

Clouds over Alexandria

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When suddenly, at midnight, you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive—don't mourn them uselessly.

.

As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
as is right for you who proved worthy of this kind of city,
go firmly to the window
and listen with deep emotion, but not
with the whining, the pleas of a coward;
listen—your final delectation—to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

Constatine Cavafy, "The God Abandons Anthony"

1

TIME WAS FLYING IN THE second half of 1975, and news of President Sadat dominated the headlines. He traveled to France, and France announced that Mirage jets would soon circle the skies over Egypt. From there he traveled to New York, and the American president, Gerald Ford, announced that Egypt would be supplied with American weapons. President Sadat gave a speech at the United Nations, suggesting that the Palestinian Liberation Organization be included in the Geneva Conference that would be held to discuss the situation in the Middle East. Egypt and Israel were then separated in these discussions, which were to result in the second withdrawal, the evacuation of the Israeli army from southern Sinai, and the return of the oil fields. Syria, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the Soviet Union were all displeased with the separate discussions and with the strong rapprochement between Sadat and the West.

On his return, Sadat announced in England that the West could supply Egypt with weapons that the Soviet Union could not provide. During Sadat's visit, the world-renowned actor Omar Sharif had announced in New York that he was returning to Egypt and that he would build a resort on Alexandria's North Shore. The film *The Summons*, based on the novel by Yusuf Idris, was being shown at the Cinema Rivoli in Cairo and Cinema Radio in Alexandria, while the Cinema Royale in Alexandria was showing *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which had been preceded by the fame of the actor Jack Nicholson, and of course of the producer, Miloš Forman. The play *The Lesson's Over*, *Stupid* continued its successful run in the Bab al-Luq Theater in Cairo.

It was announced that three women had been arrested, each of whom had married two men. Also winter fashions for men appeared, with big jackets boasting two large patch pockets and wide lapels. The Ministry of Supply announced that there would be no change in the price of meat, and that it would not exceed three-quarters of an Egyptian pound per kilogram, under a dollar for a pound of meat. An initial announcement was made of the creation of seven new cotton-trading companies, whose shares would be offered to the public, as a first step on the path to the new capitalist state. Additionally, it was announced that the creation of political parties had been turned down in favor of retaining the concept of platforms for various political tendencies within the Arab Socialist Union, the only national political organization since the time of Nasser. So far the number of platforms had reached forty, and it was said that they were a good beginning toward bringing people together and toward the formation of parties later on.

In broad daylight a drunk attacked some girls from the Wardian Secondary School in Alexandria as they were leaving school. At the end of September Daria Shafiq died, a woman who had been an important pioneer in movements for women and for patriotism as well. She was a daughter of the city of Tanta who had obtained her doctorate from the Sorbonne in France, who had translated the Quran into English and French, and who had published the magazine *The New Woman* during the forties. She fell from the balcony of her home in the Zamalek neighborhood of Cairo; it was rumored that she committed suicide because of the isolation in which she found herself living. Around the same time the governor of Alexandria announced the beginning of the reclamation of a large part of Lake Maryut in the area of Muharram Bey, which would be filled in with garbage from the city to create an international park.

In western Alexandria, the neighborhood of Dekhela experienced an invasion of people arriving from the Delta and from Upper Egypt. It was a neighborhood far from the city, with no high buildings but with a lovely, peaceful coast, and its women and girls were known for their fair complexion, their round faces, and their wide eyes. The new arrivals built in the southern part of the neighborhood, on low,

sandy land that the people of Dekhela called 'The Mountain.' They built little houses in narrow streets, haphazardly planned, usurping the land or buying it from its Bedouin owners, who had taken possession of it ten years before but did not live there.

The Dekhela neighborhood had previously witnessed the exodus of its Greek citizens, during the sixties, as well as the departure of a number of artists, men and women, who spent the summer there. They closed their houses and went out to Agami, about the time of the foundation of the company Microsoft in the United States, and the appearance of the first personal computer ever made available on the market.

Three days earlier the sweeping miknasa storms had begun, dumping heavy rains on Alexandria. That's how it is every year during the last ten days of November: black clouds slam together and clash forcefully, and sudden bolts of lightning fill the sky over the city, followed by rolling, jarring rumbles of thunder. Who guards the city tonight but the angels on high?

The rain is ceaseless. It's illuminated by flashes of lightning high in the sky, and closer to the ground by the light of the street lamps. The noise is continuous as the rain pounds on the flat roofs of the houses or the asphalt streets, and the water pours onto the sidewalks from the gutters or from balconies, to be devoured by the drains that wait for it from year to year.

The sound of the wind, so quarrelsome moments before, dropped over the city, though it still mixed loudly with the sound of the waves along the shore of Alexandria. In the apartment of Yara's family her father and mother sat in front of the television, enjoying the warmth emanating from the air conditioner turned to the heat setting, and waiting for the film *Night Train* that would be shown soon. Her mother and father loved the dancing of Samia Gamal, "The Lady" as they called her, which was not at all vulgar, and they loved the acting of Stefan Rosty, who took evil to its extreme in this film.

Yara's brother Fuad, as usual, was away on a long voyage with the merchant ship where he served as an officer, heading for South

America. He would return months later, to begin a new voyage around the world. That's the way it was with the officers who graduated from the Merchant Marine College, which his father had chosen for him, and which he had taken to.

