

Cigarette Number Seven

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Nothing lies between us and happiness
but the demons that lie within us.
—Naguib Mahfouz



Dedication

I LIKE INTRODUCTIONS BUT DON'T really know how to write them. Maybe by my next novel I will have developed the ability to craft the kind of opening that draws the reader in. But for now, let me stick to a few words of dedication.

To “the demigods” and to the violin player whose music travels to me across communication channels—you are not like the others, so stay as you are!

To the faces I lost track of, the faces I tried to keep, and the faces that hurried past me but left a lasting impact. To the moments we spend lifetimes trying to capture. To the child who has not yet read my words, and to the promised day when she will. To my family by birth, and to my other family by choice. To the friend who chose to leave but is still—I'm certain of this—watching over me from afar. To good company, to allies, and to the small, colorful places that bring together our troubles and reluctant joys.

Finally, to the one who keeps the promise of a more innocent world alive.



1

I SAT NEXT TO MY grandmother on an old wooden couch in the spacious apartment and watched as she sifted uncooked rice to remove the small stones and mites that might have crept into the cloth sack she had bought at the cooperative. On a bed in the same room, my grandfather lay on his side next to the radio. The voice of Umm Kulthum was interspersed with radio static. For the rest of my life I would never learn to appreciate Umm Kulthum without the static.

I was not yet five years old, and had been living with my grandparents for as long as I could remember. My grandparents lived on the fifth floor of a huge, ancient building on the main road of a small city. There was no elevator, and Grandma often carried me up the wide staircase. I didn't talk much, but I absorbed every detail around me: every grain of rice on the red tray on Grandma's lap, every word in the song coming out of the radio—"the evening sauntered toward us, then harked to the love in our eyes"—and every line on Grandpa's serene face as he listened.

Grandpa gestured, calling me over to him, and, still lying on his side, took me in his arms and rocked me in time with

the music. The joy on his face in that moment is stored deep within my memory. But so is the way his face suddenly contorted and his arms slackened around my small body. I also remember how Grandma jumped to her feet and rushed over to us, and that he tried to reassure us both.

I wasn't a child who cried. I didn't cry when Grandma closed Grandpa's eyes, calmly carried me into bed next to him, and pulled the covers over the three of us. Nor did I cry the following morning, when men and women in dark and ugly clothes came to console my grandmother, who wasn't crying either. My grandfather's illness had eaten away at his liver and killed him. The only time I cried was when Grandma switched the radio from Umm Kulthum to the Quran. By the time my mother arrived from the Gulf, also in black and tearfully mourning her father, I had stopped crying.

Grandma wore black from the day of Grandpa's death until her own, fifteen years later. Her spacious home was filled with sadness. I would look at the photograph of my grandparents on the wall, then at Anwar Wagdy and Layla Murad on TV, and feel confused—I couldn't tell them apart. Although, as contradictory as it may sound, my grandmother resembled both Layla Murad and Amina Rizq. She was Layla Murad with her big smile and her gravity-defying hairstyle, but she was also Amina Rizq with her sternness and strength and the handkerchief wound tightly around her head.

Grandma rarely took me out. All I knew of the world was the rusty black radio, the books that she brought to teach me

to read, and Grandpa's room at the end of the apartment, where I wasn't allowed on my own because she said it was full of ghosts—and there *was* something ghostly and magical about that room with the old wooden TV that was always covered in a white bedsheet. I knew nothing about the outside world. My mother said that when she started to take me out, I would stand in front of streetlamps and ask their names, and that whenever she switched on the TV I would enter into long monologues with news anchors and stomp my feet when they didn't reply. All I knew about the world came from my grandfather's laughing face and the songs of his beloved Umm Kulthum.

