

Cairo Swan Song

Mekkawi Said

Translated by
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To my sister, Fatima, without whose support I could never
have finished this novel;
To my older brother, Osman, who looked after me when I
was a child;
And to all the loving hearts that continue to offer me their
support.

To the warm lightning bolt that I happened upon and locked
up in my heart never to be released,
For my sake, calm down. Give in.

—Mekkawi

1

IT WAS A LITTLE PAST midnight and the coffeehouse was closing up; only two tables of customers remained, absorbed in their games. They didn't seem to mind the biting cold. They were my only protection against the anxious waiter, who was looking at his watch every five minutes and shaking his head. I was desperate to sit there out of the cold for as long as I could. I was watching the waiter nervously, hoping he wouldn't announce closing time. Every time he went to clear away my empty glass and wipe the table down with his wet rag, I'd order another drink. When he sat down beside me, sighing and rubbing his hands together for warmth, I mumbled an order for a hot chocolate. Head lolling forward, he called to the guy behind the counter who made the drinks. His coworker's curt reply, "The gas tank's empty. No more hot drinks," felt like a push out the door.

Without looking at the waiter, I ordered a bottle of Pepsi. He stood up lazily and brought me a partially frozen Pepsi in a can. He chucked it down on the table in front of me, causing a deep thud. While he was watching a table of customers rising to leave, I asked him to bring me a glass for the Pepsi. He ignored me and went over to tell them how much they owed. After they paid up, he walked back over with his hands in the wide front pockets of his apron. He remembered that I'd asked him for something, and brought me a glass. He sat down beside me again. "You know, pal, cold drinks are the best

thing in this kind of weather,” he said. I didn’t say anything. I was busy watching the remaining three customers; two of them were playing a game and the other was cheering them on. The boy standing next to them was carrying a large ladle of burning coals for the water pipes and shivering almost imperceptibly. He was watching the game and would occasionally lift the coals up beside the table. They’d stop playing and warm their hands over the glowing coals for a few moments before resuming their game. The waiter kept at his mission to get rid of me by counting out the chits I’d accumulated. Every little token he dropped on the table clanged and that, along with my attempts to drink the frozen Pepsi, set my teeth chattering. I was losing my patience so before he could drop another chit I put my hand over the pile. One fell on to the back of my hand.

I faked a smile. “I’m sorry, that noise is bothering me. Count them somewhere else.”

He looked at me for a few seconds. “We’re closing, sir.” Before I could nod in the direction of the other customers, he stood up and said, “Those folks are friends of ours.”

I lit a cigarette and waited for him to come back out. As soon as I saw him, I called him over. He refused the cigarette I offered him as I asked how much I owed. Then I paid up, including a tip that was bigger than the total bill. He thanked me coolly a few times before going over to the other table and feigning an interest in their game. I finished my cigarette and sat there loafing while I lit another. I knew he was watching me out of the corner of his eye. He came and sat next to me again as I’d expected he would. He hesitated, but then whispered, “If you’re in a bind, there are cheap hotels near the shrine.” I turned my head, but he kept on like a broken record. He pointed at the boy carrying the coals and whispered, “Borai lives upstairs, in this building. He’s got himself a little spot on the roof. I hope you won’t mind me saying, but if you’re meeting a hooker, you could take her up there. He’ll do anything for a tenner.”

That was the decisive moment in our conversation: if I didn't draw the line right then, he'd carry on like that until all his reserves of filth and smut had gone dry. I silenced him with a sharp look and stood up to leave with the other customers, who were filing out. I thought walking in the cold would only make me more anxious. I felt the wide empty square, bathed in pale light, was moving toward me. There were interludes of silence between the flourishes of wind and the echoes of dogs' barking. As I tried to remember where the place was, my mobile shrieked, grating my nerves.

I snapped at her over the phone. "He left me hanging at the coffeehouse." I realized that 'left me hanging' might have been too idiomatic for her so I rephrased, "I waited for him there until closing time."

Her response was made up of some phrases that mixed contempt and suspicion. "Call me if there are any developments," she said and ended the conversation.

