

Here Is A Body

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A short dedication: To AS, and every AS

A long dedication: To that free heart, Alaa el-Dib,
rest in peace

“When it was midnight we went to sleep, and then we woke
up in great distress.”

1

The Abduction

THEY CAME AT FOUR O'CLOCK in the morning and I was too sleepy to get out of the way in time. They trampled on the big trash bin and planted their heavy boots on the mass of bodies. My hand was crushed under someone's boot, along with Emad's arm. I gasped silently. Then someone started lifting my leg, which was stuck under Youssef's stomach, and then my body too. I clung on to Youssef's clothes, but the hand lifting me was much too strong for me. I suddenly found my head swinging through the air. I stiffened my neck to try to control it, but it was no use. I couldn't make out where the voice giving orders was coming from but it was definitely from above.

"Get up, you filthy bastard. Get up, you piece of shit. Get up, get up," it said.

As he pulled me, my head trailed through piles of trash. I started waving my arms and trying to grab hold of anything, but nothing I touched held firm. Whenever I gripped onto anything it fell apart in my hands. I picked up tissues and dirty diapers from the pile we had sifted through the previous morning, pages from school children's exercise books and the books we had arranged on the floor to sleep on top of. I got scratched by empty tin cans and found sticky substances all over my fingers. As I was dragged along the floor I grabbed bits of chicken carcasses I had seen the poultry man throw away a few hours earlier. I panicked when my body left the ground and I started writhing in the air. I automatically

clenched my teeth and bit my tongue in anger. Usually when I go to sleep I try to stay half awake in order to be on guard for moments such as this, but this time I couldn't escape. I could feel the ground shaking beneath me and hear old bits of wood creaking, bones crunching, and bags rustling, but it was too late when I came to my senses. I opened my eyes only when I caught a good whiff of the rotten smell from the stuff on the wet ground, stirred up and turned over by people's feet.

I could hear Youssef and Emad's screams, stifled and hoarse, and I realized we were moving in the same direction. My head, hanging loose, banged against someone's bony knee and kept swinging back against it with every step taken by the titan carrying me, but unlike my friends I didn't utter a single sound, not even a cry to show I was there. I just tried to draw some air into my lungs so that I wouldn't die. I felt very dry inside and I wanted to throw up. Something was hitting me violently in the chest. All my weight seemed to be concentrated in my brain, which felt hot and squeezed so tight it was about to explode. My tears fell in the wrong direction, running over my forehead instead of down my nose and cheeks. I felt certain that all these things were signs that the end of the world had come, and I wished I could lose consciousness and not know what was happening until the moment of reckoning came.

It was pitch dark and the titans who were carrying us didn't seem to need any light. There were no lamps or torches or even a beam of light from a streetlamp. I heard what sounded like a hand hitting hard against something hollow, and then a short burst of cursing, which I made out to be from Emad. Then there was another bang, but no one's voice this time. Youssef didn't cry out in response to the sound and I kept silent too. I was shaking violently, in anxious anticipation for the next bang. A long time passed with no more sounds and eventually I wished they would hit Emad again so that he would make some noise to reassure

me, but the blows stopped and I was left waiting in alarm. I longed for Youssef to shout out again, but he didn't. In vain I listened for the sound of my friends breathing, but I couldn't hear anything. A sudden screeching pierced my icy skin and the hand gripping my foot threw me sideways and slapped me against a wall, causing a loud booming noise, then an invisible door closed and I lost consciousness.

A rotten smell like garbage surrounded me on all sides. My mouth was pressed against a floor that was level but rough, unlike the floor I had been used to sleeping on every night. My saliva was forming a small puddle under my face. I tried to swallow it, but I couldn't close my lips. I realized I was gagged and the gag was stopping me from closing my mouth or speaking. I was almost paralyzed too: my arms and legs couldn't move and none of my muscles were receiving the signals my brain wanted to send them. Around us, it was still pitch black. I couldn't work out clearly if my eyes were open or if I had a blindfold on. I tried to open my eyes but I couldn't tell if they responded. It made no difference and the darkness didn't change. My whole body was shaking, even my imagination. It slowly dawned on me that I was in the trunk of a car and, judging by the loud noise it made, it seemed like a big one. I felt like an extension of its motor as it roared and shook. My body suddenly bounced up and down several times, then finally came to rest and settled on the floor of the trunk like a stone. My mind went blank. My ear hurt so much I thought it had been torn off when I landed.

"Wake up, you jerk," someone said. "Wake up, you donkey. Pull yourself together and be careful. There's still an hour to go before we arrive."

It was the voice of the man who had carried me. So I wasn't asleep or having a nightmare. I was in the real world and I would have to go through another hour of this torment, judging by what he said. Maybe there were other

people in the vehicle, gagged like me and terrified. Youssef and Emad might be an arm's length away without me knowing. I tried to crawl on my side or on my stomach in hope of making contact with anybody, but the voice pinned me to where I was.

“Hold it, you rat. Hold it, you piece of trash. Hold it or you’ll end up as minced meat under the wheels,” it said.

A shiver ran down my spine. I was soaked in sweat and piss and snot and tears.

I didn't know how to pass the hour I knew was coming. Should I count the minutes off? I'm not good at counting, although I'm old enough. I may be fourteen years old or a little more. I remember the shapes of the numbers but sometimes I get them confused. If I just imagined the numbers a few times, would the hour pass and would I be free of this man who had tied me up in a tight bundle?

My counting soon began to slow down, interrupted by a frightening thought. Maybe I was going to my demise, to the place where people like me and Youssef and Emad disappear. Maybe it would be better to fall asleep here in this vehicle, bound and gagged, better than going on to the unknown place where they were taking me.

