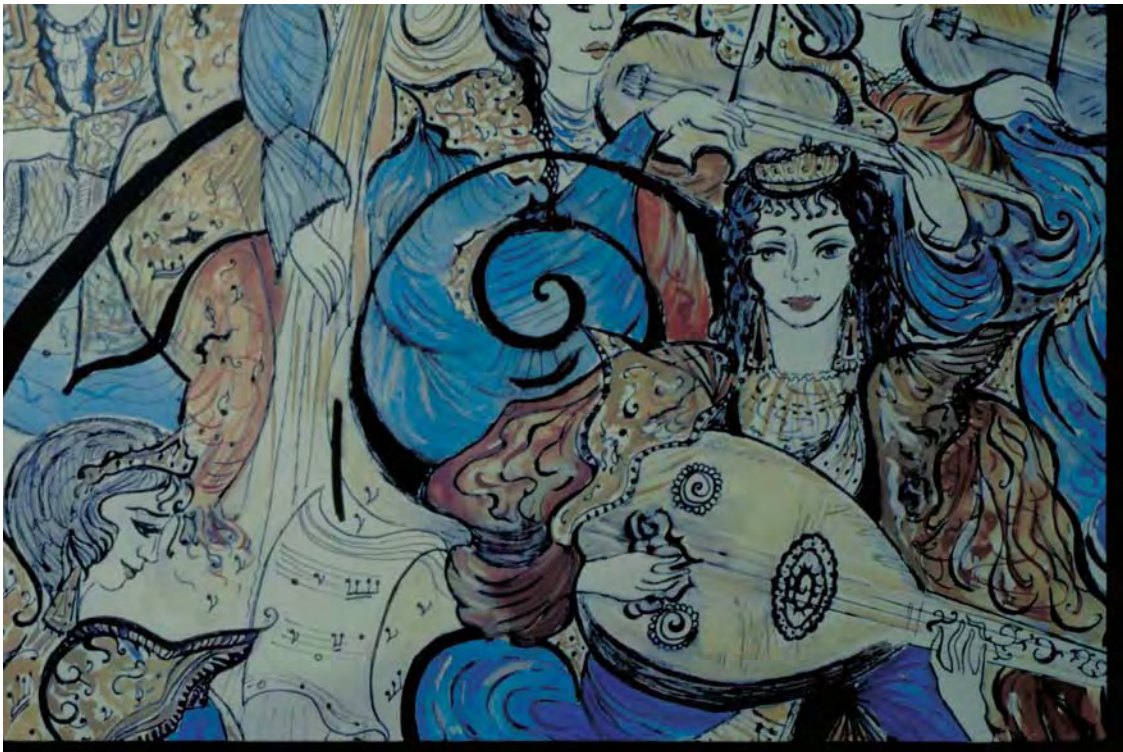


*Are You Listening?*  
*Voices from the Middle East*



**Revised Edition**

**The Outreach Center  
Center for Middle Eastern Studies  
Harvard University  
17 Sumner Road  
Cambridge MA 02138  
<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/mideast/outreach>**

# *Are You Listening?*

## *Voices from the Middle East*

**Revised Edition**

**Editor**

Carol Johnson Shedd  
Outreach Coordinator

**Anthology Committee**

Adrian Cole, Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University  
Sylvia Ducharme, Near Eastern Studies, New York University  
Roanne Edwards, Free Lance Writer, Belmont, Massachusetts  
Deborah Gilman, Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University  
Nyla Gislason, Dover-Sherborn High School, Dover, Massachusetts  
Robert Louis, Abington High School, Abington, Massachusetts  
Alexandra Siemon, Dana Hall High School, Wellesley, Massachusetts  
Priscilla Starrat, University of Wisconsin, Superior, Wisconsin

**The Outreach Center  
Center for Middle Eastern Studies  
Harvard University  
17 Sumner Road  
Cambridge, MA 02138**

*The project was made possible through the generous support of the International Advisory Committee of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University*

Copyright © 1998 by the President and fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

This document has been made available online for educational purposes only and may be freely copied and distributed for that purpose. Any other use requires the permission of the copyright holder. In all circumstances, use of any part of the document in classroom or other educational use must be accompanied by appropriate citation.