As usual, my hand missed my jacket pocket and my mobile fell to the ground with an awful clunk. I damned her and I damned the weather; damned love, animal instincts, boredom, and belief as I bent down to pick it up. My scarf slipped forward on my neck, exposing me to the assault of the brutal cold. I stared at my mobile phone: it was like a stiff, mute corpse in my hand, its screen an endless spider web now. I stuffed it into my pocket.

When I got to the square, I became an ideal target for the cold currents blowing from every corner: out of back streets, alleys, avenues, building entrances. The Mosque of Sayyida Zaynab looked captivating and seductive through the heavy mist. I retreated to the corrugated iron door of one of the closed shops and leaned against it. I perched on the cold marble sill of the display window, feeling with my buttocks for the narrow space between the iron spikes, which the sadistic shop owner had installed to keep people from sitting down. I lit a cigarette with the last of my matches to have survived the cold gale. I

was waiting for a phantom, not a human; all just so I could tell Marcia that he was going to cooperate with us. If I'd taken him to see her right then, she, having finished her bottle of whiskey and bag of weed, would rocket up to seventh heaven, taking us onboard, paying no mind to the clouds, black holes, or nebulae.

Windows slammed shut, others sprang open violently. The wind was blowing more strongly now, through the bending boughs of trees whose runt branches fell to the ground. I got up and started walking, sheltering under the cover of balconies. Billboards were shaking violently on the roofs of the large buildings bordering the square. My eyes were fixed on the sky, searching for the one that was going to crash down on my head. I walked for a while until the wind died down and I decided I'd see that night through, no matter what the cost. I headed randomly to the right following the imprecise directions Karim had given me. I didn't see any of the signs or landmarks he'd mentioned, but after some careful searching I found a small store, shut up for the night, with an ugly sign that said they mended clothes. Next to it was a somewhat bigger store; it was closed, too, like all the other shops on the street. It looked like a tire shop. There was no sign, but the tire rims hanging on the lamppost out front gave it away.

Across the street, there was a villa with a crumbling façade squatting in the dark, beside shattered streetlights. I examined the villa. There were some irregular lights, glowing faintly and flickering all over the place. I felt like a fighter pilot scoping out a small, disguised target. I crossed over to the front of the villa. Growing more daring, I went through the entrance, which was missing its iron gate, into the courtyard. I stood there a while, unable to advance or retreat. Then, suddenly, the mounds of trash, dirt, and rocks around me were replaced by boys and girls, none older than ten. They surrounded me. The tallest one took a razor blade out from under his tongue and started waving it in my face as I tried to back away. A little girl, his sidekick, was sneaking closer to me under the protection of his

razor. The boy's arm came straight down and cut a long slice through my leather jacket. I caught the little girl's hand in my pocket reaching for my mobile. The girl shouted defiantly. They looked even more vicious and angry. I let go of her hand; I didn't even consider following her as she scurried inside the villa. "I want to see Karim!" I shouted.

They immediately fell silent and lowered the small weapons they'd been pointing at me. They looked at one another as if there were some pact between them, and then they ran off in every direction, disappearing completely.

I walked away. I didn't pay the slightest attention to the dogs' barking, or the bracing wind that'd come on stronger than before, or to the falling tree branches along the way. Not even to the billboard that tumbled to the ground and nearly crushed me.

2

I WATCHED THE SUN SET, entertained by the sight of a light-gray pigeon that was shuttling the food and straw she'd hidden in a corner of my balcony up to her nest on the roof of the building opposite, up to crannies in the crumbling concrete just below the eaves. I hadn't seen Marcia for the past three days. My home phone had been cut off for a while and my mobile was busted and stolen. There was no Internet at home, either. Marcia was accustomed to my disappearances, and hiatuses were nothing new to us. I'd pull back when I began to get bored of her and she'd usually drop out when she had work to do. The malaise I was feeling at that moment was almost enough to make me put on my clothes and run out the door in her direction. Instead, I decided I'd spend all night in some club downtown after I'd gone to Essam's studio to drag him along with me, but I was caught off guard by a barrage of knocking and doorbell ringing.