The engine stopped and the vehicle ceased to shake, but I still had severe pains in my ear and my head. I felt that my hands, which were tied up, were throbbing separately from my heart. The door opened and I could see light through the cloth that covered my eyes, so I turned my face away. The pain increased then disappeared all at once when I heard heavy footsteps nearby and smelled a familiar smell. I was lifted up into the air again but this time I remained upright, with my head at the top. The titan was holding me by the back of my collar and the seat of my pants and had moved on to a place where the air felt different. Finally I heard voices and a mixture of stifled throaty noises. I couldn't work out who was making them, but I was certain that my friends were there.



They threw us to the ground one after another. We curled up next to each other and didn't move. This time it was a tiled surface, hard and firm. I could hear the sound of each new body landing as they threw them on the floor. It was reassuring to know I was not alone and that there were plenty of us. Someone came around taking the blindfolds off our eyes and I saw that the titans had herded us into a large room that contained only a large table. I looked around and saw blotchy walls with the whitewash falling off. But pale lines of sky appeared between small bars at the top. They left us alone in the middle of the room, surrounded by walls at a distance. Now we could see, but our hands were still tied behind our backs, our feet were shackled, and our mouths were gagged. The only way we could communicate was by exchanging scared looks. I stared into the faces one by one. I couldn't find my two friends among the kids who were there. I would have cried if I hadn't thought of Emad making fun of me when he turned up, and he was bound to turn up. Time passed and we sat there in deep distress. We were totally powerless in a way that maybe none of us had experienced before. Some of us tried to sit up straight and others wanted to lean against the walls, but these simple actions seemed impossible at the time, though under ordinary circumstances it would never have occurred to us that we might be unable to perform them. Some of the children tried to speak, but the drawling voices, coming from gagged mouths and distorted like the meowing of cats in heat, amplified my fear and my sense of helplessness. I recognized some of the boys who were with me in the room. Most of them hung out in the same area as Youssef, Emad, and me. There were also some kids I hadn't seen before, though they looked very much like us three. There was no difference at all between the boys trapped in this room and there was nothing special about me compared to them. I didn't understand why we were all there.

Two of the titans arrived when the sun was high enough to come in through the roof openings, strong and scorching. Most of us had been wailing and howling, which made the situation worse. My tears were mixed up with the snot from my nose and I had taken to swallowing the acrid mixture so that I wouldn't look so disgusting to the others. I thought it was for the best that the titans had arrived, although the possible consequences were uncertain. It was better than waiting. As my mother always says, "Either disaster strikes or you wait for it to strike." Without glancing at each other, the two men gave us a hard look, unthinking and unquestioning, as if our presence in the room were an accepted fact and they had organized everything and knew everything, as if our fate had been decided in advance and there was nothing to discuss or negotiate. I didn't notice the bundle of newspapers that one of them was carrying until he referred to them.

"These newspapers are about you," he said sharply. "You may not have a chance to find out everything that's in them, but I'll fill you in now on what's important." He pulled out a page from a newspaper and spread it out in front of us. He put his finger on a picture of a man, surrounded by lots of words. I could see that the man in the picture was bald with glasses and shiny cheeks. I looked at the picture as the titan continued.

"This is an important man," he said. "He creates a stir wherever he goes. He's well-connected and knows important people. And he loathes you with a loathing that knows no bounds. You're insects as far as he's concerned, insects that pollute and defile the country. There isn't a pleasant place in the country that has escaped you. You smell disgusting. Vermin feed on your bodies and lay their eggs on you and inside you. This man knows that you thieve, take pills, sleep with each other in trash cans, and so on. He knows you well and everything he says about you is true. The man spoke to the ruler himself when he met him at the last celebration. He

went up to him as he was cutting the ribbon, whispered in his ear, and asked for a private meeting about something important. Aware of the man's merit, the ruler didn't blow him off completely. He asked the general to stand in for him because he himself was short of time. He asked the general to meet the man as soon as possible and handle his request. And then, without hesitation, the man headed for the general's office the very next day and showed him documents about you, and then suggested an all-out hunting campaign that would put an end to your disgusting existence. The man persuaded the general that you had to be kept off the streets, so we've hunted you down as a first step."

The titan scowled and looked serious. He left the room and the other man followed him. They closed the door and we heard them putting a padlock on the chain. Our hearts skipped a beat as we tried to work out what they were going to do with us next. If they had wanted, they could have put us in jail right away or moved us to reformatories, but they hadn't done that. Maybe they were going to burn us to death, asphyxiate us with gas grenades, or hold us here until we died of hunger and thirst. The sun grew fiercer and turned the room into an oven like the one at the local bakery on the corner of our trash dump. I felt as if I were melting into the floor. On top of my snot and my tears, I now had big drops of sweat to contend with. My clothes clung to my skin, producing a burning sensation and irresistible itching.

We kept our eyes wide open, unable to relax for a single moment. We stared at each other for a while, then each of us chose a spot on which to focus, as if impervious to what was going on around us. Then we retreated into ourselves, whimpering incessantly. It was terrifying. The pangs of hunger in my stomach and brain reminded me that I was still alive and that I might soon lose even that advantage. I don't know how many hours passed until finally the door opened again. This time one of the titans came in and demanded in a loud voice

that we pay attention, stop sobbing, and stop trying to take cover by the wall, which a small number of kids had done as soon as we arrived, in the belief they could keep out of harm's way that way. In reality, most of us no longer had the strength to try anything, even to cry, so we submitted completely to our fate.

“You know we’ve been studying your problem for years,” said the man. “As soon as he took office the ruler set up a council of advisers to look into it, and this council has endeavored to work out integrated strategies and has allocated a large budget to study the problem. Remember Dr. Abdel-Samie Mukhtar, whose picture you saw yesterday? He’s one of the country’s greatest scholars and he’s done extensive research and has numerous students. After much thought and a painstaking search for a solution, he suggested we consider you to be non-existent, that we eliminate you completely, that we remove your names from the official records, if your names are even there, and that we treat you in the same way we treat stray dogs—and the only solution for them is to kill them. There would be nothing easier than poisoning you or shooting you and having your bodies removed with the piles of garbage to be buried or burned. Dr. Mukhtar worked with us for many years and served us faithfully. He likes traditional solutions that have proved effective in practice. This proposal of his won widespread approval from the members of the council, because the country cannot afford to spend money feeding, educating, and housing you without you doing anything in return.”