Front cover image reprinted courtesy of PADIA archive. Thorne Anderson/Saudi Aramco World/PADIA.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint material copyrighted by them:

“The Name” by Aharon Megged. Copyright © Aharon Megged. From ISRAELI SHORT STORIES edited by Joel Blocker. Schocken Books, Inc., 1962. Used with permission of the author.

“The Night of the Festival” by Fawzi Abdel Kader el-Milady is reprinted from *Egyptian Tales and Short Stories*, American University of Cairo Press, 1987.

Pages 20-28 from *A Wife for My Son* by Ali Ghalem, Banner Press, 1988.

YASHAR KEMAL: Chapter 2 from *Memed, My Hawk*. First published in 1958 under the title of *Ince Memed* by Remzi Kitabevi, Istanbul, in the English language by Collins Harvill 1961. © Yashar Kemal 1958, © in the English translation by Edouard Roditi 1961. Reproduced by permission of the Harvill Press.

“The Worst of Two Choices” of “The Forsaken Olive Trees” by Najwa Qa’war from ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN PALESTINIAN LITERATURE edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi. Copyright © 1992 by Columbia University Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

“Miracles for Sale” by Tewfil al-Hakim is reprinted from *Modern Arab Short Stories*, Heinemann, 1967.

Chapter 2 from *Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz, published by Heinemann Educational Books, 1977.

“Don’t You Have Any Donkeys in Your Country?” Reprinted from TURKISH SHORT STORIES FROM FOUR DECADES by Aziz Nesin, selected and translated by Louis Mitler. Copyright © 1991 by Louis Mitler. Used with permission of Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.

“The Whistle” by Abdul Kassem. Reprinted from EGYPTIAN SHORT STORIES, selected and translated from the Arabic by Denys Johnson-Davies. Copyright © 1996 by Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. Used with permission of the publisher.

“Gowhartaj’s Father” by Mahmud Kiyanus. Reprinted from MODERN PERSIAN SHORT STORIES, translated by Minoo Southgate. Copyright © 1980 by Minoo Southgate. Used with permission by Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.

“The Assassination of Light at the River’s Flow” by Saqqaf Khayriyah. Reprinted from THE ASSASSINATION OF LIGHT: MODERN SAUDI SHORT STORIES, collected and translated by Ava Molnar Heinrichsdorff and Abu Bakr Bagader. Copyright © 1996 by Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. Copyright © by Abu Bakr Bagader and Ava Molnar Heinrichsdorff. Used with permission of the publisher, Lynne Reinner, 1990.

“The Errand” and “The Shame” reprinted from THE CHEAPEST NIGHTS AND OTHER SHORT STORIES by Yusuf Idris. Translated from the Arabic by Wadida Wassef. Copyright © 1978, 1989 by Wadida Wassef. Used with permission of the publisher Lynne Reiner, 1990.

“My Father Writes to My Mother” taken from “Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade” by Assia Djebar and translated by Doroty Blair, published by Quartet Books, Ltd. In 1985.

“My Mother” by Gadhma A.M. Amrouche, from *My Life Story: the Autobiography of a Berber Woman*, copyrighted © 1989 by Dorothy S. Blair. Reprinted by permission of Rutgers University Press.

Chapter 14 from *Fragments of Memory* by Hanna Mina, University of Texas, 1993.

Pages 1-11 from *Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman’s Journey to Independence*, University of Texas Press, 1989.

“The Women’s Baths” by Ulfay Idlibiis reprinted from *Modern Syrian Short Stories*. Three Continents Press, 1988.

“The Two Pennies” from *The Pillar of Salt* by Albert Memmi. © 1992 by Criterion Books, reprinted by permission of Beacon Press.