It definitely wasn't Marcia; could've been Essam. I ran to open the door—Zaynab, I hadn't expected. She shoved me back into the apartment and kissed me on the cheeks. She'd already shut the door behind her before I'd been able to get my head around anything. Why didn't I realize it was Zaynab? We were always fighting and giving each other the silent treatment. She was usually the one to end the standoff: she'd either drop by or send a text or else she'd stick a note on my door—she didn't think twice about snooping neighbors or anyone else who might happen to read it.

She was sitting on the couch, focused on taking the Walkman out of her handbag and putting her headphones on. She had a pile of papers in her hand. Her shoes lay overturned on the floor. She was about to start writing again as if I weren't even there or as if we'd never had an argument. When she noticed I was looking at her, she curled her thumb and fingers as if she were holding a glass: a bitchy signal that meant I should make her some tea.

“Go make it yourself.”

She didn't get up. I went into the kitchen to make sure there was something for dinner in the refrigerator. Then I went to enjoy a hot shower while she took care of whatever it was she was working on.

I first met her when she came to interview me for a third-rate newspaper that probably no one's ever heard of. That was after I'd come back from the Gulf. I was attracted to her calmness and her beautifully plain face. She wore no makeup and very ordinary clothes. She brought me a copy of the interview after it was published. She called me a few times after that, too, and we ended up going out on a date. I'd become drawn to her in a short period of time. At difficult moments in my life, I often thought it'd be best to put an end to my bachelorhood with her; to be nestled in her hands rather than in Marcia's claws.

She lived in Shubra, in a hostel for girls whose families didn't live in Cairo. Her family was from Minya. I reckoned my apartment downtown was like her idea of paradise. Zaynab lived simply. The silly little gifts I gave her embarrassed her and made her uneasy. Whenever we went to a café, she'd refuse to eat and only ever ordered tea with milk, or the occasional coffee. One night, after we'd known each other for some time, I asked her why. After a little stonewalling, she shyly admitted that her father was a farmer and that he'd had a hard time supporting her, her two sisters, younger brother, and their mother. So that, for many years, all they'd had for dinner was a cup of tea with milk and some scraps of bread. She said she'd never

tasted a cup of tea with milk as good as the ones she used to have at home and that she was hoping to rediscover that taste somewhere, either with me or when she went out by herself. And when she said that, a tyrannical wave of emotion overtook me and I decided that Zaynab was the woman for me. In a stupid, irresponsible moment, I decided that as soon as I'd seen her back to her hostel, I'd ask her to set a date for us to go visit her family so I could ask for her hand. I didn't talk to Essam or Awad first, or anyone else for that matter; nor did the thought of Marcia cross my mind. I was like a guy who decides, on the spur of the moment, that he's going to kick alcohol and start leading prayers. I didn't even ask myself why I chose to wait until after I'd seen her back to her hostel.

She surprised me on that wondrous, lovely night after we'd lost track of the time, when she looked anxiously at her watch and told me that her curfew had been hours ago. I volunteered to go back with her to help smooth things over with the matron, but she said that the matron wouldn't be placated by my excuses, and that actually my presence would probably make matters more complicated. She said it wasn't the first time she'd missed curfew. It would've been the third time and she'd already been warned by the management that she wasn't to miss curfew again without prior approval or else she'd be kicked out. I felt radiant and romantic as I watched her, her eyes filling with sparkling, disorienting tears. I couldn't decide whether to embrace her, or cry on her chest, or swear to her that I'd protect her and look after her for the rest of my life, that I'd never let anybody get in the way of her happiness. Zaynab had never been dearer to me than she was at that moment. I settled for circumspectly patting her on the back. We were faced with two problems: one urgent and another for later. Where was she going to sleep that night? That was the question that required an immediate answer. She used my phone to call several of her girlfriends, all of whom made excuses but one. Her friend lived in a suburb called Oseem.

Zaynab calmed down after that, even though the commute seemed treacherous at that time of night. There was still the problem postponed so we set a time to meet the next morning to sort out the issue of her hostel.

