

The Hashish Waiter

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God made the world a rowdy place and then he filled it with rowdy people. Everybody here's rowdy. They're all rowdy 'cause all they want to do is get rowdy and they either get to or they don't. And everybody here's run-down. But they're all run-down in their own way. And me, I'm the king of the run-down 'cause I'm run-down in every which way.

Rowdy Salih

Humanity takes itself too seriously. It is the world's original sin.
If the caveman had known how to laugh, History would have
been different. Seriousness is the only refuge of the shallow.

Oscar Wilde

The Marouf Quarter

HAKHEEM'S HASH DEN WAS PARTICULARLY well situated relative to all the other dens in the Marouf Quarter, which is just behind Talat Harb (formerly, Suliman Pasha) Street. The main drag in the neighborhood, Marouf Street, runs parallel to Talat Harb, beginning at Tahrir Square and cutting across Antikkhana Street—now Mahmud Bassiouni—where the Library and Museum of Modern Art used to be. Back when we were the masters of our own time, we used to spend countless hours in the library and museum, listening to music, reading expensive books, and admiring the paintings. Marouf Street ends where 26th of July and Tharwat streets meet, in front of the High Court building, which looks out onto 26th of July and Ramses streets. There are a few similarly styled buildings attached to its solemn edifice: the Judges' Club and the Lawyers' Syndicate, which look out over Tharwat Street toward the Church of the Sacred Heart and the Railway Hospital on the other side. Marouf Street and Talat Harb Street are completely different though they're only a few steps apart. Taking a shortcut or two, we could get from Café Riche in Talat Harb Square—where intellectuals, celebrities, and the cream of the tourist crop hung out—to the clump of hash dens in Marouf in less than three minutes, but we'd arrive feeling as if we'd been magically transported to another life in another city inhabited by another people. The entire length of the street was packed full of countless people and objects: donkey- and

horse-carts; handcarts; vegetables, fruit, and fish for sale; plastic and aluminum tableware in all shapes and sizes spread over blankets on the ground, to say nothing of the knickknacks, the refrigerators stocked with soft drinks, and the stores all alongside: grocers', fuul and falafel stands, kushari stands, auto parts stores, bike shops, spray-painting, mechanics', and electricians' workshops, and coffeehouses. And on top of all that, little bits from all of the above being carried around in roving vendors' display cases. To say nothing of the tiny corner stores where they fixed locks and car doors and primus stoves, and where you could find cobblers who were pros at fixing worn-out shoes and getting them to shine again. These stores all had scores of customers who came by car and on foot and the most amazing thing was that they actually managed to squeeze their cars into whatever empty spots they could find, calmly parking amid a storm of noise and shouting, and the kind of relentless honking that could drive you mad. And yet, because Egyptians are so generous—and because of that alone—everything had to be allowed to reach its destination. Cars passed through the eye of a needle but no headlights were smashed, no fenders dented, no merchandise upset, no pedestrians injured. The traffic only ever stopped for a second or two before starting up again. If for some reason there were a backup, several passersby would take it upon themselves to start directing traffic and others would push a stalled car out of the way; even the mechanic might haul himself down to the car when called for. And then there were all the people who came to shop for vegetables, fruit, meat, fish, and bread: most of the customers were women of various social classes armed with baskets and palm-leaf bags. Some of them were housewives who looked like foreigners—or else even blonder, paler versions of foreigners—while some others were scrawny, dimwitted, fish-out-of-water maids who never stopped jabbering. Still others came barefoot and dressed in black on black from who knows where to sit out in the street and sell white cheese, butter, mish cheese, and pigeon chicks