He talked

And I talked

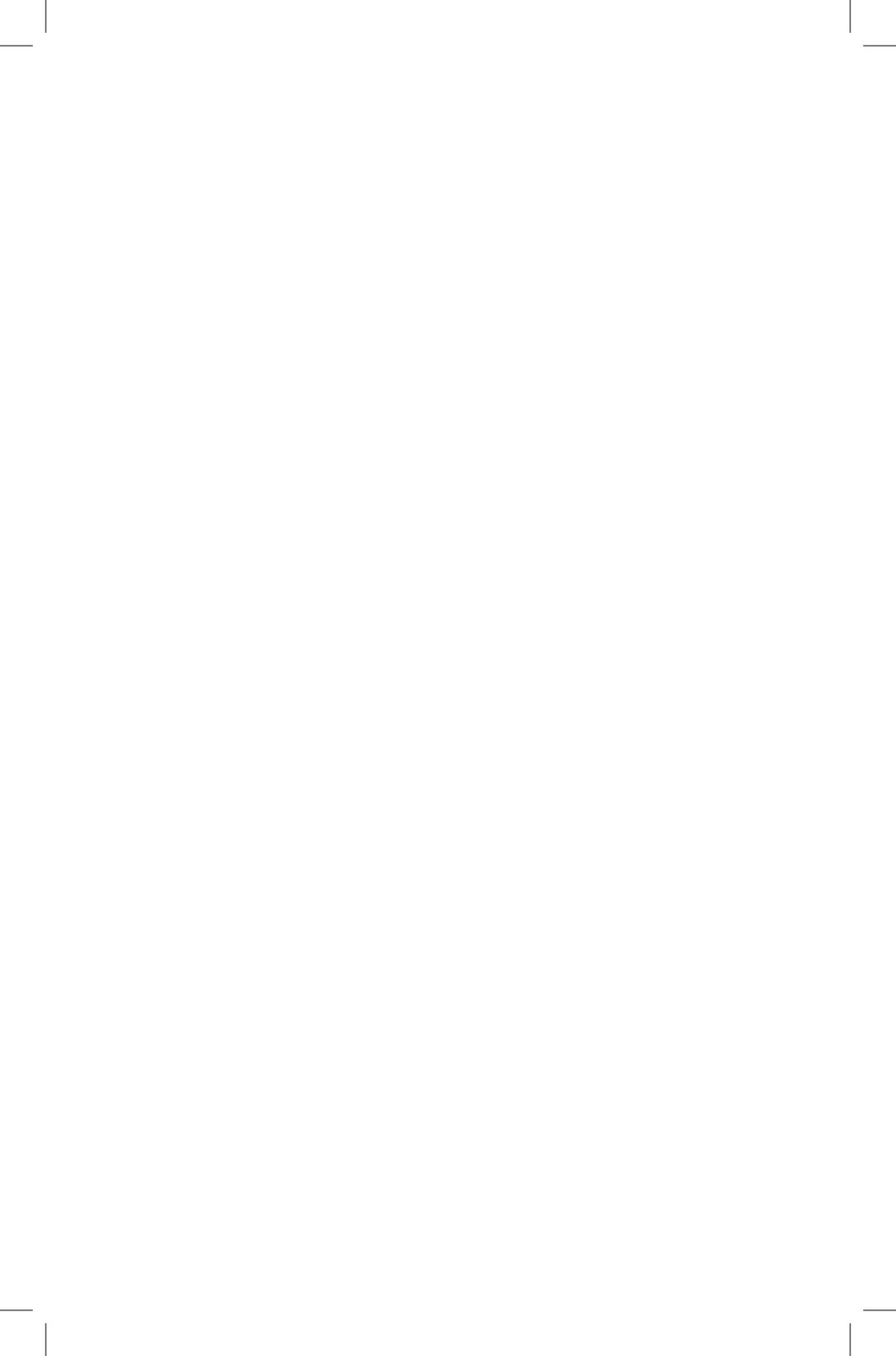
Until we finished all the words



2

I ABSORBED DETAILS. I REMEMBER my mother, sitting with her sister in my grandfather's room, and me in the middle, as if I weren't there. They were discussing things—people; maybe relatives. Were they talking about the men in their lives, their marriages? Maybe. They talked, and sometimes they cried. Then Grandma came in and silently, gently, led me to the other room. She dressed me in going-out clothes—a nice pink and blue summer shirt and blue cotton shorts. My hair was long and dark. She combed it, somewhat roughly, and put two flower hair clips in it, one on each side. I sensed drops of water on my head and looked up at my grandmother, but her face was unchanged except for the tears she quickly wiped away.