Yara's room had an ebony wardrobe that her father said was a work of art, and she knew that in fact it was just that. He had bought it along with a lot of other furniture for the house, from some of the Jews who left the city after the Suez War in 1956. Her father always said that he had refused to pay its owners anything less than its value at that time, which was much more than its original price. They were in a hurry, fleeing from Nasser's politics; but some of them, as her father always said, were his friends, speculating with him on the Egyptian Exchange in Manshiya. The Exchange was officially closed on Sunday and on Muslim and Christian holidays, but it closed also on Saturday and on Jewish holidays, because of the large number of Jews who worked in it. He would laugh and say shamelessly, in front of Yara and her mother, "We used to learn love, when we were boys, with the girls from the Jewish school in Shakkur Street." His mind would always wander from them then and he would speak distractedly, as if he were watching a film in the air before him. He would speak of the agents who filled the cafés in Muhammad Ali Square, specifically on the right side when you faced the Exchange, where the cafés and the wide sidewalks were also crowded with money changers as soon as the square was light, even before sunrise. Then he would close his eyes on what he saw, and fall silent.

Aside from the wardrobe there was a clothes tree in Yara's room, also of ebony; it had eight hooks, four above and four shorter ones below, and a few pieces of clothing were hanging from it. Yara was sitting now at a desk in the French style, inlaid with copper, each of its legs carved with a woman lifting a bunch of grapes to her mouth. In front of the desk were two chairs inlaid with mother of pearl, as was the chair she was sitting on. In the corner was a low, round Persian table from the fourteenth century, which her father had bought at auction in Tawfiq Street (Urabi Street after the July Revolution),

where there were antique shops and the Hannaux Store, which had a cafeteria celebrated throughout Alexandria for its beauty.

On one side of the room was a copper bed with a small nightstand next to it. On the desk were books, notebooks, a holder for pens, and a small radio. She had announced more than once that she would not move the dial away from the music station, which she had not known existed until her boyfriend Nadir told her about it. "It looks as if I'm going to spend my life reading and writing and listening to the music station," he said. He told her about classical music, which he had come to love, and about the magical time with light music that began at two in the morning and went until six. It was rare that any announcer interrupted that program, and mostly it was from the sound tracks of films he had seen before. Yara did as Nadir did, and she said, going beyond his description, that the music did not glide down from heaven but rather opened the doors of heaven to her, so that she flew with it in the white clouds among the angels.

The first time they had declared their love was the previous year, when they went to the Antonius Garden. They found that the public was not allowed to walk in it. *Why?* It became a military zone after the defeat of 1967. *But we won the October War!* It's still a military center, and it's still restricted. That's what the soldier said, seeming surprised by their questions. They spent the day in the nearby zoo, just a few steps away.

The visitors were few that day and the air was springlike, with blossoms opening on their branches. The very instant that Nadir decided to gather his courage and ask for a kiss, she anticipated him and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. His eyes flew open in overwhelming pleasure, a magic he had not experienced before. This was his first kiss. The pleasure went from his lips to his whole body, and he closed his eyes in ecstasy and said "Allaah!" He found himself thinking about the lovely taste of women. Then he opened his arms again, this time shouting "Allaah, Allaah!" He spun around and nearly fell. She steadied him with her hands, laughing and saying, "There are people around us!" But she let him put his arm around her shoulders and they walked leaning on each other. Then she put

her arm through his and the tender warmth of her breast traveled to his arm and then to his spirit, with a pleasure he could truthfully say he had never known before.

Now Yara smiled as she sat in her room. She was tempted to open the window to see the lightning in the sky, to see the rain rushing toward the earth. The fleeting lightning appeared behind the shutters and the glass of the high window. These were bahri buildings, facing the sea, Italian in design and overlooking the eastern port. The sound of the royal palm reached her, its fronds moving in the wind. If only for an instant she wanted to see the ships anchored far off, as they moved on the water, rising high and falling down again. She wanted to see the small feluccas closer in and how the waves pulled at them, too, even though she knew they were held in place by great heavy metal anchors, maybe by more than one for each boat. She wanted to see the Citadel of Qaytbay at a distance in the dark, and the lights of the Greek Club even though it had closed its doors, and the Yacht Club. Was there anyone in them now?

She opened the glass gently and the cold air penetrated the cracks of the wooden shutters. "Crazy," she said to herself as she shut the glass again. Once more she asked herself if she could open the shutters without her mother and father noticing. But their absorption in *Night Train* would not keep them from hearing the air entering the room.

Softly she closed the door of her room, which had been ajar; that way the sound might not reach them. She opened the glass and grasped the knob of the shutters, finding it very cold. She opened the shutters a little and a strong, cold wind rushed over her face and chest. What did Yara want tonight?

She wanted the wind to carry her, to fly with her to the sky. She was smiling in happiness. She had opened the shutters enough to see the darkness before her covering everything in the eastern port before her, and she saw the Citadel of Qaytbay, darker than its surroundings. Who would believe that in its place once stood the Lighthouse of Alexandria, four or five meters taller than the Citadel? It had been anchored there for centuries, guiding the ships,

announcing that it was one of the Seven Wonders of the World! Had lovers gone to it by day as they now went to the Citadel? But the sound of the thunder was continuous, so she closed the window hurriedly, amazed at her own madness.