The man snarled and scowled as he continued: “The country is poor and many people are out of work. It cannot afford the extra costs for which you are responsible, but you do not appreciate the crisis. We have received thousands of complaints. One citizen complained that you harass his children daily on their way to school and university. Another complains that you vandalize his car. He sees your dirty fingermarks on

the car windows every morning and from his balcony he has watched you jumping on it in the early hours. People are fed up with seeing you on the sidewalks, at the metro stations or bus stops, or outside the restaurants where they eat and the supermarkets where they do their shopping. What are these places to you? They can't stand the senseless, inhuman way you pester them. They are so fed up with you begging for money and food that they can't stand looking at the things they buy, because they feel you are looking at them enviously. You have started to ruin their shopping expeditions and their enjoyment of life wherever they go.

“The consultants designed a survey and the results, published on our website, showed support for the idea of exterminating you. You are of course aware that we do not take decisions without consulting citizens. We have received an endless stream of comments: a woman in one high-class neighborhood favors immediate execution and claims she will not feel safe as long as hordes of kids are roaming the streets night and day with impunity. She is threatening to abandon her house and move to another neighborhood if we don't deal with you. A doctor says you are carrying serious contagious diseases that may spread to innocent citizens. He favors getting rid of you and disinfecting the street corners where you have been congregating. He has offered to share his knowledge and help with the campaign. Sheikh Abdel-Gabbar, the prestigious sheikh of whom you must have heard, issued a fatwa some weeks ago saying that in your case the relevant principle under Islamic law is that averting harm should take precedence over serving the public interest. Do you understand what that means? Addressing the harm that you cause is more important than anything else, more important than any benefit that might be expected from you in the future. There can be no question of patiently tolerating the grave offenses that you commit. Sheikh Abdel-Gabbar was outraged at the horrific nature of your offenses: you were harassing women, terrorizing people,

vandalizing public property, and inflicting harm on our close-knit society and its established traditions—our quiet, peaceful community, which has a long history and is civilized and cannot accept your vulgar and impudent behavior. What a disgrace! Anyway, people trust the sheikh and do his bidding. He doesn't make ill-informed or gratuitous rulings. He tells the truth and you have only yourselves to blame, and those who follow his rulings are blameless. The government has announced an official decision that has implications for you. Its program this year, based on the ruler's directives, is clear on two points: we need to tackle your widespread presence in the city firmly and without clemency, and we need to eradicate the endemic diseases that have been damaging people's livers. You can see that if we solve the first problem, the second will automatically diminish, because you are one of the main sources of contagion."

The titan stopped talking and started to examine our faces, which looked stunned and had turned white. We looked like we had joined the ranks of the dead before they had even carried out their death sentences on us. At that moment the man's narrow eyes could have harvested our souls just by staring at us a while. Our wide eyes bulged in anticipation of our imminent demise. They had clearly gathered us together to spare themselves the trouble of killing us in batches, which would take too long. They were going to exterminate us right here and bury our bodies in one mass grave. No one would ask after us and not a soul would ever know what had happened. Our lives, everything that had happened to us, would be forgotten. We would cease to exist. The idea frightened me more than before, and Youssef's old musings on the subject didn't help me make light of it. I wasn't frightened of death in itself. I could almost hear Youssef describing it as a long sleep, a perpetual dream. I wasn't afraid of death, but I was frightened of what would happen before I got there. It was only then that I lost my sense of hunger and thirst and no longer had

any desire to piss or shit. I think I had already pissed and shat myself anyway, and I wasn't the only one. The next morning the titan pushed the door hard to open it. Some of us fainted while others shuddered in expectation of imminent death. The room smelled like a sewer. There was shit everywhere. We couldn't make jokes about it because we still had gags covering our mouths. There was a slightly playful twinkle in the titan's eyes, but I could hardly see him because my vision was clouded and he was mostly a blur. He folded his arms on his chest and started shouting roughly. He told us we had just escaped a death sentence. Escaped? Had I lost consciousness and slipped into a limbo world of pleasant dreams? Had they in fact killed us already? Would I have to start a new life alone or was I hallucinating about the prelude to my own death?

I turned my head right and left and started shaking it violently and squirming in my place. I was wide awake and around me everyone was wide awake too, though so surprised that their eyes were almost popping out of their heads. So what we had heard was real! But since we were still tied up, we had no way to express the crazy joy we felt or our feelings of deep gratitude toward the titan. We had survived, we had survived! Suddenly one boy, unable to believe the news, started jumping up and down, and the others followed him. People shouted out things I didn't understand, but they were ecstatic and wildly happy. I didn't jump up and down like them. I was so tired I couldn't move. I felt like I'd been running and jumping ever since they'd tied us up. I noticed another kid who, like me, hadn't budged. I noticed the room looked like the tray on which my mother used to spread rice to clean out bits of grit from among the grains. The other kid and I were like two grains of rice stuck to the tray among a mass of moving grains. One of the kids, overcome by the relief of surviving, crawled along the ground and rubbed his cheek against one of the titan's massive shoes. The titan looked at him for a moment, then bent down and pulled him

toward him with one hand. He undid the strap on the boy's wrist and let it fall to the ground.

"Take the gag off your mouth and untie your feet, you 'body.' Use your hands. Take the gags off the others too, and none of you 'bodies' are to stand up until I tell you to."

The boy moved around from one boy to another, obediently shuffling on his knees. When my turn came and my hands were free, I grabbed the cloth that had covered my mouth. It was soaking wet. It was some minutes before we were all free, but no one dared to move. Our eyes were pinned on the titan, who put a wireless device up to his mouth, and then our necks swung round toward the door when he ordered that bottles of water be brought. We were desperate for a single drop.