She stopped outside a coffeehouse and asked me to ask the owner if she could use the restroom to wash her face. I was sitting, waiting for her, when she came back out, drying her neck with a tissue, but she didn't signal to me to get up. She sat down next to me instead. "You're really going to come with me tomorrow to talk to the matron?" she asked with a pleading look. When I nodded, she regained her captivating smile. She waved over the waiter, who'd been watching us from afar, and ordered a tea with milk. When she saw me furrow my brow, she ordered me a coffee and smiled at me. She started telling me about the hostel and her friends there, and about the funny incidents and ups and downs they'd all experienced over the past two years.

I found myself compelled to say, "I love you." She let out a laugh that was straight from the heart and dipped a spoon in her tea. She insisted I taste it. I didn't understand what that had to do with my saying 'I love you,' but I tasted it like she'd asked.

Black clouds loomed once again when she looked at the clock hanging above the counter. She told me that it had got too late for her to go to her friend's place in Oseem. I was exhausted and in no mood to spend the whole night loitering in cafes, captive to her high-velocity mood swings, so when she asked me, "What do we do now?" I said, "Either we hang out on the street till morning or you come spend the night at my place." Her eyes grew wide, but she didn't say anything. I tried to lessen the impact of what I'd said by explaining that I'd take her back to my place, but that I'd go sleep at Essam's.

On our way back, she held my hand and whispered, "You don't have to do that. It's your apartment. I can't make you sleep somewhere else. You only have the one bedroom?"

"Two."

“It’s settled then. You sleep in one, and I’ll sleep in the other.”

I started to forget about the idea of going to visit her family in Minya, but I wasn’t going to give in to my wishful imagination. We took a taxi home. The doorman’s room was off the foyer, across from the elevator. He usually slept behind his door so he could monitor whoever came into the building late at night. And she was still talking. She talked in the cab. She talked on the sidewalk in front of the building. She was talking as we waited for the elevator, and when the doorman came out from his room, she said, “Good evening.” He responded in kind, rubbing his eyes and stepping back into his room while I tried not to look angry.

In the antique elevator, she tapped her long fingers on the worn wood to the tune of a popular song. She wanted to write on the mirror with her lipstick, but then when I scolded her, she just stared at me for a while, puzzled. Once we got inside the apartment, I brought her a gallabiya and changed into one myself. I pointed her in the direction of the refrigerator so she could get something to eat, but she said she wasn’t hungry. I gave her the key to the bedroom and she locked the door, but then a few minutes later she popped into my room and handed me back the key, saying I shouldn’t let her lock the door because she wasn’t used to sleeping alone and she was scared. Then she asked me to stay awake for a bit and talk to her between rooms and when she returned to her room, she left the door ajar. She said I should shut her bedroom door after she’d fallen asleep, but she kept on talking while I was trying to read. I didn’t respond until she started whining, but by then I was pissed off and fed up. I was about ready to throw her from the sixth floor. Her voice flagged and it was quiet for a stretch. I figured she’d fallen asleep. A few minutes later, though, I heard her feeble voice, “Aren’t you going to go to bed?”

I turned the light off so I could sleep. A few moments later, she called out again, but this time her voice sounded serious

and somewhat frightened. “Why’d you turn off all the lights? It’s pitch-black in here.” I got up from my bed in a huff, this close to throwing her out on the street. Her room was as bright as a movie set. As soon as I walked into the room, she grabbed my hand and whispered, “I’m scared. I’m really scared. Please, sleep in here.” She pointed at the bed and before I could even understand what had just taken place, she said, “You can sleep over there,” pointing at the farthest edge of the bed, “but please don’t move around because then I can’t sleep.” I did as she asked and lay there for a few minutes like a schoolboy who’s sorry to find himself in a room full of the mean teachers he dreads. I was woken by her moist lips nibbling the bottom of my ear. When I opened my eyes, she smiled and whispered, “Thanks for letting me stay the night.”