The music of *Boléro* filled the air in the room. She really wanted to dance. She had seen a ballet dancer once on the television program *With the Ballet*, dancing to the beautiful music of Ravel. She began to move her legs to the rhythm of the music. When would she have the freedom of a butterfly? She went with Nadir to the Nuzha Gardens to kiss him and be kissed, and to the Smouha neighborhood, where there were thickets of trees and open spaces and very few houses, which all seemed to be uninhabited. No one saw them in the great broad spaces filled with camphor and willow trees, date and banana palms, as they hugged and kissed each other. Every time Nadir's thoughts would stray, despite the delight that moved through them, and he would say, "When will we be together between four walls, without worrying that anyone will see us?" She knew he was inviting her to the apartment he lived in with his friends, their classmates in the college. She would pat his hand without answering, repressing her inner desire, a great urge to say yes. But now she laughed as she sat at her desk. She glanced at the book of modern philosophy, opened to the lesson on Nietzsche, and said, "It's a night for Superman." But before she returned to studying she heard a light tapping on her door, which then opened. It was her mother, her eyes wide in surprise and confusion.

She whispered, "Kariman!"

Yara was even more surprised. Her mother continued:

"She's standing outside. I saw her from the peephole after she rang the bell. Were you expecting her?"

Yara's surprise grew. "No. Why would she come in this weather?"

Her mother answered, "Hurry, go open the door for her."

Yara crossed the living room where her father sat, absorbed in the film, as her mother went back to sit next to him. Both of them were dressed for a winter evening at home, with a neat robe over their pajamas. In front of them was a dish of cashews, pistachios, and walnuts, all the nuts that had disappeared from Egypt

for so long during the time of Nasser, and that had returned now to invade the market with high prices.

It was after ten, and Nadir was still sitting in the small, dimly lit lobby. He felt as if it were an old place where no one had come before. He had been waiting for more than an hour, hearing a continuous sound of moaning that came from some unknown source. The intelligence officer who had come to his house at about five in the afternoon had given him a small paper, summoning him to appear at the State Security headquarters on Faraana Street at eight-thirty. It only took a moment at the door, when he went out to see who was knocking and came back dumbfounded. His father had just finished the evening maghrib prayer, his mother was in the kitchen preparing a platter of fish, and his little brother was also in the kitchen, hurrying the food. His father saw him frowning and asked him,

“Who was at the door?”

Nadir did not answer for a moment, looking distracted. Then he said, “No one. Someone who made a mistake with the address. He wanted our neighbors.”

He fell silent and went to his room. It was a simple room with an old bed, an old desk, a metal wardrobe, also old, and wooden shelves on the wall holding a small number of books. He usually borrowed books from the college library or the municipal library. If he couldn't buy newly published books, he borrowed most of them from Amm al-Sayyid, who sold books at the Raml station. He would borrow them for a penny a book, or two pennies, or five if the book was expensive. Dostoyevsky's novels stood out amid the other books because of their large size. Really, why did he insist on buying them, when he could have borrowed them also? Why did he always read them on cold winter nights, when the sound of the rain was ceaseless, like tonight? He dreamed of a day when he would visit Russia and stay up until morning during the icy, sleepless nights.

He had just finished reading *Dr. Zhivago* today, after a week of pleasure and pain. He paused over the last poems, over everything in them. Now he recited to himself:

The darkness of the night still reigns
and the time has not yet come
for the sky to scatter its stars
that cannot be counted.

Always, when Lara was running before him in the open fields, in the buildings besieged by ice and death, in the war and the internment camps, the name of his beloved Yara and her face moved above the pages of the novel, and he found himself saying “Yara, Yara.” He often read “Lara” as “Yara,” and pushed away his anxiety over the separation that afflicted Lara and Zhivago.

At that moment in his room Tchaikovsky’s *Marche slave* filled the air around him, coming from the radio. As usual he was surprised at the announcer who called it “March of the Slaves,” not realizing that “Slav” is the name of a people and does not mean “slaves.” He remembered what Dr. Hussein Fawzi, that Egyptian Sindbad, had said during one of the music lessons he presented every Thursday on Channel Two on the radio, about how Tchaikovsky had written this orchestral music when Orthodox Serbia had risen against the Ottoman state in 1876. Orthodox Russia had stood with Serbia, and had sent its soldiers to fight on its side, and the music was a glorification of the Slavs against the Ottomans. But that didn’t matter now. He was confused and didn’t know what would happen tonight. The man who had brought him the summons must be walking now in the wind and rain, or standing on the deserted Maks beach, waiting for the bus. Was summoning him important enough for this man to rush out so urgently in this weather? What would happen if he didn’t go?

An hour of Arabic music began with the song of Muhammad Abdel Wahhab, “The Night was Calm,” composed by the poet Ahmad Shawqi. To his great surprise, Nadir found himself forgetting the matter of the summons, and thinking instead about how the tune of the song was based on the same melodic interval as the *Marche slave*. The discovery surprised him and he smiled. He thought about how he had not realized that before, nor had any

of the music critics who were always accusing Muhammad Abdel Wahhab of stealing from Western music. But he liked the fact that Muhammad Abdel Wahhab had known the music of Tchaikovsky very early in his career.