"Look here, you bodies. Look at me, not at anything else, or else I'll gag you again and tie up your hands and feet. Look at me and listen carefully."

We sat up straight at the sound of his loud voice.

He stared at us pointedly for some moments and then began to explain, "We've reviewed the research that Dr. Abdel-Samie Mukhtar submitted and yesterday evening we met with the council of advisers and scholars. We found a loophole that saves you from certain death. Credit for that goes to General Ismail, the officer in charge of the camp, who decided against moving on to the next and final step before we have exhausted all possible ways of rehabilitating you. The general shared his insights with us and asked us to draft a detailed memorandum that set out what he had explained, and then to put it into effect. In short, Dr. Mukhtar had overlooked certain important aspects, which made his conclusions inaccurate and unreliable. It's true that he met some of you and asked questions and made inquiries and wrote papers that filled dozens of shelves, but he hasn't dealt with you as we have done and he didn't know you as we have known you over the past few years. On top of that, he doesn't understand the aspects that we're interested in. Although he has plenty of

information, it still has a limited perspective and is confined to his area of expertise. Dr. Mukhtar ignored the distinctive features you've acquired as a result of the long time you've spent on the streets. He took no account of the natural qualities that you possess and was not aware of their value. Only we understood that. It's not the right time to explain more. Suffice it to say that you are in a better position than you or he imagined. He seems to have overreached because of the narrow scope of his theories, which made him overlook the public interest. He studied your circumstances in isolation from other problems, but he accepted the outcome when we debated your case yesterday, and today the general endorsed the decision and sent a copy of it to the ruler, and it will be broadcast on all the media. You are truly lucky. From now on you won't be sleeping in ruins. We will give you shelter in the camp and we will look after your scrawny bodies and you won't have much need for those rotten heads that you carry on your shoulders. You'll be valued and you'll be strong, smart, upright citizens as good as any others. Stand on your feet. Form a line with your colleagues and none of you try to stretch or brush the dirt off yourselves. You'll go to the cleansing unit imminently and then you'll be fed."

We reached the bathroom escorted by a titan, who stood by the open door. We went inside in groups and water came pouring out of powerful hoses. He told us to pick up the hoses and wash each other down. He said we didn't need to take off our clothes, which were so torn that they fell apart easily from the pressure of the water. We ended up almost naked, with most of us only in our underpants. Dripping wet, we followed the titan like trees with drops of rain running off them, and then he made us stand in a line. He gave us a few towels that we passed around, as well as identical clothing and rubber shoes. We took them gratefully. Our desire to acquire things had subsided. We didn't fight to get the best stuff the way we used to when desirable goods fell into our hands. We were still

very tired and content with whatever we were given as long as we were safe. We were all about the same size, so we were ready within minutes.

The titan led us to a place where there were rows of metal tables and handed us warm meals in cartons. It was like a miracle had taken place in front of me, right out of the blue. I had never in my life held a Kentucky Fried Chicken box that was unopened and untouched. It contained a whole chicken thigh, a bread roll that no one else had already bitten, and some French fries. I thought about Youssef and Emad and felt sad. If they had been with me, we would have made a party of it and shared the box between us. Two days had passed and I still didn't know where they were. I lost my appetite for a moment, but I soon got over it. They must have gone off in another vehicle and been dumped in another room. Maybe they were eating now, like me. The food distracted me from thinking and I started stuffing my face with the fries and chicken. I left the bread to the end. I didn't look up from the box till I had finished. I didn't know when they would bring us food again. I looked around and saw that one boy was pushing his carton away toward someone else, rejecting the food. It was the same boy who had sat still with me when the others jumped up and cheered. I regretted I had been so distracted. If I had been sitting next to him, I would have gotten more to eat.

At night I had horrible dreams. In one of them they killed three of us. I heard voices and several times I woke up shaking in my bed at the end of the dormitory. It wasn't a bed like the one in my mother's house. It didn't have any legs or planks of wood, but it was certainly different from the garbage dump and it didn't smell. There was a mattress, a pillow, and a cover for each child, and it was a private space on which the others could not encroach. We weren't in a police station and I don't think it was a prison either because there weren't any jailers. My mind was out of action all night long. Luckily I was right

next to the wall, so I pressed up against it, but it was no use. If Youssef and Emad had been beside me, I probably would have slept better than I had for ages.

They counted us in the morning. We had to file out through the dormitory door one after another to the sound of the titan's booming voice. He stood outside the door holding a small piece of paper that I guessed was a list of our names: they know everything here. The dormitory emptied out completely and the titan was still by the door. Then he stepped back inside to check.

He soon returned and said, "One of you is missing. You two, count how many of you there are. . . . Or rather don't bother, because you're useless. You can't count, of course. You're still young."

We began to murmur fearfully. One of us wasn't there. How had that happened? We could only move around when the titan was there, when we were within his sight. I looked around at the boys and my heart skipped a beat when I realized who had disappeared. It was the boy who, like me, hadn't jumped up and down when we learned we weren't going to die—the same boy who had refused to eat his food the day before. Maybe he'd noticed that they hadn't locked the door on us that night or put a padlock and chain on it, as they had the previous night. He'd given us the slip and caught them unawares. Really, he hadn't needed to give us the skip. After the horrors we had been through most of us had slept like logs. I certainly hadn't seen or heard him in the nightmares that had tormented me. Even if I had heard any noise, I would have been too frightened to move. I wasn't going to risk dying now.