out of huge pans. Everyone who lived downtown came to do their shopping on that market street, which buzzed all day and all night and made anyone caught up in its throng feel like it was the earth itself that was moving. Yet all the same, the street was a fun place to hang out day or night. Life there was also as cheap as could be: instead of costing you the equivalent of a humble government clerk's monthly salary like a meal on Talat Harb Street would, on Marouf Street you could stuff your belly for two piasters. For one piaster, you could probably even get a sandwich stuffed with fuul, falafel, and fixin's, or a chunk of delicious and filling roast sweet potato. You could sit at one of the street's many coffeeshouses or snack bars and have a cup of tea with milk and smoke a water pipe for just two and a half piasters. As an added bonus, your eyes could delight in the sight of a stupendous crowd of women of all different ages, shapes, and colors; it was as if every house in the city had dumped its fair ladies out onto the street. They were dressed in simple house-clothes that showed off all their curves, especially those parts that were supposed to be covered up. The women walked along naturally, without any cares, without even the slightest sense that they were being ogled, as freely as if they were walking around in their own homes. Their chests spilled over the cages, their breasts mingling with the pigeons and rabbits lying there with appallingly calm resignation; their cheeks blending in with the pomegranates and apples and peaches; their armpits, white and flushed and depilated, with legs of lamb and veal hanging from large hooks. Nile perch, whitefish, and catfish shuddered in the air above fishmongers' baskets at the touch of lady-Nile perches. Nights on Marouf Street had their own special magic. Traffic would die down after sunset and the muddy street would be washed down, foul water flowing between the revolting pavement tiles. The air would fill with a heavy stench, like the smell of all the sweat that had fallen to the ground that day, and then be freshened by the smell of meat grilling over coals and of liver and brain being fried up

in pans on clean, white pushcarts decorated with colorful glass and lights. The clamoring, fragrant fruits on display looked like a grandstand of flowers, a festival of natural colors. The sound of bottles of beer and soft drinks being opened grew louder; as did the sound of pieces slamming down onto backgammon boards and tongs clanging on marble countertops in coffee-houses. Umm Kulthum's voice rose up out of the radio and spread in every direction, only to echo back from every corner of the street. Life there seemed as easy, as calm, as pleasant, as perfectly gratifying as could be. The screeching neon lights created a canopy of happy serenity that gave infinite space to imaginations intoxicated by philanthropic emotions that felt moist and green and warm all at once; especially when you were just stepping out of one of the hash dens hidden in the depths of that great big carnival.

Clear Path

THERE WERE SEVERAL WAYS TO get to Hakeem's den. You could get there from Ramses Street, in which case you'd have to pass by Galal's den. This was actually mildly embarrassing because Galal competed with our favorite den, which was no more than a coffeehouse built of wood and reeds in the middle of a large bank of ruins. All the houses around it—down Marouf Street and Ramses Street—were, according to official government records, at risk of collapse. Their expected lifespan had run out more than half a century ago and many stern orders to evacuate the buildings had been handed down; yet despite their age, they had maintained the charm of their inventive design. Each house was a priceless architectural treasure, but they'd ended up looking like big-shots who'd seen better days and were reduced to trying—albeit in vain—to get some bastard somewhere to take pity on them. The residents hadn't been able to find anywhere else to live so they just stayed put, accepting responsibility for themselves, and, as far as the government records were concerned, the houses were simply condemned and abandoned. This, despite the fact that everyone could see that the houses occasionally collapsed, crushing the people inside. Even so, new residents would come and take over the ruins, salvaging the iron and wood, and building shacks, shops, hash dens, and workshops for spray-painting, locksmithing, and metal-working in the clearing. Boss Galal, who ran the most famous hash den downtown—if not in the

entire city including the suburbs—was the man whose lead they followed. And follow they did because Egyptians have a peculiar fondness for thuggish crooks, and many derive great pleasure from doing what they say and submitting to them. Maybe even going so far as to try to outdo one another in vying for their affection; maybe they do it to get on their good side, or maybe so they can count on their backing when something comes up. Boss Galal was the most famous safebreaker in Egypt. Paroled from a life sentence, he was ready to gut any police officer who tried to get in his way, or keep him from earning a living, or who simply irritated him. The police were all scared of him so they just let him have his hash den, figuring that was better than him gutting anyone or cracking any safes. His hash den was really nice: it was clean and orderly and it felt like a coffeehouse with its proliferation of chairs and colored tablecloth-covered tables lined up in rows in and around the large shack, which was as big as a soccer pitch. There was a counter made of marble and tile that was fitted out with all the nicest cups, kettles, copper trays, ashtrays, and water pipes used exclusively for smoking molasses-steeped tobacco, in addition to the coconut bongs used just for smoking hash. The boys who worked there were relatively clean and genial looking, but having a powerful and influential boss had made them rude and arrogant. They'd raise the price of each bowl from half a piaster to a piaster, which was double the price of other dens, and the price of a tea to two piasters, in order—so they claimed—to preserve a certain level of clientele and keep the lowlifes out. The Boss, owing to his tact and the experience of a commuted life sentence, had succeeded in attracting a select group of customers. Only the most respectable types, the most prone to looking stylish and showing off, showed up: journalists, artists, public-sector grandees, business men, and the sons of wealthy Revolutionary Officers, who'd taken the place of the pashas' sons, and who liked to tip excessively from a supply of unknown provenance. This got them the best service, and