Nadir was pleased that he could realize this, despite the anxiety that engulfed him over this sudden summons. He was capable, then, of facing the summons. But he asked himself again why he had not asked the intelligence officer the reason for the summons. The man wouldn't have answered. Nadir had taken the paper from him, frowning, as if he had been expecting it. All that he had noticed was the large palm of the man's hand, unusually large, as he handed him the paper.

Nadir noticed *Dr. Zhivago* open to the last page in front of him, and he closed it. A delicious aroma of fish came to him as his mother opened the door of the room and said, smiling,

"A platter of fish to swear by! Come and eat."

"I'm not hungry."

She was surprised. "What? Dad bought bluefish today especially for you. He bought two kilos for three Egyptian pounds, all at once!"

He did not move from his place. Looking into his eyes, she asked him, "What's wrong, Nadir? What's on your mind?"

"I have an important errand. One of my friends is sick and I have to visit him."

"In this weather?"

"Forgive me, Mama. Anyway you know I like rain."

She didn't look convinced. He saw that on her face, and said, "Fine. Bring the food to me here."

He thought that would solve the problem of eating among them when he was preoccupied. She returned quickly with a tray bearing a big plate holding two large bluefish, grilled, and another plate with red rice. The two bluefish were surrounded by slices of tomato and onion and pepper and a few slices of potato. Did he really not have any appetite for this meal he loved?

He began to eat slowly, then he could not resist. He must show his mother the pleasure she was used to from him when she cooked

fish. He would never leave her worried, thinking about what was keeping him from eating her food that he loved.

He finished and dressed quickly—pants, a shirt and over it a pullover, and a chamois leather jacket. He left the house after telling his parents that he would spend the night with his friends, after he visited the one who was sick. They knew that he spent most nights during the school year with his friends from outside Alexandria, in the apartment they rented close to the college. In the beginning his father wasn't happy with that, but he saw that he spent all his time reading, and he knew that reading kept him away from anything else. So he accepted what his wife said: "What's Nadir going to do with his friends other than what he does here? Read."

Nadir was soon standing on the Maks beach, at the end of the Number 1 bus route. Behind him was the Zephyr Casino, closed for some time, and the Magd Sports Club, which was no more than an apartment in a small building, with a room for watching television and a room for playing ping-pong. Near the building was old Amm Ahmad's cigarette kiosk, and facing it was the old railway station, to which no trains came and where no one worked.

The bus wasn't long in coming. It stopped and two men got off, hurrying in the rain and wind. Amm Ahmad saw him standing in front of the Magd Club, under the balcony, and asked him, "Where are you going in this weather, Ustaz Nadir?"

Nadir was looking at the surging, high waves, their crashing noise filling the air, his shoulders hunched against the cold. He answered, "It's an important errand, Amm Ahmad."

"God be with you, son."

He hurried onto the bus. The driver stayed in his seat, but the conductor got off and headed for Amm Ahmad, returning quickly with a bottle of Spatz. He held it up in front of him and said to the driver, "Only iron dents iron." Then he said to Nadir, "Hello, Ustaz. I read in the paper that in Russia they eat ice cream in the dead of winter, and we're just as good as they are."

Nadir smiled, and gave him a penny for the ticket. The conductor said to the driver, "Don't wait. Nobody will come out of his house except for this crazy guy. Let's get going."

Nadir smiled again and the driver started the bus. Nadir began looking at the windows of the old houses, all of them shut, like the windows of his apartment. Soon the bus was passing the low-slung coast guard barracks, also silent, showing no trace of anyone among them. The bus would enter Maks Street, and everything he would see along the way would be silent: the army depots on the right, the slaughterhouse and tanning companies on the left, filling the air with their smell. He would pass the Wardian Secondary School for Girls, and his old school, Tahir Bey Middle School. He would pass the Khafagi Café, where a few customers would appear behind the glass, like ghosts in the darkness. Would Isa Salamawy be there tonight, in the café near his house, rather than going to Ateneos in Raml Station? He told them that he was always in the Khafagi Café in the morning, and in the evening he was always in Ateneos. Would he break the rule tonight because of the rain and the cold? Should Nadir leave the bus and tell him about the summons? No. He would go and finish everything on his own.

The bus left Maks Street and entered the neighborhood of Mina al-Basal, turning into the Street of the Seven Girls and Manshiya. To his surprise, when the bus reached Raml Station he saw that five people had boarded along the way without his noticing. He got off and walked alone to Faraana Street. The rain lightened as he moved along Safiya Zaghlul Street, where almost all the shops were closed. He turned into Sultan Husayn Street, then he went into Faraana Street and stopped in front of the villa that had become the headquarters of the State Security forces. He saw the tall trees surrounding it, the darkness in the lovely streets beside it, the dim light coming from the villa. It was eight-thirty, precisely the time of the appointment.

But now it was ten, and he had not yet been taken to the one who had summoned him. The dim light in the room had not changed, nor had the moaning stopped coming from its unknown source. But a short man appeared before him suddenly without making any noise, and

pointed to a door at the end of the lobby. It had been closed the whole time, and no one had entered it or come out. He said, "Please go in."

Nadir rose quickly and went forward, but the short man grasped his arm for a moment and then said, "The best thing is for you to tell the truth so that you come out quickly. You're going to meet Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari, the head of the State Security forces. He's a good man. Don't annoy him."

The short man said this gently, and then disappeared. Nadir didn't pay any attention to where the man went, just as he hadn't noticed where he came from.