When it was certain that the boy was gone, we were so afraid we didn't dare speak. Spontaneously we started using sign language, waving our arms and heads behind the titan's back so that he wouldn't know we were communicating. The titan didn't throw much light on the boy's fate: he said the

boy was bound to turn up, and didn't add another word. I had expected him to get angry and call the other titans to tie us up again. But none of that happened. I couldn't understand how the boy had dared to leave. Where did he think he was going? I was sure they would catch him straight away. His escape added to my anxiety. It was a strange feeling that came over me—a feeling that we were close companions. We had never exchanged a word and our eyes had met for only a fraction of a second, but we did both keep still when everyone else was jumping around to celebrate the news that we weren't going to be executed. That moment had created some bond between us, and in my mind I called him Rice Grain because of the idea I'd had at the time. He would have become my friend if there had been more time. I wondered how he would be punished if they found him.

We tucked into breakfast and all we could talk about was the boy who'd escaped. The titan didn't stop us talking, though he didn't leave the room. We started in whispers, and then the whispers grew louder as we got excited and in the end people were shouting, either attacking or defending the boy.

"The son of a bitch never thought about what he was doing. He didn't think about the fact that they saved us and they might change their minds because of him. He didn't care what might happen to us after he escaped. Anyway, he'll go back to the streets and die there."

"If that guy gets back on the streets, he'll soon get killed. People are on the lookout for us and someone might carry out the sheikh's fatwa."

"No, the boy must know a place to hide. Maybe he has a house he can go back to and lie low for a time."

"He's definitely braver than us. He's a free person who doesn't like to take orders."

"He's a traitor. He's been with us from the start and then he tricked us and ran off on his own."

“Would you have gone with him if he’d woken you up?”

The titan shouted to warn us that eating time was over. We had completely forgotten he was there.

We moved to another room where they put us in rows of wooden chairs like the ones they have in marquees for funerals or weddings. A titan called Allam stood in front of us like a statue in a public square, towering, his eyebrows knitted. His feet were slightly apart, fixed to the floor like lamp posts.

“I’m Head Allam. That’s what you call me. Head is the title I prefer, because I’m the boss here and you’ll obey me. All the staff in the camp are superior to you, so obey them too.”

He started talking in a loud, raucous voice. He gave up using the loudspeaker and left it dangling uselessly in his hand. The loudspeaker seemed to need the titan more than the other way around. I closed in on myself and stuck to my chair while he bellowed out the rules we would have to follow from then on. I withdrew deeper into myself as he spelled out, carefully and with relish, the penalties for disobedience. I repeated to myself word for word the things I had said at breakfast about the boy who’d escaped. I hadn’t said anything he could punish me for, had I? No, I had, but it was too late to do anything about it. I’m stupid and loose-tongued. Without knowing, I might have spoken in favor of what the boy had done. Had he been eavesdropping on us? Had he been watching us from the start and had he noticed that the boy and I had been too lazy to thank him properly two days earlier, and we hadn’t showed how happy we were, unlike the others? He probably noted every offense and he might put me at the top of his list: the list of deviant children. They would soon get rid of me and I wouldn’t be able to call on either Youssef or Emad to help me.

“None of you bodies are to sit up straight in your seats or open your traps at all. General Ismail has come from his office and will be here shortly. General Ismail is the head of the whole camp, the main head and the top leader of all the heads. The ants here can’t leave their nests without

his permission, and whenever one of you bodies breathes, the general knows how much air you've inhaled. You may not know it, but he's just taken on the highest office in the government for defending the whole county. Yesterday I told you what he had done for you: today he's set aside his other commitments and responsibilities and has come to address you in person to explain to you the situation you've ended up in and the future that awaits you."

This made me even more anxious and I started to shake uncontrollably. General Ismail must know about me too. In fact, he was better placed to know than anyone else. Yes, I had made a mistake and now I knew what a big mistake it was. I knew it was so big that I deserved to be punished for it. I liked what the boy had done and I'd thought of running away like him. But doesn't it count in my favor that I chose to be safe and cowered where I was? There was no way I could really have left. The general might call on me now and tell me to stand up. He might whip me with his belt or zap me with a Taser as a lesson to the other boys. I didn't really care about the boys, but I don't like anyone to punish me—in the street, at home, or anywhere. That's why I tore up my school books in my early years, because I wanted nothing to do with the school or the people there. I couldn't put up with it long enough to graduate from primary school like my brothers. I refused to stand with my face to the wall and my hands in the air. I've never hated anything as much as I hated the principal, the teachers, and the cramped classroom. They were all ridiculous. They thought they owned the children and had a proper understanding of the world, while none of them had any experience of living free like me. What a joke! Now I was back in another school, but the punishments would no doubt be more horrendous. There would be no escape from it and rebellion against it might cost me my life.

We all stood when General Ismail appeared. He made a gesture with his head and hands, and we all sat down. He

wasn't how I had imagined him. He was as short as some of us children, but he was fatter of course. He had thinning hair, a broad forehead, and sleepy eyes. His cheeks were red, rounded, and chubby like those rich people's kids that drink milk in the ads. He stood with his legs together, his hands clasped over his crotch as he scanned our faces, turning his head steadily in silence. I felt compelled to stay stock-still, terrified of what was to come. I thought of passing the time in some diversion, as I usually did when I faced danger, but I couldn't find anything around to divert me except for the general, so I looked at his camouflage fatigues and lost myself in the mixture of colors.

His voice seeped into the room, soft and low. He told us we were like his children, or that we really were his children. He said it with a smile, his eyes half closed, and the lump in my throat began to go away. I waited for his voice to shake the rafters when he scolded us for what we had done in the past, but nothing like that happened. He stayed calm and I stayed on alert.

He spoke at length. He spoke about the tragedies that befall children like us, sweep them away, and destroy their futures. He told some amusing stories, though he didn't pursue any of them to the end. I identified with him and listened attentively.

"You have many problems, I know," he said, "but, as you have seen, I also know the solutions. Everything will go well, inshallah. I promise you I'll do what I can as long as you promise to help me, and I hope that the rehabilitation program that I've worked out will succeed in helping you see your country as it should be seen, and that you'll come to understand the challenges and difficulties it faces, so that you'll find out how to deal with them and overcome them."