Chapters 1-3 from *An Egyptian Childhood* by Taha Hussein © Dr. Zayyat on behalf of the estate of Taha Hussein, published by permission of The American University in Cairo Press.

“Me and My Sister” by Alifa Rifaat from *Distant View of a Minaret*, Heinemann, 1983 © Quartet Books Ltd.

“Three Cloistered Girls” From *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* by Assia Djebar © Quartet Books, London, 1985.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	<i>vii</i>
Growing Pains	
<b>Me and My Sister</b> by Alifa Rifaat.....	3
<b>Two Pennies</b> by Albert Memmi .....	7
<b>Egyptian Childhood</b> by Taha Hussein .....	11
<b>The Women's Baths</b> by Ulfat Idlibi .....	15
<b>Three Cloistered Girls</b> by Assis Djebar .....	21
Family Matters	
<b>Gowhartaj's Father</b> by Mahmud Kiyanush.....	27
<b>The Name</b> by Aharon Megged.....	35
<b>The Night of the Festival</b> Fawzi Abdel Kaderel-Milady.....	43
Women's Voices	
<b>Year of the Elephant</b> by Leila Abouzeid.....	49
<b>A Wife for my Son</b> by Ali Ghalem.....	55
<b>The Shame</b> by Youssef Idris.....	59
<b>The Assassination of Light at the River's Flow</b> by Khayriyah as-Saqqaf.....	67
<b>My Mother</b> by Fadhma Amrouche.....	71
Outsiders	
<b>The Errand</b> by Youssef Idris.....	77
<b>Memed, My Hawk</b> by Mustafa Kemal.....	83
<b>Fragments of Memory: A Story of a Syrian Family</b> by Hanna Mina.....	91
Twists and Turns	
<b>Miracles for Sale</b> by Tewfik al-Hakim.....	97
<b>Don't You Have Any Donkeys in Your Country?</b> by Aziz Nesin.....	101



<b>Midaq Alley</b> by Naguib Mahfouz.....	107
Varieties of Love	
<b>The Worst of Choices or The Forsaken Olive Trees</b> by Najwa Qa'war Farah.....	113
<b>The Whistle</b> by Abdul Hakim Kassem.....	117
<b>My Father Writes to my Mother</b> by Assia Djebar.....	119
Student Activities.....	121
Background Notes.....	167
Glossary.....	195

## ARE YOU LISTENING? VOICES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AN INTRODUCTION FOR THE TEACHER

### Understanding Other Cultures: An Educational Priority

**D**espite increasingly critical awareness of racial stereotypes, the Middle East and Middle Easterners are often poorly understood in America today because of stereotypes and misrepresentations in cartoons, film, newspapers and television. This is especially true with regards to media representations of Islamic Fundamentalism or terrorist attacks by people of Islamic or Middle Eastern heritage. The perpetuation of such stereotypes is a major obstacle to a better understanding of the region and improved international and intercultural relations. What is lacking in the images of the Middle East received by millions of Americans is a human perspective which fully conveys both the intricate nature of many of the region's conflicts and the personal experiences of those who live through them. The news media, the only way of knowing the Middle East for so many, often reduces the region to a limited number of categories, most of which are negative. In so doing, both the diversity of the area and its wealth of human experience are denied.

Preventing the formation of negative stereotypes is work that falls not only upon parents and society but very much within the realm of education. Cultural and ethnic stereotyping begins early in a child's life, through family and community, and is aided, if not created, by ignorance about the people involved. While educators have, throughout the last decade, come to see Multiculturalism and Global Studies as top priorities, the material avail-

able on the Middle East is mostly historical or political in nature. Much of this material is of a high quality, but by itself it does not go far enough in breaking down barriers to cultural understanding for two major reasons: first, it is not always easy for a teenager to appreciate the relevance of an historical narrative to his or her own life; and second, without any subjective testimony, such material does not furnish insight into the lived experience of diverse individuals who may often think and act in ways not so dissimilar to their own.