Yara's eyes went to Kariman's face, red from the cold. It surprised her and made her smile like a child who had never seen that before. Kariman came in with a blue cap on her head, a blue coat on her body and a sky blue scarf around her neck, so it seemed as if the cold was concentrated completely in her face and her nose, which was flaming red. She said,

"Of course you're surprised that I've come so unexpectedly."

Yara said, smiling, "On the contrary, it makes me happy. I'm just surprised by how beautiful you are."

Kariman smiled and rubbed her hands. "What lovely warmth!" She took off her coat and scarf to put them on the clothes tree, then rubbed her hands again forcefully, and said, "I wish I could have a coffee."

"Nothing easier." Yara went to a small nightstand in a corner and brought out an alcohol burner, a coffee pot, two small cups, a glass of water, and two small jars, one holding coffee and the other sugar.

Kariman said, "I'd like to put coffee things like this in my room, but my mother won't let me."

Yara asked in surprise, "Why?"

"Actually my stepfather tells her that girls shouldn't drink coffee."

Yara gave a short laugh and said, "Crazy!"

Kariman said, "What's more, he says that a girl who drinks coffee may be smoking hashish too."

“He’s really, officially crazy.”

“Every so often he tells me my clothes are too short and looks at my legs when I’m going out or coming in. Is it okay if I smoke a cigarette?”

Yara was briefly embarrassed, then she said, “Of course.” She hurried to close the door of the room, which had been slightly ajar.

Kariman took a pack of Cleopatra cigarettes and a Ronson lighter from her bag and lit a cigarette. She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes for a moment, and then blew the smoke out slowly as she opened her eyes again. It seemed as if she was lifting a heavy burden from her chest.

Yara finished preparing the coffee and offered a cup to Kariman; she took it and lifted it to her nose, smelling it, while Yara looked on happily. Kariman asked,

“Why didn’t you come to the college today?”

“The weather wasn’t inviting.”

Kariman thought for a bit, her face lightly veiled in sadness. “I would have liked to stay home, but . . .” She thought some more, and then said, “My mother went to her work at school, and her husband stayed home, so I went to the college.”

Yara reflected a little and then asked, “What’s up with your stepfather, Kariman?”

“He harasses me.”

“To that extent?”

Kariman nodded and said, “Don’t worry. What matters is that students carrying iron chains appeared in the College of Law today and attacked some of the leftist students. They’re from Islamist groups.”

Yara’s face showed her amazement and disbelief, so Kariman continued: “They’ll definitely come to our college.”

Yara asked, “Are you afraid for Hasan?”

“And for Nadir, of course. Neither one came today. Likely because of the weather.”

Yara’s confusion increased. Kariman said, “We’ll have to be careful the next few days.”

Yara wondered if that was really what had made Kariman visit her in this weather. They would all go to the college tomorrow or the next day and learn what happened. But then Kariman said,

“Can I stay with you tonight?”

Yara smiled happily. “Of course.”

She hurried to open her wardrobe and took out a winter nightgown. “My clothes will be a little big, but the bed is small and it will warm us both.”

Kariman gave her a long look as she took the nightgown from her, and said, “Your eyes are beautiful, honey colored, shining and moist, as if you were about to cry.”

Yara laughed. “How can I compare to Kariman the blonde, with her green eyes! Listen to this beautiful music with me, change your clothes, and stretch out next to me on the bed.”

Kariman wondered, “Who’s the composer?”

“Borodin, but don’t ask me who he is. Maybe I’ll learn something about him later on. What matters is that the piece is named *Prince Igor*. I’ve heard it many times before. The good thing about the music station is that it often repeats the same pieces, and you remember them. I love this piece. They always play it at this time of night.”

Yara couldn’t keep herself from looking at Kariman as she took off her skirt and blouse to put on the nightgown. She smiled, liking the marvelous form of her body. She found herself asking,

“Did you like the film *The Summons*?”

Kariman chuckled and got under the covers with her. She said, “Hasan didn’t give me a chance to enjoy the film—he was kissing me the whole time.”

Yara laughed her short laugh, delighted. She said, “It’s as if the two of them were in it together, Hasan and Nadir. Nadir did the same with me when we were watching the film. But the song is beautiful, and it scared me.”

Kariman said, “Naturally the film can’t express the depth of the novel. The story isn’t about the naiveté of a man or woman from a village facing the city, or about the naiveté of ignorance in the face

of knowledge. It's as if it were destiny, as if every man has a hidden summons to an obscure fate."

"The funny thing is that after we came out of the film, Nadir began to explain the myth of the summons in history, from the time of the Greeks. He told me the story of the Sirens, mistresses of seduction. Sailors heard their song on the sea and then they'd leave the ship and throw themselves into the water and not come back. He told me that he saw the film *Ulysses* in a second-run theater years ago, and he saw how Ulysses tried not to respond to the seductive sound. He had the sailors plug their ears and tie him to the mast of the ship with his ears unplugged. He couldn't stay tied when he heard the voices of the Sirens, so he tore off the ropes and would have thrown himself in the sea, if it weren't for the sailors holding him back as the ship was pulling away."

Kariman said, "Those two guys are both crazy."

They laughed, then silence descended on them for a few moments. *Prince Igor* had ended, and after that the music of *The Godfather* filled the room. Yara knew it well, but her face showed her fear, as she remembered Laila Gamal's song in the film, *The Summons*.