I just played dumb and remained completely silent. She was either playing with my hair or tickling my nose when she spelled it out for me, “Please, don’t come any closer.” I honored her request, slave to the genes of idiocy that were in control of me that night. I shut my eyes and tried to recall the day’s events, which passed by in rainbow colors, as I smilingly crawled toward sleep. Every time our bodies touched, either intentionally on her part or absent-mindedly on mine, I immediately pulled back and a frightening image weighed down on my heart. I could picture her telling her close friends how noble and moral I was, about how I’d shared a bed with her for eight straight hours without once touching her. That really aggravated me. I got on top of her; she looked at me in shock. I kissed her cheeks and her hair and then she rolled me over. I was assailed by kisses all over my body. She was like an unbroken, unbridled mare running out into open country. I kissed her back, and my hands discovered all the visible and hidden treasures of her body, but she didn’t let me go all the way. “I’m still a virgin, so don’t try anything,” she whispered, and yet in spite of that, she used her practiced hand on me. “I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

I relaxed for half an hour or more, but she wasn't finished. There were fewer restrictions that time as desire consumed her, and after I'd done what she'd timidly asked of me, lust took over and she asked for more and more. My path was unobstructed and her performance was astonishing: she took me through all my memories of Saudi and Doha and America, sailed me to all the official and underground fun spots. I was exhausted. I'd nearly disappeared in a deep labyrinth where only the echo of her voice could reach me. She told me how her uncle had stolen her innocence when she was a child and that was why she'd left for Cairo and distracted herself with her many newspapers. Maybe I imagined it, or maybe I actually heard her swear I was only the second man she'd ever slept with. Whatever. I was in a totally different universe anyway.

“Are you going to sleep in the bathroom?” Her screechy voice was driving me mad. That lunatic! Did she ever give it a rest? She showed no regard for anyone else on earth. As if I didn't have neighbors who knew me! Her voice was as loud as a field of crickets. It never occurred to her that other people existed, not that she gave a damn about what they thought. She treated me as if she were my wife.

One time, after I'd woken up, I found her standing in the doorway of the apartment, talking to a neighbor as if they were old friends. I was worried she'd introduced herself to the woman as my wife. When they'd finished their conversation, she shut the door and turned to me, but when I let her have it, she was annoyed at me for being angry. “She didn't ask who I was. And anyway we didn't talk about anything. Just ‘Good morning’ and a little girl talk. That way she won't suspect anything. If I'd hesitated or clammed up, she probably would've reported me to the police. I let her decide who I was. Your wife . . . your sister . . . your daughter . . . your stepmother. The important thing is that you don't bring any trashy types back here anymore and get me in trouble.” I laughed, tickled by what she'd done.



I walked in and found her lying on the couch wearing only shorts and a bra. She shifted a little so that I could sit beside her. I leaned back and asked, "Aren't you cold?"

"You know what kind of people get cold in weather like this? Old people like you . . . not me."

"Are you hungry?" I asked as I caressed her thigh.

"Not yet." Then she snapped out of her malaise and gave me a kiss. "I missed you," she said.

The maddening ring of her mobile went off, and she grabbed it before I could reach it, afraid that I'd smash it, since I'd done so once before. She stood up and answered in a whisper.

I couldn't make out a word of what she was saying, nor could I read her lips because she'd turned her back to me. She finished her call quickly and turned the phone off. I was always telling her to turn it off before she came over, but it was a waste of breath. Before I could start giving the speech she was tired of hearing, she attacked my ears with kisses and drenched them in whispers. "He's a real important source. It's great that he called me. This is going to be a knockout scoop."

I slapped her butt and said, "Here's your knockout." That annoyed her so she started punching my chest playfully, babbling about how I didn't trust her and how stupid she was to have given me everything hoping it'd bring us closer, but I was just like any other man: as soon as his lover spreads her legs for him, he begins to wonder if she's spreading them for everyone else. She got up to look for her clothes, pretending to be angry and threatening to leave. My desire for her was inextinguishable so I was ready to put up with everything I hated in order to have her. Like the peasant proverb that goes, "Before you make love, you'll give her an acre, but after you've had her, you pray someone'll take her." I grabbed the blouse out of her hand and pulled the trousers off one of her legs. I

was pleading with her as I dragged her to the bedroom. As I laid her down on the bed, I ignored the looks from her glazed, sated eyes, the same look I'd see in her after we had sex. Her body reeked strongly of men, but I ignored even the smell of semen on her breath. Lust propelled me and I didn't stop until it was satisfied.