that set them apart from everybody else. The rest of us had to wait for the boys to serve the beys, who liked to take their time. If you had a problem with it, well—pardon the expression—but don't let the door hit you on the way out. A lot of serious hash smokers, including our circle of friends, avoided Galal's den even if they were friends of his. They were bound to get the best service if they went to smoke when Galal was there, but during the day when he was fast asleep, they were captive to the whims of the malicious little bastards whose attention could only be got with money. The way our group saw it was that getting high in a common coffeehouse—or somewhere like a common coffeehouse—took half the fun out of it. It took longer for you to get to the stage of being properly stoned because the crowd made the smoking a lot slower. The bowls would come ten at a time no matter how big the group, so each person would only get one bowl to smoke each round and by the time the next ten came and the water in the bong had been changed, and the coals broken up into smaller pieces because the last round's rips were so weak, your high would've already worn off. But then if someone dared to tell the boy to hurry up or order another bowl, he'd be told off: patience is a virtue, and God helps those who wait, and the world hasn't flown away yet and it isn't going to, and there's a silver lining in every delay, and on down the list of ever-ready, infuriating platitudes. The staff were all a bunch of no-good, disrespectful thugs. Plus, they always had the radio turned up as loud as possible and there was no hope of getting it turned down because everyone had the right to listen. At the same time, everyone had the right to talk, but with the radio at full blast, everyone had to shout. The racket alone guaranteed that you'd end up coughing away the deepest hits and get a headache no matter how good the hash was. It was all in Boss Galal's interest, of course: you could never get stoned so you'd just go on smoking and smoking. Serious hash smokers like us preferred to smoke in a no-frills hash den that was nothing like a coffeehouse,

where even if they did serve tea and coffee, it was a service on the side—one that could be canceled at any moment for any reason. The closer the den came to being like a cave or a crypt or a burrow, the better the high, the more tickled the imagination. It doubled a hash smoker's enjoyment to be sitting there—wherever he was—doing nothing but smoking hash, hemmed in by a lot of stimulating limitations. No-frills hash dens, like bars, didn't try to do anything else. As soon as the customer sat down, he'd get one set of bowls after another with a steady frequency that didn't waste a minute. The workers all had specific tasks: there was one to clean out the bowls, one to pack them with tobacco, one to stoke the coals and break them up, one to change the water in the coconut bongs, and one—or more—to serve the customers. These guys would kneel down on the floor in front of the customers, holding the bong in one hand and pushing coals down on top of the bowl with the other to make sure the hits were strong. Because they depended on tips, they were the lowest paid of all.

Down Past Ali Mango's

OFF ANTIKKHANA STREET, THERE WAS another way to Hakeem's den, but there was embarrassment to be had in that direction as well. Boss Ali Mango had a small store on the corner where he sold cigarettes, packaged sweets, and soft drinks, but it was all a front for his real business: dealing hashish and opium. Boss Ali Mango was a clever guy, but opium had made him thin, and a succession of jails had chewed him up. He was famous across every far-flung neighborhood in Cairo for being hyper-thorough when it came to his superb product. His specialty was a top-grade hash called Blue Powder. He always stuck to the same variety and only ever did business with the same grower in Lebanon. He was constantly inspecting each crumb he sold, too, even when the customer was in a hurry and didn't really care. The problem with Ali Mango was that he'd suck your blood and pretend he was doing you a favor. He was—of course—insistent, crusty, and transparent, but he was also as smooth and as poisonous as a desert snake. He was so frail and his wormwood-colored face so lacking in lifeblood that you almost couldn't see him. He had thick lips, rotting teeth, and a chronically dry throat from the fat, unfiltered Wings cigarettes that never left his lips. He had hawk eyes, too, and was always alert. Buried behind a glass counter adorned with jars of toffees, caramels, fondant bonbons, mints, gum, lollipops, firecrackers, and balloons, he'd spy one of us walking past on the sidewalk across the street and reel us in with a