She took me by the hand to the photographer's studio and told me to smile: he was going to take my picture but first he had to see my teeth in a wide smile. I tried and tried. Finally my features cracked into a tight little smile that more than anything conveyed suspicion. I didn't show my teeth.



3

UMM KULTHUM SANG AGAIN, AFTER months of Quran on the radio, months in which the only color I saw was black. My grandmother moved with her big rice tray to the kitchen, abandoning her wooden couch, and naturally I moved with her. I watched her and hardly spoke. Everything she did was slow and deliberate.

Coffee brewed on the small stove. She brought onions and garlic cloves in from the small kitchen balcony, and slowly and skillfully peeled the garlic and sliced the onions. When my eyes started to water, she ordered me out of the kitchen, but I stubbornly refused. She layered the onion and garlic along with sliced potatoes in an elegant oven dish, whose colors fascinated me, and placed it in the oven. Then she coated the chicken with flour, vinegar, and salt, and placed a saucepan filled with water on the stove. When bubbles started to appear on the surface, I told her the water was boiling. She smiled—the world’s tightest smile—and dropped the chicken into the water, just for a few minutes, before taking it out and placing it on top of the potatoes in the oven. To do that she took out

the oven dish with her bare hands, without using a towel. My grandmother's fingers were old and crinkled, so maybe her nerves had died, or maybe she enjoyed the pain of heat on her aged fingers.

When she was done with the potato dish, now a chicken-and-potato dish, she placed the copper pad, which prevented food from scorching, on the burner. She put a saucepan on top of it, put in some ghee and semolina, and sprinkled in a few drops of mastic. She added wet rice to the mix, which sizzled and immediately released its delicious aroma.

I sat on a chair, resting my cheek on my hand and looking at the ceiling, ready for the awaited moment. My grandmother looked at me, her tight smile slowly spreading across her face. "You're dying for a coffee, aren't you?" she said, and I turned to her eagerly. She got up and placed the coffeepot on the burner. When it was ready, she poured most of it into a big white cup for herself and a few drops into a tiny porcelain cup—which must have been part of a toy set—for me. Yes, I was a child who drank coffee. A five-year-old in a big kitchen in front of a red tray full of rice, sipping coffee and waiting for the moment that always came and made everything look wonderful: I would look up and see that all the colors had deepened. The potato dish was reddish gold now, the chicken on top almost done. The rice was in the pot and the plates were set before us.

4

I HELD ON TO MY father's hand. We were in a vast, beautiful park that had a big pond, in which snow-white birds swam. I wasn't interested in jumping around like the other children. My sole ambition was to get as close as possible to the ducks and geese in the pond. I pulled at his hand and he laughed. "What is it you want, my girl? You want to feed the geese? OK, OK, easy now!" We went to the park caretaker, who gave me some breadcrumbs to throw to the birds in the pond. But I wanted to put the bread in the geese's mouths. My father laughed. He held my waist so that my upper half was dangling toward a goose, who snatched the piece of bread out of my small fingers. I frowned for a moment, and then threw myself into my father's arms.

Then he took me to get ice cream. We sat together at a metal table. I smeared my face with ice cream while my father read the newspaper, occasionally peering at me from behind its pages and his glasses. "Having fun?" he asked with a big smile. I nodded, content, then climbed off my chair and went over to dirty his face with an ice cream kiss.



5

LIFE IN OUR APARTMENT IN Madinat Nasr started when I was barely seven. I had only been a few months old when my mother left me with my grandmother and went to the Gulf. We didn't own a house and my father didn't have a steady income, so my mother bent over backward to get a job overseas. She took my sister with her and left me behind. My father objected, but when my mother set her mind on something, nothing could stop her. For the next few years, my grandmother took care of me and my grandfather, who was sick. I remember the black radio and my grandmother's delicate finger pressing the play button, the bowl of mashed vegetables she would be trying to get me to eat held in her other hand. That play button was the only thing that coaxed me into eating. Umm Kulthum's deep voice succeeded where all other grownup games failed to overcome my childish stubbornness. Her voice and the words she sang—"How could they possibly remind me? As if I would ever forget!"—even outshone the funny faces my sick grandfather would pull to get me to open my mouth.