I realized that some time had passed and so far he hadn't singled me out with a glance that would expose my secret and destroy my fragile existence. Even so, I started fidgeting in my chair, unable to stay still. I leaned back, then rested my

elbows on my knees and splayed my toes inside my new shoes. Then I brought them together again suddenly as if I had been pricked by a thorn.

The general continued with a smile: “I tell you, you’re *our* kids. This country’s kids. You have to believe what I’m saying. I would never lie to you. I’m being honest with you, so that no one can do any harm to our country.”

I was instinctively drawn to his occasional smiles—small, vague smiles that appeared mid-speech. I didn’t understand what he meant by them. They puzzled and confused me so much that they added to my anxiety. Before the general spoke, I imagined myself getting up from my chair and running off, but when he started speaking I was surprised how calm he sounded, and when I got over my anxiety, his smile began to intrigue me. He was strange; he neither frightened me off nor made it possible for me to sit peacefully. Something about him unsettled me, although he showed no hatred toward us, unlike Dr. Abdel-Samie, and he wasn’t brutal like Head Allam.

At the end of his speech he said he trusted us and would protect us. Then he said we would never let him down as long as we cooperated with the other heads and obeyed them, observed the rules, and followed the plan they had drawn up.

“I’ll meet you often and follow your progress closely. For now, I thank you and leave you with Head Allam for a few minutes,” he said.

The hall fell silent for some seconds. At the time I wondered whether we were meant to clap or keep quiet. Silence seemed more likely, but Head Allam started clapping loudly, and we started clapping even louder than him. I was amazed how big his hands were. His fingers were fat and thick, too, and his forearm was the size of my thigh or bigger.

In few words Head Allam explained the rehabilitation program. Then he turned to face the wall and briefed us on what he called the “activities schedule.” He followed that up with a large map of the camp, showing the buildings we would

be using. His face was expressionless when he turned to us and his voice was monotonous. He spoke in a strangely emphatic way when he pronounced the name of each place and pointed it out on the map.: “This is the training area, this is the dining hall that you’ve already used, those are the bathrooms, and the big hall for lectures, seminars and cultural events, and likewise the room we’re in now. As for the small square you can see at the top of the map close to the camp perimeter, that’s the lockup for those who disobey orders.”

“No, no, don’t frighten them, Head Allam,” the general interjected. “Don’t worry, kids, and don’t take what he says seriously. Head Allam is rather strict. He likes complete obedience and commitment, but he has a big heart. Thank you very much, Head Allam. I’ve said enough now. I hope God grants you success and I wish you a useful stay here. You’ll be a pillar of strength for the country and one of its main lines of defense.”

I sat down when my turn came. They wrapped a white towel around my neck, almost strangling me, and I felt an urge to vomit. An old man with smooth hair picked up a pair of scissors and started cutting my hair without even combing it first. There was no way a comb could have untangled it anyway: even my fingers couldn’t have done it. The hair fell to the floor and covered it like coarse black grass that had just sprouted. I couldn’t see my face while I was having my hair cut, because I didn’t have a mirror in front of me. I knew what I used to look like from my reflection in shop windows and car windows. I had often played a trick on people in cars in order to get a good look at myself. I went up to them enthusiastically, holding a dirty rag in my outstretched hand as if about to clean their windscreen. They would look in the other direction and quickly wind up the window, maybe in disgust or horror at the way I looked. Some of them pressed their phones to their ears as if they were off in another world, while some pretended to

be lost in thought and that they hadn't seen me. In the meantime, I moved in and stared, not at them but at the distorted reflection of my face in the glass.

The barber soon finished my hair. My ears and the tip of my nose felt cold, like an animal that has lost its fur. I looked forward with pleasure to him applying some cologne, but he didn't and I thought I must have done something wrong. I stayed where I was, hoping he would forgive me. Surprised I was still waiting, he told me to leave. He had no reason to begrudge me the cologne. I hadn't moved when he was cutting my hair and I hadn't annoyed him in the way I used to annoy Sayed Halawa, the most popular barber near our garbage dump. Sayed's shop was well-known in the area, and we were also well-known there. I had often stopped outside the shop with Emad, staring at the customers passively having their scalps massaged. We used to stick our tongues out and play mind games with them. Sometimes we'd slip in through the door and watch them blocking their noses irritably because they expected us to stink. Once the barber shouted at us and flew into a rage when he saw us. When his shouting didn't deter us, he gave Emad some money so that we would leave his customers alone, but by doing so he created a bond with us, maybe unwittingly. We used to pass by his shop whenever we wanted some money, when the people in cars were ignoring us, for example, and we didn't have any other way to raise it. He had to pay a price to make us go away.

“Bend. Stretch. Jump. Press. Get down, boy! Get up, quickly! Your arms are like a girl's. There's no point making an effort with you. How did you sleep on the street on your own? I bet the other kids pushed you around. Push the weight forward! Push as if you were fighting off an infidel!”

Head Salem soon took us in hand. He set about dividing us into groups according to age, or rather height, fist size, and chest size. He pointed at me and I took off my undershirt. He

examined my body for a moment and then consigned me to the second group, the middle-height group, not the weaklings or the big guys. Some of the children in the camp limped in one leg or had old injuries: Head Salem put those kids in a separate group and didn't look at their chests or their fists.

I ran with my group until I was out of breath. I jumped twenty times to touch the sky, as he had ordered, and then I hung onto a pole stretched between two posts. I climbed a tree and jumped to the ground from the top. I picked up one of the other boys and carried him, and then we reversed roles. We repeated the exercises, and then the first group took our place and we went to do what they had been doing. Head Salem watched over us and bellowed in a voice that almost deafened us. In his notebook he wrote down things we couldn't see. I think he was measuring our strength and sometimes he would insult one of us or throw a stone at someone if he tried to avoid doing what he'd been told to do. All that mattered to me at the end of the day was to survive and still be standing on my wobbly legs, so that he wouldn't mark me down as a failure and a weakling. At the end he made us sit on the floor and he walked around shaking his head.