somber and peremptory wave of his veiny arm and a smile like a crushed tomato that still managed to brim with hospitality, decency, generosity, and glittering promise as though he were about to give you good news or an expensive present. His smile would win you over, like a hook snagging you by the neck so that if you ever did try to get away, it'd hurt and you'd give up. You'd have to say hello to him, Brother! (which was what he'd undoubtedly say to you) for no reason other than to be polite; that was the lie you'd tell yourself anyway. "So I guess we only know each other when there's business to do, huh?" he'd ask. "Aren't we supposed to be men, fella?" As soon as he saw you heading toward him, he'd get up, leaning on his crutch, and dart through the gap in the counter toward the red refrigerator that stood beside the cigarette display case outside the shop. Ignoring your protests that a treat was wholly unnecessary, he'd open it and move a slab of ice out of the way. Feeling to see which of the bottles were cold, he'd pull out the coldest one. In the blink of an eye, *chikk* . . . "Here you go, Bey. Drink up"—and as you took the bottle, he'd always add, "Drink up to cool down! Ha! It's as hot as fire today! May God protect us from the flames of hell." As you began to sip from the icy bottle, he'd rub his long fingers against the back of his ear and, in less than a moment, stretch his hand out toward you. On his thumb, there'd be a lick of opium smelling pungently of a freshness that was both alluring and harrowing, like the freshness of sin.

"Give me your mouth and take this kiss," he'd say.

The rumor among novice opium addicts was that soft drinks ruined the effect of opium, and Boss Ali Mango was always joking about how gullible they were: "God bless the Prophet! What are they on about? There's nothing that can spoil honest-to-goodness opium, not even lemons!" You'd continue standing there in spite of yourself and try to think of a way out. Veterans like us would advise you—heads up, indeed!—that the longer you stood there, the more screwed

you were because next he was going to offer you a joint: “This hash is brand new. You can’t even buy it yet. May God bless you and help you get your hands on some! I wouldn’t put it past Him.” Working on advice you’d been given, you’d ask him—grudgingly, no doubt—for a quarter qirsh, or maybe even an eighth. You’d apologize for the paltriness of the order, saying something about straitened circumstances right now, and you were bound to add that you didn’t like buying on credit and didn’t believe in borrowing, not a piaster. You had to be extra careful not to sound wishy-washy or tentative when you said it because he’d do his best to confuse you with encouragement: “Don’t worry about the money. Since when is money the only goddamn thing that matters? We only know each other because of money? What’s up, fella? How much do you want?” He was certain his loan would be repaid because you had no choice but to smoke the hash in one of the dens in Marouf, right under his nose, right in the Mayor of Marouf’s backyard as it were. Boss Ali Mango had all the hash dens under his thumb and he could get at them any time he felt like it. There was nothing to stop him popping up when you least expected, like a heart attack. Being forced to pay up, or else being humiliated, was as insupportable as it was insulting. If you ever did get made a fool of in a hash den, even just once—and especially if it were over money—you’d never ever be able to get your honor back, no matter how much money you spent. The real problem was that Ali Mango would sell you a quarter qirsh for forty piasters—cheap as can be—but at the same time, his ex-wife Umm Yahya would sell it for only twenty-five. And it was the same hash, maybe even a lot better. Umm Yahya was very generous, too: her hash looked reassuringly plentiful and made you feel like what you were getting really was a quarter qirsh with a little extra thrown in to be nice; you could easily get ten bowls out of it. But he—God help us—had a toxic touch and was always taking a little off the top of the quarter qirsh till it ended up the size of a shriveled old fava

bean, which he'd wrap in a quarter-sheet of cellophane in such a way that it was impossible to open up, unless you did it slowly after you'd left, but by then there'd be no point in complaining or throwing a fit. All you could do was get angry about what'd happened, so the best thing was to appreciate the wisdom of those who say, "Don't push your luck and leave it in God's hands." And so, walking past Boss Ali Mango's stand was risky, awkward, and totally frowned upon.