Something from afar is calling me,
something has happened to me.
I can't help it, father;
Father, I can't help it.

Kariman noticed her distraction and asked her, "Where did you go?"

Yara smiled without answering. Kariman continued, "I wish we wouldn't go to sleep, so we could keep on listening to music and talking until morning."

When Nadir entered the room he saw that it was very large, and he saw the head of State Security sitting at a huge desk at one end of it. The man did not look up; he was writing something on a paper before him, and he motioned to Nadir to sit down. He remained absorbed in

his writing for several minutes, while Nadir thought about the sound of moaning, uninterrupted here too, and about foreign films about Nazi concentration camps, and about what he had read in the newspapers about prison camps in the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser. He told himself that these things didn't happen in Egypt now. Still, images of torture from the film *Karnak*, shown in theaters since the previous summer, came back to him and took shape before his eyes. For a few moments he thought about Yara. Yara was more beautiful than Suad Hosni, so would they get to her? He pushed himself to think instead about how to apologize to Suad Hosni. He imagined himself meeting her and beginning to apologize to her for having thought that there was anyone more beautiful than she was. He was contemplating her lovely smile, which opened the expanses of the universe to him and filled him with delight. He took great comfort in thinking about anything other than torture and humiliation, hoping to give himself courage.

At last the head of State Security looked up at him, having finished what he was writing, and Nadir nearly laughed aloud. He had never expected this great likeness between the man and Mustafa the barber, where he went for a shave on Maks Street! It was as if he were his twin. He felt reassured; he would treat him as if he were Mustafa the barber, and not at all as Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari. He might also think about meeting the man's wife so he could tell stories about her, like the fabulous stories that Mustafa's customers told about his wife Laila, who was really beautiful. Everyone knew that their stories were all just dreams and that none of them had met her; at most someone might have seen her passing in front of him on the street. But they never stopped telling stories.

"Hello, Si Nadir."

Nadir was confused as he emerged from his imaginings.

"Will you have tea?"

"No thank you, sir."

"Do you work or are you a student?"

"Both, sir. I give private lessons to the kids in my neighborhood, and I'm a student in the Humanities College. I'm helping to support myself."

“Then you are the only one who has any money, among your classmates?”

“I don’t understand!”

“I mean, you spend your money on the wall magazines.”

Nadir smiled. “The wall magazines don’t cost anything. You know, respected sir, that the price of a piece of cardboard is four pennies, no more, and the magazine is one sheet with articles on it. Ball point pens also cost a couple of pennies.”

Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari nodded his head and was silent for a bit, and the sound of the moaning returned, louder. It was a woman’s voice this time. But Nadir decided to hold himself together as much as he could. Thus he denied the accusation of being a Communist. He said that it wasn’t a crime for a man to be a Communist, on the one hand, and that their studying Marxism in the college did not mean that he was a Communist, either. In the Philosophy Department they studied all philosophical, social, and historical theories. If he and his friends disagreed with the politics of President Sadat—especially his new policy of rapprochement between Egypt and Israel and America and abandoning Egypt’s genuine ally, the Soviet Union, and its home and natural orbit, the Arab world—that only meant that they were Egyptians who loved their country.

Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari gave him plenty of time to talk, because he wanted to know all the secrets of his soul. He pretended to like what he heard, to lure Nadir into saying more; and Nadir, who never wavered from seeing Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari as Mustafa the barber, answered all the questions thoroughly and fearlessly. He said he didn’t know of any secret Communist parties in Egypt, and that he was hearing about that now for the first time, from Sayyid Bey. Bishr Zahran, Hasan Hafiz, and Kariman didn’t know anything about that either. They were his friends and he knew everything about them. He tried to joke a little, and said that Bishr Zahran, for example, edited the magazine out of a desire for fame more than as a political act, because Bishr was short. For a moment he was worried that Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari might be short, but the man laughed and Nadir was reassured. He went on

to say that Hasan was an artist who wrote plays and short stories, and who was most inclined to the theater of the absurd.

The titles of his plays showed that, *The Eye Walks and the Foot Sees*, *The Night Sun and the Daylight Moon*, did that have anything to do with Communism? His last short story, published in the last magazine they hung up, called “The Old Anxiety,” was about enemies who don’t come to a city, so the people there turn into dwarfs. It was inspired by the novel *The Tartar Steppe* by Dino Buzzati. He just added the story of people turning into dwarfs.

Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari’s eyes widened in real amazement. He asked, “Is this Dino Buzzati a foreigner?”

“He’s an Italian writer.”

“Is he with you in the party?”

Nadir was taken aback, and then he felt a desire to laugh, but he contained it. “There isn’t any party or anything else, sir. We’re angry artists and this Buzzati is an important Italian writer, like Pirandello, for example. His novel is old. It’s been translated into Arabic and it’s sold on the sidewalks for ten cents. We don’t like politics.”

Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari gave him a long look, and then said, “And Yara—don’t you love her?”

Nadir was disconcerted. The image of Mustafa the barber, which had occupied the face of Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari, disappeared, and another image sprang into its place, the image of the man who tried to rape Suad Hosni in the film *Karnak*. But he was able to conceal his pain and say, “Please, sir, there’s no need to talk about Yara.”

Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari’s eyes widened, as if he had found Nadir’s weak point. He said, “Are you afraid for her?”