"Your bodies aren't tough enough. They should be hard like real men. You're no longer children, so don't expect us to feel sorry for you. None of you will be men until you can do what you have to do without complaining."

He paused, looked around at us and then roared: "Get up, you bodies, and run some more! We'll make men of you despite yourselves, as long as I'm in charge. Run to the dining hall and don't leave anything on your plates. Anyone who stops running before they arrive won't get a meal until tomorrow. And don't imagine you're ever out of my sight, however far you go!"

I was nodding off between one mouthful and the next. I came round several times to find my head bowed so low it almost fell onto the plate. The training exhausted me and I

could hardly walk to the dormitory. My whole body was in pain. The pain wouldn't go away and it didn't diminish with time. As soon as the bedding arrived, I threw myself down on it, a complete wreck. I felt bloated with all the food I had stuffed down my gullet without chewing it. My head slipped off the pillow and my eyelids drooped, but I didn't fall asleep. My mind was full of all the things that had happened since the morning. General Ismail's face constantly appeared, and the words of Head Allam and Head Salem echoed in my head like a recording.

They said we'd come to the camp to save our lives. They'd done us an invaluable favor and were going to give us an opportunity we would never have dreamed of. We'd learn new things, find out how things worked behind the scenes. People would treat us with respect. All we had to do was listen carefully, remember as much as possible, and do what was required—nothing more and nothing less.

They'd designed the program especially for us. They said it would take several months of intensive training, and we would apply what we learned carefully and faithfully. And then?

"Then we set you free, qualified for a better life." That's what they said.

"When you graduate from the camp, you'll still report to us. We won't abandon you. You'll get a regular salary and when you reach the age of majority you'll be given identity cards with an address and a profession. Most importantly, it will be a step up for you—you'll be respected in a way you never knew in your earlier life. From now on, no one will remind you that once you were street kids."

We were the children of General Ismail personally, children of the System. We would serve the country honorably and responsibly, like important, respectable people. We would defend the national interest and the security and stability of the country. There was nothing better than that. They were

really interested in us, but would they give us a choice? Would it be possible to walk away and go back to the street?

I dreamed of General Ismail. He looked like my father and I had the same feelings toward him: discomfort, disgust, and an urge to disobey his orders and break the rules he laid down. In the dream I punched him on his red cheek. He soon recovered and didn't punch me back. In fact, he invited me to punch him again and, when I told him he was a stupid idiot, he drew a sword and made a cut in my neck. The blood poured out and I woke up. I could still feel the pain. I started twisting and turning in bed and I couldn't get back to sleep. I stared at the ceiling a long time in the hope that my insomnia would wear off, but it didn't. I sat up and cursed the fact that I had woken up so early when all the other children were asleep. I was tired and drained and my limbs were sore. I felt like I'd been given a nasty beating and couldn't stand up. I looked around at the faces of the sleeping children. We were still as we had been the day before—one person short. The boy, Rice Grain as I called him, hadn't come back yet.

I fell asleep again at dawn and woke up late. I struggled to my feet to get dressed and looked around to find the others leaning against the walls. None of us were in good shape. Head Allam came in hurriedly and said we would be going to the lecture hall in an hour to meet an important guest. We had to eat breakfast quickly.

The Obedience Lecture

Sheikh Abdel-Gabbar arrived, massive and impressive in a cloak and caftan. His face was round and full of health and he had a salt-and-pepper beard. General Ismail welcomed him and introduced him to us warmly and hospitably. Then they sat down next to each other on the dais. Sheikh Abdel-Gabbar cleared his throat, said a prayer, and then "Peace be upon you" at the end of the prayer, as important sheikhs do. He then launched into his sermon, his voice bellowing through

the loudspeakers, as if he were preaching the sermon before Friday prayers.

“Copious praise be to God, that He has bestowed His grace and favor on you and sent you a heavenly miracle, the likes of which we have rarely seen in our time. Praise be to God that He has plucked you from darkness and saved you from the devil’s snares when you were on the edge of perdition. Praise be to God that He sent you someone to guide you, to cast light into your hearts and show you the right path. He is very much like Ismail the prophet, whom God Almighty redeemed out of respect for Ismail’s father Abraham—certainly not unlike him.”

I turned my gaze to General Ismail and found him smiling bashfully with his eyes closed. I was reminded of my elder sister when her boyfriend came to visit us to propose, with two wedding rings.

“My children, the gates of mercy have been opened to you, so close the gates of iniquity and repent to God for the sins you have committed. God is forgiving and merciful. Don’t forget that good deeds cancel out the evil deeds of the past, as long as you remain obedient. You were going through hard times, your lives were unsettled and the things you did were depraved and misguided, but today you are taking your first steps toward maturity. Now that we are here, on this distinguished occasion, I would like to remind you of the story of the prophet Abraham, when God ordered him and his son Ismail to build the Kaaba for people to face when they pray and as a place where rituals and prayers could be performed and the one God could be worshiped. I remind you of those two prophets, of the venerable Kaaba and everything that is useful to people and inspires them to be god-fearing.

“My children, Commander Ismail has built this place for you, this great camp, for you to seek God’s favor here. Through serious training, through effort and sweat, and by joining the ranks of those defending our country and our religion, you can

build a future that, God willing, will be promising. Through your good deeds you will secure places for yourselves in heaven and drink from its rivers. My advice to you is that you seize the opportunity, obey your leader always, remember his favors to you, and make sure you carry out orders to the letter. Meticulous work is a token of belief and obeying your master is part of obedience to God, one of the pillars of the faith. My sons, I won't detain you long today. I just wanted to introduce myself to you on my first visit. I congratulate you on your decision to attend this laudable rehabilitation course, which is endorsed by the state and sponsored by the brave and admirable leader, General Ismail. I hope to find you well on my next visit so that, God willing, we can have longer conversations and hold a series of lectures in which I can explain to you many aspects of religious law that are unclear to you, and answer your questions. Peace be upon you, and the mercy and blessings of God."