Umm Yahya's Alley

THERE WAS A THIRD WAY to get to Hakeem's den, around the back of the mosque off Marouf Street, down a narrow, twisting alley, crowded with groups of children sleeping naked on the ground, encircled by their own shit now infiltrated by armies of hoary old flies, lizards, beetles, and flying cockroaches. Women squatted in front of laundry basins and primus stoves heating up big cans full of water they'd fetched from a charity tap on the edge of Bulaq Abu al-Ila. Old women with their spreads of sweets: sesame-seeded halva, molasses sticks, and cotton candy all being swarmed by flies. Mangy strays licked at the bottoms of both children and plates and when they got hit by surprise smacks, barked and recoiled in pain, carrying their screams of agony with them a short distance away. A man and his children sat around a bowl of fuul midammis, scarfing down bread and spring onions. Another man who'd made his bed in the street, slept deeply, looking to all the world like a mummy escaped from the Egyptian Museum just a few steps away.

It took some practice and a certain acrobatic ability to navigate the alley, but even then you couldn't help but look—to a distant observer—as if you were dancing on ice or through a field of thorns as you made your way to Umm Yahya's house. Her vicious dog—son of a wolf—was always chained, very securely, to the door to warn Umm Yahya of the arrival of any strangers so that she could be ready for them. He was unlike

any other dog: he never grew fond of anyone, not even customers who came by dozens of times a day. That dog always gave the customers a hard time. He was so awful that even when he saw an old customer he recognized, he'd just tuck his head between his shoulders and roar, glaring at the customer, looking ferocious and intimidating, ready to pounce at any moment. He'd go on roaring and growling until Umm Yahya yelled to silence him from the second-floor balcony, which was really no more than the remains of a protruding floor that had once been surrounded by a wooden screen behind which the women of the house would look out from.

Umm Yahya greeted the customers she knew with a smile and those two dimples in her full and fleshy cheeks. Her round red face shone beneath the hand-embroidered edging of her headscarf and her soft locks, which were mixed in with some gray. She was pretty with that round face of hers, which had retained its allure and spoke of a bygone beauty that—you could be sure—had once been captivating. With a steely assurance, she'd yank the rope beside her, undoing the latch on the gate to the street.

You had to walk backward through the gate because of that damned dog. There was a staircase directly in front of you; of course, you knew it perfectly well, but it still got your attention as though you were seeing it for the first time. The steps looked more like boxes or crates stacked up edge to edge. One, two, three landings and then you were up above the roof, overlooking emptiness on three sides, half the walls having collapsed to expand the vista. Umm Yahya would be waiting for you on the last landing, holding a heavy cloth bag tied up tightly with the ribbon threaded through it. You were supposed to hold the money out as soon as you got up the stairs and with a quick glance at the amount in your hand, she'd see how much you wanted, open up the bag, and pick out your order. In a split second, the bag disappeared into a magical vault somewhere in the rubble piled up around her. She'd stay there by the top of

the stairs, bellowing at the dog, until she'd made sure you'd reached the bottom and then she'd lock the gate behind you and completely forget she'd ever had the pleasure of your visit.

A few steps past Umm Yahya's, you came to the Muarraq hash den and you had no choice but to walk past it. It was nothing more than a tiny, gloomy storefront, leaking damp and putridity, hordes of ants and flies, and rivers of spit and phlegm coughed up out of the chests of disgusting hash addicts, who laid swollen, suppurating sores down onto the black surface of the floor, and no one, it seemed, ever thought to paper them over with a little dirt. Your eyes couldn't help but be drawn instinctively toward Hakeem's den, which lay directly in front of you, with its sweet, familiar scent.