Nadir closed his eyes and began to feel true terror. Then he said, in a low voice, “Yes.”

Several moments passed in silence, during which Nadir noticed Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari looking at him deeply. He looked at the floor so the other man wouldn’t see any more of his weakness. He heard him saying, “Fine, we’ll leave Yara aside for now. If I asked you if people are free in Egypt, what would you say?”

“No.”

The answer came without thinking, and Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari's face showed wrath. Nadir said hurriedly, once again seeing the image of Mustafa the barber on the man's face, "Sorry. Basically I'm an existentialist, that's why I said no."

"What do you mean?"

Nadir took off, speaking like someone who had found a real escape. "Existentialism considers that man is born and dies without having willed that, and between birth and death he lives as others want him to live, so he's not free. Others are hell, and the only freedom is found in suicide."

Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari was the one taken aback this time. Nadir saw that and hurried to continue, taking courage:

"Existentialism produced the movement of the hippies in Europe, for example, and anarchist singers like Juliette Greco. The only meaning of existence is to get out of the usual rut. A man doesn't like to be committed to anything, he doesn't like to belong to anything."

Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari looked distracted, as if he were thinking about something else. Suddenly he pointed to the exit.

"Please."

"I should leave?"

"Naturally. You won't be of any use to us."

Nadir hurried to stand, saying with feeling, "Thank you very much, sir!" He did not know that as he rushed out, Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari was watching him with disgust.

Nadir couldn't believe he was free until the cold air struck him and he saw the raindrops falling in the darkness. He saw Fuad Street in front of him and took off toward it, hurrying along under the balconies to protect himself from the rain. He noticed that the moon was up, far above the clouds that veiled its light. He found himself laughing and calling, "Good for you, Barber Mustafa!"

He would make his way now to Raml Station and take the tram to the apartment, and tell his friends everything. It would be nice if they could go to the Nawal Boîte nightclub tonight, and stay up until morning with Nawal. In the club he would tell her everything that

had happened, and they would laugh. He wouldn't tell Yara anything, and he would ask his friends not to tell her anything. Yara was a bird of paradise, and he didn't want to cause her any fear. Nawal's shoulder was big enough for him. She would make things easier to bear and would reassure him.

He really needed to know, today more than any other day, why Nawal the nightclub owner cared about them. After all, they were just Communist kids, as she said, laughing heartily. Would he learn her secret tonight? But no matter how much he hurried on the way it would be late. He would put off going to the Nawal Boîte until another night.

All the stores around him were closed. He wondered why the street was so dark tonight.

He was alone when he turned into Safiya Zaghul Street; he didn't see anyone in the street and all the stores were closed here, too. He didn't notice the placards for films in the Metro Theater or the Rialto or even the Alhambra or the Strand, at the end of the street. In Raml Station the booksellers had all folded the cloths they spread on the sidewalk and closed their kiosks along the wall. No one there, either. The tram was standing still, lit from within, but no one was heading for it. It looked as if it had been forgotten for a long time. When it moved off with him aboard he was alone. At Azarita Station a man of about forty got on. The surprising thing was that he ignored the whole empty carriage and sat facing Nadir, rubbing his hands from the cold and blowing on them, even though he was wearing a heavy black coat and had a wool scarf around his neck.

"The miknasa winds." The man made the remark, but Nadir did not respond. He was thinking about whether Sayyid Bey Abdel Bari had sent this man after him.

The man said, "It's well named. It sweeps away everything on earth."

Nadir smiled this time. He didn't think the head of the State Security forces would be stupid enough to send someone when Nadir would see no one else.

Soon the tram arrived at the Camp Caesar stop, and quickly he left the tram and went up the little stairs to the station, to find the street empty and the stores closed here as well. The wind grew stronger and papers on the ground began to fly. Water was still pouring into the drains even though the rain had lightened. He turned into one of the lanes, hearing the sound of the waves and met by gusts of wind as he headed for Tanais Street. It wasn't far, no more than twenty meters, then he turned into the street as the wind moved around him. He climbed the stairs of the house and rang the doorbell more than once. The response was long in coming, but then he heard Ahmad Basim's hoarse voice: "Patience, people."

He smiled, and Ahmad opened the door. As usual he was blocking the way with his very tall frame and broad chest. But Ahmad was shocked at the sight of him.

"Come in quickly, you're soaked!"

He went in and saw Hasan Hafiz sitting in the living room along with Bishr Zahran. Ahmad closed the door and turned to him. "You look as if you're a refugee from a catastrophe."

Nadir was surprised at Hasan's quick return from Mansura, where he had gone a week before. He asked,

"You're back, Hasan? You said you were going to spend two weeks there."

They shook hands. But Ahmad seemed to be finishing an earlier conversation. He declared,

"For your information our village women are very beautiful, but the problem is with the panties."

Bishr laughed and Hasan smiled his partial smile. It seemed to Nadir that he wasn't going to be able to tell them what had happened to him, since Ahmad carried on,

"The panties are all made of either rough cotton or hemp."

Nadir found himself almost forgetting his situation. He was surprised at himself since he had come here to tell his story, and he never expected a conversation like this. He found himself laughing with Bishr, while Hasan kept his half smile and Ahmad went on talking:

“Brother, I saw some panties today in the Prestige Store on Saad Zaghul Street—I mean I saw them in the window—and they were no more than a thread. And what a thread! And for how much? For two whole pounds! I asked the seller, why two pounds? If it was half a penny, maybe. That thing, the merchandise could fall right out of it.”