3

IT WAS A BOISTEROUS PARTY like all the rest. The foreign band was playing like a bunch of madmen and the noise from the speakers was shaking the chairs and the floor. I went out to the balcony and leaned against the wooden door. I stood there smoking, looking out over the beautiful Cairo night. The balcony stretched the length of the two rooms that the partygoers were congregated in and each opened out onto it. I wasn't the only one out on the balcony; other guests were hanging out in corners smoking pot or hash, and couples stood in the dark, one hand on their drinks, the other on each other's bodies. The clamor reverberated through the otherwise serene and lovely neighborhood, even though we were up on the fourteenth floor. The building's tenants were mostly students at the international private universities in the city—most of the foreign students were studying at the American University in Cairo—or else they were consultants or employees of the multinational firms operating in Egypt. The building was extremely well guarded, almost as if it were being kept a secret. Watch out if you've had a plate implanted for a broken bone, or if you've got a silver tooth, or if you're a woman, if you're using an IUD for birth control because the metal detector that's like a second narrower entrance to the building is certain to erupt in an excruciating whistle. You might not even get through without a certificate of quarantine from NAMRU.

I was leaning against the door of the balcony unable to look at the ground below. When I turned my head, I could see Marcia writhing, dancing, absorbed in the music. I could tell she was drunk. She was staring at me with an empty look, warning me against sneaking out unannounced. I wouldn't have been able to dance with her if she'd asked. I was sick with boredom so I tried to keep entertained by checking out the faces of the people there: half of them I'd never seen before, but the other half I knew. Some were students of mine, or I'd met them through Marcia, and there were some Egyptians and foreigners whom I'd met at cultural events. None of my close friends had come. Bloody Essam talked me into coming here and then didn't show up himself. I hadn't seen my German friend, Awad, either. I saw Diana and Evelyn, but I pretended not to, and went to say hello to some losers and exchange idiotic conversation with an idiot. I was drinking steadily and steadily receiving stolen kiss after stolen kiss from the foreign girls I tutored. I was totally out of it by then.

Exhaustion drove me to the study where I found Julia the maid. Clearly drunk at this point, I kicked her out like a tyrant. My mind was wrestling with gelatinous visions, my intestines were near bursting, and I had an awful headache. When I woke up in the morning, I was in Marcia's room and my elbows and feet were painfully sore. Marcia was sleeping at my feet, her legs spread, and her hair looking like tufts of felt. I slowly moved my feet from above her and kissed the part of her hair; my lips felt wet. A plan was just now beginning to crystallize in my mind. I was going to get in the shower and get out of there as soon as possible; no Nescafé, no coffee, no chitchat with Marcia. But as soon as I'd finished my shower and went back into the room to grab my keys from the bedside table, I saw a note written in English under my keys: it said something to the effect of "Wait for me. Don't leave before I wake up. Marcia." Those few lines made me scramble to get dressed so that I could get out of there immediately, hopefully before the maid woke up. I

tripped over empty plastic bottles and beer cans causing a racket I couldn't muffle, but, fortunately, no one woke up.

Essam wasn't at home when I went to his apartment-cum-studio. I thought about going home, but it felt unwelcoming so I didn't. I sat in a café nearby and when I thought about Marcia, I got scared. I'd started this cat-and-mouse game with her a little while ago. I was part of her life, but it wasn't like I was her shadow. I came and went as I pleased, but she was a foreigner and our genetic make-ups were totally different. She might've got fed up with the game and grown used to me not being there. Someone else would just fill my place, and I'd met plenty who would've been happy to do so. I decided that I'd take my search for Karim seriously and make some time for the project even if it meant taking a break from teaching or not accepting any new students. If I couldn't find Karim, no matter what the reason, Marcia would probably take that to mean that I'd been stringing her along, especially since it wouldn't be the first time I'd let her down. And if—God forbid—Marcia and I did have a falling out, well then that would've made it impossible for me to maintain those beneficial relationships with foreigners who want to learn Arabic or even with the Arabs who want to live like foreigners.