The sermon ended and Sheikh Abdel-Gabbar stood up and shook the general's hand. He turned to leave and, in the blink of an eye, he was gone. He hadn't said anything about his earlier fatwa. Had he changed his mind and forgiven us so now people wouldn't track us down in the street? Or was he testing us, waiting to see how much progress we would make and what we would be like at the end of the course? He didn't seem to be sticking to his previous attitude toward us. I didn't like to imagine he would be happy to see us killed in any case. I thought of putting my hand up and asking him what religious law had to say about the boy who had fled the camp, and whether running away meant he was an infidel. I would also have liked to ask him about the children who hadn't appeared in the camp yet. He must have known whether anyone had followed his fatwa and done them harm, or if they were still safe. I had to postpone my questions when the sheikh left, but I was determined to organize them properly in my head, because I didn't yet know what could be said and what might make the sheikh angry with me.



The boy who had run away didn't come back in the following days, although we were expecting him, or at least some news of him. We continued to await his reappearance impatiently. The training made us forget many things and distracted us from anything outside the camp, but it didn't prevent us from thinking about his fate. With every day that passed, the stories multiplied, each adding another detail or some figment of our febrile imaginations. When a second group arrived, it helped to spread frightening ideas among us. Alarming stories circulated and we couldn't tell which were true and which were imaginary. There were stories about plans to shove us into ovens and about ordinary people setting up ambushes in anticipation of us reappearing on the streets. There was a man who threw sulfuric acid at a boy who refused to get away from the doorway of his store. The skin on his back was burned to the bone. One woman screamed when a boy approached her: passersby gathered around and beat the boy to death. A boy's body was found in the river, and in the mortuary they discovered he was missing several organs. All these stories evolved and acquired new details. People came up with possible evidence for them. One particular piece of evidence terrified us and made us think of the danger we would face outside the camp: that some of the boys in the latest group to arrive were disappearing from time to time. In the dining room we no longer saw the lame boy or the boy whose fingers had been cut off. They never came to the training room either, and the titans didn't look for them or talk about their absence in their daily conversations. The fact that they were missing was apparently normal, unremarkable. For our part, we didn't ask ourselves where they had gone, maybe in case our fears were confirmed. We preferred to wait and keep hoping they would return, even if that was largely naive and foolish.

One nasty boy refused to let it go. One gray morning he whispered to us that all the explanations we dreamed up for the

disappearances were mistaken. The children hadn't escaped. People outside the camp hadn't pounced on them or buried them alive. Proud to have information unavailable to us, he said he had been carrying some bags of trash out of Head Allam's office, next to the lecture room, when he overheard the head saying at a meeting that they planned to dump all the disabled children in the desert. He claimed he had heard this with his own ears, just one day before the children disappeared. He swore a solemn oath to that effect, mindful of the practice in our previous life outside the camp, where we held such an oath to be sacred. At the time, our throats dried up and we were terribly anxious. We weren't convinced by what he said, but his story burrowed into our brains like a maggot.

From then on we stopped talking about the children who had escaped or disappeared. We also avoided the boy who claimed to have overheard the heads. It was as if he were responsible for the missing children's fate, or at least was an accomplice in it. If he'd held his tongue he would've made it much easier for us. Was he upset because he thought we were blind and that he was the only one who could see? Or was he so frightened that his tongue got the better of him? Or did he maybe make up the story to frighten us and enjoy our confusion and our conflicting emotions? Whatever the boy's intentions, the sad truth was that we were completely dependent on the titans for our safety and well-being. So what could we make of his story? If just one of the missing children reappeared, we would have dismissed it as a lie, or maybe as a fantasy. We wouldn't have blamed him for that: we often had frightening hallucinations that we thought were real. Then the fog would clear and we would realize we had been very stupid. But the missing children were still missing, without any sign to give us hope, and deep inside I was convinced that the disabled children had disappeared for good. Maybe if Head Allam had told us he had moved them somewhere else, or that they had committed a serious offense that required expelling

them from the camp, I would have relaxed, but he didn't say anything. The subject was glossed over, and we were complicit in consigning it to the deepest recesses of our minds. We swallowed it and did our best to make sure it didn't float to the surface. Silently we shared a fear that would break loose only in our subconscious. I had recurrent nightmares.

The faces of Youssef and Emad came back to me almost every night. I had a succession of dreams in which they were the only people I saw. My head was full of dark forebodings. I was haunted by suspicions that had neither beginnings nor ends. I couldn't not think about them, but I didn't know what to do. If I had asked the titans about Youssef and Emad, they would have slapped me and seen me as a wimp. Had they died along the way? I heard they had thrown some children into the river when they were moving them. They did it when the truck was halfway across the bridge that comes down near the university. The truck was overloaded, some people couldn't breathe and the situation inside was intolerable. I had also heard children from remote districts say that the titans had got rid of one or more boys before they reached the camp because there was an unexpected need for kidneys and fresh liver lobes. Youssef once told me about a movie he'd seen when he sneaked into an open-air theater, though he couldn't stay till the end. He was very sad about what he had seen. In the movie young children had been raised to obtain spare parts for adults with incurable diseases, then they killed the children one by one to keep the adults alive.

Despite the repeated gossip and rumors, which changed dozens of times a day, something inside told me that Youssef and Emad were still alive and I would see them soon. They must have had plenty of diseases, I thought, so nothing useful could be hoped for from their livers, let alone their brains, which had been frazzled by taking too many pills. And me, how long had it been since I had taken a pill? Maybe I was delirious because of

the long deprivation. I kept imagining myself waking up in the big garbage dump and finding my friends and scraps of rotten chicken beside me. Then I'd shout at them, saying we should look for a new place to spend the night.