They couldn’t stop laughing, and this time Hasan’s voice was raised in laughter, too. But Bishr said, “Stop, Ahmad, please. We want to find out why Nadir came in this weather.”

Nadir had already decided to cut off Ahmad’s talk. He said, “I came straight from State Security.”

Silence and shock descended on them. Bishr and Hasan exchanged troubled looks, but Ahmad said,

“I’m going to go in to Saadiya, you stay with State Security. You won’t be satisfied until they arrest you all.” He moved toward his room.

Nadir knew the names of all the women Ahmad brought to the apartment, and he knew the names of the female students he brought, too. He, Bishr, and Hasan were careful not to be there when the students came, so as not to cause them any embarrassment. He found himself asking doubtfully,

“Who’s this Saadiya?”

Bishr answered, “Don’t worry, she sells peanuts in Shatbi Station. He surprised us—he brought her and a box of Rabso detergent and said she was going to bathe with it.”

Nadir was too astonished to laugh. Ahmad turned back to them before going to his room and said, “Pipe down, if she hears you she might get annoyed and leave.” Then he said to Nadir, “I swear she took a bath with the Rabso and came out white as cream. What can I do? I’m tired of dainty women.”

He left them quickly, chuckling, and went into his room.

Bishr said to Nadir, “Hasan didn’t go to Mansura. He went to a camp in Amirriya through the Student Welfare Office. Naturally there were students from several colleges with him. They trained them in karate, gave them lectures against leftists, and at the end of the week they gave every student ten pounds.”

Nadir looked stunned.

Hasan said, “I accepted the offer from the director of the Office in order to learn what’s going on around us. Of course I won’t go on with them. I’ll keep the ten pounds until we go to the Nawal Boîte so we can spend them there—it doesn’t make sense for Nawal to pay for us every time. There’re hard days ahead, and Egypt is changing without our noticing. All the lectures in the camp were about capitalism and the freedom that awaits Egypt in all things, and against Communism as a comprehensive ideology.” The he smiled his partial smile and added, “Sons of whores.”

Silence fell over them for a few moments, then Bishr said to Nadir, “Now tell us what happened to you.”

Nadir was thinking about whether it was a coincidence that he had been summoned to State Security just as students were being trained to beat up Communists.

Warmth enfolded Yara’s room as dawn approached. The rain had fallen silent and the waves had calmed, leaving only the sound of the royal palm fronds moving in the wind. The whole world was sleeping around Yara and Kariman, but they remained awake, Kariman sitting cross-legged on the bed and Yara supporting her back against the headboard. Yara said, her eyes sparkling,

“This is the music of *Dr. Zhivago*; I know this piece, too. I’m going to read the novel soon. Nadir was reading it and talked to me a lot about it.” Then she laughed. “The problem is that I’m not used to reading novels and he says this one is huge.”

Kariman shrugged her shoulder. “Don’t read it.”

“I’m afraid he’ll be annoyed.”

“Then read it.”

Yara lifted her voice in her short laugh, delighted, and then said, “I would have liked to see the film with Nadir. It was forbidden in Egypt after the ‘setback’ with Israel. The government was protesting against Omar Sharif—they said that after the Naksa in 1967 he said something in support of Israel, in Hollywood. When Sadat came to power they showed the film, but I didn’t see it; I was in the last year of middle school. A month ago it was in the Fuad

Theater, but I told Nadir I was afraid of a second-run theater, afraid of the audience. I wish I'd gone with him."

Yara's apparent pain surprised Kariman, who leaned over and gave her a kiss, and then said, "You're really sensitive, Yara. How do you live here among us? Nadir is right to compose poetry about you."

Yara's eyes shone and she asked, "Do you want to hear the latest?"

Kariman answered, "Poetry and music, Yara, there's nothing better than that."

Yara put her hand under her pillow and brought out a notebook. Kariman laughed, and Yara said proudly,

"I always put it under my pillow."

She opened the notebook as Kariman smiled. She closed her eyes for a moment, and then began to read:

My spirit yearns for my love's fingertips,
I float above them with my lips,
my heart beating to the sound of my kisses.

Kariman's eyes widened in admiration and surprise, but she said nothing so that Yara would continue.

My love's fingers are the candles of my ether,
a glow like water,
a light like air,
like the light of the Virgin fair
appearing by night
to a monk, alone
in his cell beyond sight
amid the desert stones.

Yara closed her eyes again, and Kariman said, "How lovely!"
Yara said, "Listen to the end," and she returned to reading:

Here in Alexandria
Lovers have wept on the beach;

The waves of the sea have taken all the lost stories of love
And brought them back as sorrows,
In the clouds of autumn.

Here in Alexandria
The waves may take the stories of love
But no forgetfulness enfolds them.

Here in Alexandria
I will not bid her farewell,
The story of my love will not be lost,
Rather all the walls will bear it.
There is resolution in my heart
And courage in my spirit.
Even if all the gods abandon me,
I will take my love with me
And go with the quail
When the winter ends
To countries I know not,
But where I know
That women will receive me,
Singing,
On the roofs of houses,
With men playing guitar in the streets.
The story of my love will remain after me,
A song above Alexandria,
Until I return to her again,
When my story has turned into trees
Filling her sky.

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