I went back downtown and hung out in coffeehouses and on the street. I started with the spots I knew Karim frequented. I saw a bunch of kids just like him and I went up to them, and gave them money, and some of them told me that Karim had been carted off to the reformatory. I relaxed a little now that I had some solid information and I was sure he'd be back before long. Karim wouldn't be able to handle it and the teachers and administrators wouldn't be able to tolerate his mischief. My guess was that it would all be over in a few weeks at most; I could convince Marcia to wait patiently until he got out. Even though I'd met a lot of Karim's pals—older ones, younger ones, and ones his age—none of them seemed as reliable as he did. They were all—without exception—blind to any consequences.

Karim was unique because he came from a solid background: a working class family. His father was a butcher in the Ezbet al-Nakhl neighborhood. He'd married several times and had a reputation as a bit of a stud. Every one of his wives, the ones he was still married to and the ones he'd divorced, bore him children; Karim was one of sixteen. Like most of his brothers and sisters, he'd never gone to school, but unlike them he hadn't learned a trade either. He'd been mistreated and abused, physically and sexually, from a young age, so he decided—as he told me many times—simply to let the wind blow him away. By that he meant that he'd be under nobody's control, not other people, or the government, or his family. He formed a gang of young kids in his neighborhood and they stole, kidnapped, and vandalized their way through Ezbet al-Nakhl. His father and brothers had beaten him till he'd had enough, so he ran away to downtown where he learned how to get high off glue and rose through the ranks of a big gang of kids who hung out around there, begging and selling tissues.

He'd been arrested more than once and dragged back home where they tried to discipline him with beatings and by burning him on the chest and back with a hot iron, but huffing had made his head more stubborn than rock. It was his intelligence that made it possible for him to lead kids older, bigger, and stronger than he was. He would stagger them out among the alleys and streets after the dawn prayer and then divide up the earnings with them after sunset as they lay down to sleep behind the unending rows of parked cars.

I met him at the Zahrat al-Bustan coffeehouse a year ago or more. He came up to me, covering his torso, with his right hand outstretched, and asked for half a pound so he could buy some food. I looked at him and I could see he was holding something I couldn't make out in his other hand under his tattered jacket. As I was reaching for my wallet, his hand moved a little, revealing the bottle of glue in the palm of his hidden hand. I pointed to it and put my wallet away, telling him I

wouldn't give him any money. In fact, I scolded him for huffing and warned him about the danger of it. He smiled innocently, showing his yellowed, decaying teeth and listened closely to everything I said. Then he swore to me that he hadn't eaten a thing all day and I could sense he was telling the truth, so I caved and gave him what he'd asked for. He started avoiding our familiar faces after that even though we were regulars at that coffeehouse. One time, when I offered to buy him a strawberry juice, he just looked at me incredulously, and when he eventually did sit down, smiling, I tried to peek up the sleeve of his jacket. He noticed what I was doing so he brought out the bottle of glue, which had a little palm twig resting inside, and showed it off to us. I asked him what the stick was for, so he stirred the glue up and explained. We became friendly acquaintances after that.

Originally, I was interested in them as a recent phenomenon spreading through downtown Cairo. There was a striking number of these glue huffers, or "street kids" as intellectuals and TV presenters liked to call them, but what really stoked my interest were two events that I saw with my own eyes, and though they were fleeting, they were unforgettable.

The first incident happened around noon on some holiday, those days when downtown Cairo is once again like the downtown of the 1930s that we read about. Everyone had gone to the parks, or the movies, or were sprawled in front of the TV. Downtown was abandoned to calm and silence. I was just one of a handful walking down its streets that day, a hash cigarette in my hand, smoking it with relish, enjoying the quiet and the cracking echoes of children's distant fireworks. I ignored the cops who greet you with a "Good health in the New Year!" hoping for some holiday charity. There were no other pedestrians out to notice the smell of my hash, no shop owners to give me dirty looks.

