at standing, and it was completely spontaneous. I thought nothing of the fall and didn't even think to cry. I crawled like the wind toward the guest to wrestle the bottle from his grasp.

My grandmother was furious. I only grew more intent, remaining at the man's feet, pulling on his sock for him to hand it over. He patted me on the back and let me have it. I returned to my place in front of my treasures, rolling the bottle, half of whose contents had spilled onto the rug. My uncle hurried to the kitchen and brought out a second bottle. Still standing, he removed the lid with a bottle opener. "Mr. Labib is an old acquaintance. Donkey's years! From Khedive Ismail school, when we still lived on al-Khalig Street."

Mr. Labib nodded, smiling, and took off his spectacles, breathing on them. He asked my grandfather for cigarette papers, whereupon Grandfather brought him an entire book of rolling paper. Labib pulled out a couple and used them to clean his glasses.

"You bring back such memories, Shamoun!" my grandmother said. "Those were the days! True, the building was old and on a bit of a side street, but a quarter of the neighbors were Jewish and it was comfortable living there. Not like the wretched folk in this building!"

"Here or there; what does it matter, dear?" said my grandfather, trying to smooth things over. "We all have our own lives to live after all; we're all born of Adam and Eve." He smiled at the visitor. "You're very welcome here, I'm sure, sir."

My uncle hastened to say, "Mr. Labib wanted to ask for Camellia's hand in marriage."

My grandfather stroked the ends of his mustache, saying soberly, "Does the gentleman know how it is with her, though?"

"How it is?" Labib said softly, leaning in toward my grandfather.

My mother had opened the door to the room; everybody looked up at her. She made a little gesture of greeting and sat down between my grandfather and grandmother. Immediately she said, tension filling her voice, "I know Labib, and I've met him before, not once, but ten times. And I've no objection. But what about the child? That's the main thing: the child."

Mr. Labib looked at her questioningly, as if to say, What *about* the child? His eyes gleamed as he glanced over at me. After a moment's silence, he looked at my uncle, worry plain on his face. My grandmother captured everyone's attention, though, putting a hand under the sofa cushion and pulling out her snuffbox. My grandfather elbowed her as if to say *Not now*, but she paid him no heed and made to open the box. She put it back again upon discovering Mr. Labib's eyes riveted upon her, fascinated by her actions. Scratching at her head, she said, "What about the child? He's an orphan and needs care and kindness. And if God wills it and the match is made, he can stay with us half the time, and half the time with you." Then she leaned over to Mr. Labib, adding, "Isn't that so, sir?"

He responded, bewildered, "Child? What child?"

"The child—Galal—Camellia's son—this little squirt! See what an angel's face he has!"

Labib rolled his eyes. "Ah, I see."

"Isn't that so, sir?" my grandmother repeated.

Labib's face had gone pale; he saw that unless he stood up to my grandmother and fast, he would soon be in a fine mess. His defenses, though, yielded no immediate rebuttal, so he remained silent. He nodded and grew even more alert.

My grandmother went on. "The first few months, of course, he'll be staying with me. Then his mother will take him, and I'll be happy to take him anytime at all you want to send him to us."

"Of course," my uncle said, "there's no question but that he must stay with you at first, Mother, if only for the wet

nurse.” Swallowing, he added, not meeting Labib’s eye, “He can’t be apart from Umm Hassan until he’s weaned.”

My grandfather, who had stayed silent, looking from one to the other as they spoke, abruptly stopped waving his fly whisk and said decisively, “Look, my boy. The child is a Muslim. His father is deceased. His mother dotes on him. Does that suit you?”

Leaping up, Labib suddenly found his voice. “What? What was that?” He turned to my uncle. “I didn’t think it was like that, Shamoun! Why didn’t you tell me from the start? It’s enough that she has a kid, and that’s hard enough to swallow as it is. But a Muslim? You want me to raise a Muslim child in my own home? That really is the icing on the cake, dummy!”

My grandfather’s tone began to grow sharp. “What’s the matter, Labib? Why are you making such an issue of it? You know that any child born from a Jewish woman’s womb is a Jew.”

Silence reigned. Even I stopped playing, watching.

Evidently feeling that he had committed a faux pas, Mr. Labib sat back down while everyone watched him, waiting for what he would say next. Quietly, he said, meeting my grandfather’s eyes, “My dear uncle: If your question is, ‘Does this suit me?’ then I say no, and a thousand times no. And to be frank, I want Camellia, just Camellia. Keep the boy yourselves. Know your limitations; that’s my motto.” He muttered to himself, “Good God! My mama would have had a heart attack!”

“Whoa there, Mr. Labib!” said my grandmother. “Easy, easy. This matter requires some thought. I told you from the start that the boy would stay with us, and just think how long it’ll be until he’s weaned!”

Labib looked at her impatiently. “Let’s have no talk of nursing or weaning. Keep the boy. This is a matter of principle. It’s not open for discussion or negotiation.”

“Well, son, how about you think about it and give us your answer later?”

Mopping his brow, Labib said, “Think about it? I’ll think about it all right. Think about it! Sure, I’ll think about it!”

When he was gone, my grandmother snapped at my mother, “Did you *have* to bring up that wretch the minute you stepped out of your room?”

“That’s enough, Mother! Shut up, shut up!” She burst into tears and ran into our room, and I crawled after her on all fours, crying because she was crying.

My mother’s chances were ruined because of me; Mr. Labib never came back, nor any of the young Jewish suitors who came after him. No sooner would one of them set eyes on me than things changed—and not in my mother’s favor.

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