Later on, when my father took me to live with him in our new apartment, he came up with another strategy: stories that ended only when my plate was cleared. Tales of fantastical animals, giant gateways into magical worlds, colorful creatures on planets in faraway galaxies, stories about children—“Once upon a time there was a boy called Galal and a girl called Galila.” My storyteller father made up tales of animals who rebelled against the kings and laws of the jungle, and he didn’t give up until I opened my mouth for the spoon.

When my father took me from my grandmother and I started going to a school in Heliopolis, I began to experience feelings of estrangement, something they say all children, who are living mostly inside their own private worlds, occasionally feel. I really hated school. I hated studying and I hated all the teachers and nuns; I couldn’t stand the classes and all the words and numbers they made us learn. I think it must have been around that time that I developed my fierce stare and my steely armor began to form. I became known for being antagonistic. I spoke very little and was constantly being compared to my cousins, who were of course friendly and sweet. “I don’t know why she can’t be more like the other girls in the family,” my mother would say, with an underlying bitterness, to anyone who was listening.

At school, there was this annual charity event and everyone would be in a frenzy preparing for it for weeks. Donations were collected and kids from several orphanages were invited to spend “a lovely day” at our school. Girls from neighboring

schools would come to help. Everyone was supposed to get involved. The teachers prescribed poems and speeches that we had to learn and recite for our orphaned brothers and sisters, in the presence of the district director of education. I would spend that day every year hiding in the small enclosure between the playground and the nuns' residence. No one ever went there except for the dada, the taciturn school nurse. I would sit on the lawn with the skirt of my school uniform gathered between my legs and a book on my lap. The dada often saw me and placed a finger on her lips to reassure me that she wouldn't tell, and I would pass the day reading and dozing on the grass, until the noise of the other kids told me that the school day was coming to an end. Then I would gather my things and join them.



6

HE LEANED ON MY ARM as we marched in the direction of the square. I could hear him struggling to breathe but I urged him on anyway. We needed to keep up with the other marchers and escape the state security men who were scattered everywhere. We kept walking at moderate speed. My friends were at the front, but I couldn't go to them because I didn't want to let go of his arm. He whispered to me, "Is this the revolution then? Am I really going to witness a revolution before I die?"

"It looks like it could be. Just tell me if you're tired, and I'll take you home and come back."

"Are you kidding? Fifty years I've waited for this day. I'm not going anywhere and you're staying with me!"

He smiled and I smiled back as we walked on along the downtown streets that were leading us to where the battle was.

Demonstrations filled the streets of Cairo. No one could have predicted the turnout. Around us were faces of all colors, of all ages and classes. There were young women with colored

veils framing their angry and determined faces, and others with uncovered hair swinging behind them as they chanted in high voices that I couldn't help but chuckle at. I was too embarrassed to join in the chants. My thin voice wouldn't convince anyone. I thought I'd leave the chants to the rough voices of men, and held on to my father's hand.

"Where did all these people come from?" he whispered again.

"Apparently from Facebook," I answered, unsure. "Look, Baba, I don't know, but they're here. I just hope it ends well."

"Of course it will, silly!" He seemed confident now. "If anything was ever going to end well, it's this."

I gave him a look full of doubt.

We kept on walking through the narrow streets. The numbers increased as we neared the Ministry of Interior. I didn't want to go there. There would certainly be trouble. In a calm tone, as if I weren't really scared, I said, "Why don't we go grab a coffee somewhere until things calm down a bit?"

"Really?" He looked at me sharply. "You want to leave all this? For a *coffee*? And you know I don't drink coffee because of my blood pressure."

The chants picked up around us. I had to shout for him to hear me: "Have tea then! Anise tea or something. Let's just go have a drink!"

"Listen!" he snapped back. "I want to go on. If I get tired, I'll tell you. Then we can rest somewhere."

I surrendered to the flow of the march that was now certainly leading us to the Ministry of Interior. My heartbeat quickened, with fear but also with an inexpressible joy. I was in a demonstration along with thousands of people, and I was walking by my father's side.

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