When I saw a body lying in a heap against the curb up ahead, I stopped in my tracks and peered at it: a boy of about

seventeen, dressed in rags. The mud and dirt had done such a number on him that he looked like a miner or someone who made a living carting both coal and garbage. He was alive, lying there smoking the butt of a cigarette. A couple coming from the opposite direction were about the same distance away from the boy as I was. A pretty, giddy girl in a short skirt and a tight blouse, which crept up revealing her abdomen, was walking arm in arm with her boyfriend on a path that would lead them past the body on the ground. They got to it before I did, but they didn't take any notice of it. I didn't know what made the boyfriend look down at the ground as they passed the boy, nor did I know why he immediately turned back and started kicking him all over his body: in the stomach, the face, the arms, the legs, and all the while the boy didn't even defend himself. Nor did I know why the girl joined in, screeching at first, then kicking along with her boyfriend, and then trying, unsuccessfully, to drag him away. I ran over quickly and grabbed the boyfriend from behind to stop him from hitting the tattered pile that was bleeding on the pavement. He struggled against me and slipped out of my grasp. He stared at me in rage as he pointed to the boy, "Do you see what he's doing?"

At that point, I looked down at the rag splayed on the ground. I almost couldn't make him out against the background of the cement sidewalk. He was leaning forward like a puffed-up rooster getting ready to fight, but in the face of the boyfriend's wild-eyed insistence, I pulled the boy upright; he was masturbating, apparently indifferent to his bleeding wounds. He wasn't worried about us or what we might do to him, his red eyes wide open. And as we dragged him along the ground like a dead dog, he didn't struggle or resist. He seemed to enjoy us moving him. The girl was beside us crying and covering her face with her hands so she wouldn't have to watch. There was a coarse rope tied around the boy's wrist and I pointed it out to the boyfriend. I lifted the rope and saw that the boy's wrist was bleeding. It was only about twenty

centimeters long; he'd probably cut it and run away from the detective who'd been marching him back to the police station. I told the boyfriend why the boy's wrist was tied. I'd seen it a lot: a group of three or four boys bound like this together, being led like sheep to the police station by a cocky detective. The boyfriend realized there was no point in taking the kid to the closest police station, or the juvenile hall, or even the gallows. So we let go of him and he fell over onto the ground. The weeping girl pressed her head against her boyfriend's shoulder and they walked along slowly, in the opposite direction as I did.

Marcia had listened in complete silence and chain-smoked two cigarettes as I told her what I'd seen. My story made her laugh joyous laughter, but she never explained to me what it was she found so funny.

The second incident happened in Tahrir Square, the biggest and most famous of all the squares in Cairo. It was a cold winter night so I lengthened my stride in hopes of getting home quickly. There was no chance of rescue by cab because the way home was against traffic on a one-way street. It was then that I noticed them from afar, shoving one another. There were three boys chasing another boy their age, pushing him to the ground. They were around ten years old. They started hitting the boy and ended up piling on top of him as he screamed loudly. I thought they were trying to rape him and I was shocked by their audacity. I ran over to them. There was no one out on that cold night, not even any policemen. The boy was still shouting as one of his assailants sat on his lower half and restrained his legs while another, seated on his upper half, held down his chest and one arm. The boy was flailing his free arm up and down until the third boy grabbed it. The third boy held a wet cotton rag in his hand and a bottle lay beside them. At first glance, it occurred to me that they were trying to force him to huff. It was when I'd finally reached them that I was surprised to find the third attacker frantically trying to wipe a tattoo off the forearm of the boy who was lying on the ground,

crying out in pain. I started kicking them and pulling them off of him. The boy's arm was bleeding so I tried to cover his wound, while the other boys stood around me, staring in anger. I roared at them, "What the hell are you doing?"

The tallest one replied as he backed away, "We're wiping the cross off his hand 'cause he's a Christian."

I asked them if they were Muslims. When they nodded, I let go of the boy's arm and ran after them. I wasn't able to catch them before they got to the other side of the square. They were too far away. They started hurling rocks, which they got from God knows where, and though I had no problem dodging the rocks, I couldn't stop their taunts: "Dirty Christian!"

What was weird, and surprising, was that I never told Marcia that story, despite the fact that we'd been together a long time, and I usually just told stories to tell stories. I'd told stories that were more pointless. Yet, despite my love for her and our strong connection, or whatever other term described our relationship, I'd never told her; even after we'd begun working together on a project about these kids, I hadn't even used that as a pretext to tell her.

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