Nevertheless, going down that alley was also frowned upon unless you only went to buy hashish from Umm Yahya and then immediately turned around and went back the few meters you'd gone because if you carried on down the alley, you'd walk past some sluggish young slackers, their eyelids sore-ridden from too many late nights and too much crap hash, their bodies hollowed out beneath their patched, colorless, shapeless, unrecognizable clothing. Yet all the same, they were good guys, if unfortunate and unscrupulous. All you had to do was walk past them and one of them would stick to you, regardless of whether you'd even looked in his direction. Inevitably, he'd impose both his companionship and his services on you any way he could, not giving a damn about your objections or grumbling, nor even your revulsion. God save you from that kid Sooka, for example. He wasn't a professional den bum, or an out-and-out thug or anything, he was—and this was what really piqued your interest—a decent guy. You couldn't help but like him and feel that he simply was an all-right guy who wanted to do you a favor: what he meant by that, of course, was that he wanted to be the one to hold the bong for you because he knew how to smoke you out so well that two bowls from him would be a better blessing than a hundred at the hands of those thieving, no-good den

boys, who didn't have their hearts in it: the coals weren't hot enough, they didn't clean the bong well enough so the smoke didn't flow properly, and on top of that they wanted tips! Come on, already! Those guys are crooks, kind sir; trust me. The kid puts his whole mouth over the bowl before he puts the coal on—he says he's blowing the leftover smoke out of the bong, and you, no offense, think he's actually unclogging the bowl by blowing on it, but—the truth is, believe you me—that the bastard (and I mean every last one of them) sticks out his tongue—which they really ought to cut off!—and licks the hash right off of the tobacco and no one's the wiser. Then all he has to do is stick the coal on top of the bowl and you're just smoking plain old molasses tobacco. You get the wind knocked out of you from all that inhaling, but in the end you've got no divine high from on high to show for it! I mean you pay for that hash from the sweat of your brow and then this son of a whore goes and steals it and tricks you into smoking plain tobacco? You see, by accusing others of doing what he does himself, he reveals the secret of his own scam.

By the time you made it to the entrance to Hakeem's den at the end of the alley, you'd inevitably be surprised to find yourself being escorted by either one, two, or three guys walking alongside you as if they were your pals. They'd come into the den with you and sit down close by, running up their tab so much it almost put your fears at ease; they might even argue with one another about who was going to serve you. Most of the time the arguments were hostile, albeit suppressed through use of their shared secret code: it'd usually end quickly with the weakest soon withdrawing. But when they were equally matched, they had to hurry up and make one another understand with a practiced look so that without any violence or disagreement one of them would step forward and the others would remain close by, maintaining a slight distance—not out of respect for you, of course: this negligible separation allowed them to claim they weren't part of the party if the police should

suddenly raid the den, and raids could happen at any moment. The guy who held the bong for you would simply shake the bowl out when you were done, which meant that he'd suck up the remaining smoke in the bong after you'd smoked your fill. This was the smoky soup—when the coal got mixed in with the hash and the scent had burned off and the oil had started to sizzle—and you simply couldn't hold it all in your chest. Although his lungs were totally fresh, the kid wouldn't be able to inhale the whole soup either because it was so thick and went on for so long; instead he'd just toke quickly and hand the rest to his two friends. He'd occasionally also give his friends—with sir's permission—a bowl for the two of them to kill.

You were bound to get annoyed at having them around because of their constant, painful mooching after no more than five minutes of having them sit across from you. From his seat behind the barrels of bowls in the far corner, Hakeem the streetwise den owner was the only person who could sense your annoyance even before it showed. He'd twist his mouth, tightening it two inches, he was so irate. The boys who worked at the den—the legit ones—would glare uncomfortably at you and them, ridiculing you for having been so gullible, so easily taken advantage of, and yet to get back at you for bringing these guys in the first place, they'd cheat you, too, if you asked them to serve you.

And so entering from this alley led only to aggravation and was an all-around buzzkill. The best thing was to get your hash from Umm Yahya and then turn around and head back toward Marouf Street to look for a better entrance.