### Literature as a Teaching Tool

The anthology, *Voices from the Middle East*, of which "Growing Pains" is the first unit, was compiled with a commitment to literature as an invaluable resource for teaching about the region in that it can be used to present more individual, subjective experiences of a wide variety of people. As a much needed enhancement of the basic information provided by studies of history and politics, literature functions to familiarize the reader with the beliefs, thought processes and consciousness of the characters in the story. Without such personal testimony it may be hard for a student to relate to the men, women and children in the countries they are studying.

This is the rationale that lies behind our title: *Are You Listening? Voices from the Middle East*. All of these stories have clear and identifiable voices, whether they employ a third person narrator or the more direct first person. They provide points of view which act as human guides, helping us to navigate our way through the labyrinth of structures and customs which

make up cultures, and enabling us to appreciate not only the outward form of these structures, but how individuals interact with them, whether in cooperation or in resistance. It is these individual voices that can act as a corrective to the voices from mainstream media, which are very often representative of a minority and narrow point of view.

Using literature in the classroom is a means of stimulating the student's interest in the region and its culture through engagement in a story, and fostering an identification with Middle Eastern protagonists who, through this process, cease to be fearfully different. Through short stories, memoirs and excerpts from novels, a student can begin to comprehend the Middle East and its peoples by the way in which they respond to universals of human experience. We hope that reading the stories and using the lesson guides will be a satisfying and productive experience, resulting in the students considering issues they face in their own life, while, at the same time, gaining an understanding about those issues confronting people of other cultures and traditions.

### **Unity and Diversity in the Middle East**

One of the main questions which may arise through working with these stories is that of the coherence of the region in question. The Middle East is a term used loosely by the media as well as by the policy-makers and political observers. Historically, the term Middle East has been more useful than meaningful, a term coined by the British Foreign Office in London to distinguish between parts of its colonial dominion. It would not occur to someone from Syria to say, "I am a Middle Easterner!" He or she would say "I am a Syrian", or "I am an Arab". The term should be used skeptically, therefore, in trying to denote any

"natural" cultural grouping; it is not a racial, linguistic or ethnic denomination but has had meaning imposed on it from without. The *Voices* anthology includes stories from all over what is perhaps the broadest definition of the Middle East: that is, from Morocco in the west to Iran in the east, and from the Sudan in the south to Turkey in the north. If one were to search for an across-the-board denominator it could be the dual axes of Arabic on the one hand and Islam on the other. Every nation within this area, with the exception of Israel, has a majority Arab or Muslim population, although many have considerable numbers of non-Muslim or non-Arab citizens. Most of our stories therefore have, at least as a cultural backdrop, either Muslim or Arab customs and practices. Israel's majority population is made up of Jews from both Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern countries, with a large minority, predominantly Arabs, of Christians and Muslims.

But whether Morocco, Israel, Iran, Turkey or Egypt, all of the countries represented here are inhabited by individuals with their own particular experiences, and consequently, with their own unique tales. Their voices emanate from these stories to give them a well-defined humanity. That humanity, in almost all of the countries of the Middle East, is struggling against often overwhelming obstacles; war, poverty, social and economic injustice, gender inequality and tension between tradition and change. Although Middle Eastern literature is by no means limited to explorations of this darker side of suffering, it does seem to reflect this observation by George Steiner, "*The haunting paradox is this: historical evidence goes a long way to suggest that great literature flourishes under political social repression.*" Most "great literature" has drawn sustenance from injustice and the sufferings engendered by the social system. This holds true for Russian, French and

English literature as much as it does for Arabic, Hebrew or Persian literature. The fact is that literature is an exceptionally powerful vehicle for exploring, as well as resisting, repression, oppression and various forms of inhumanity. Just as South Africa has its Nadine Gordimer, South America its Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and the United States its James Baldwin, the Middle East has no shortage of voices condemning social ills and struggling to offer alternatives and remedies.

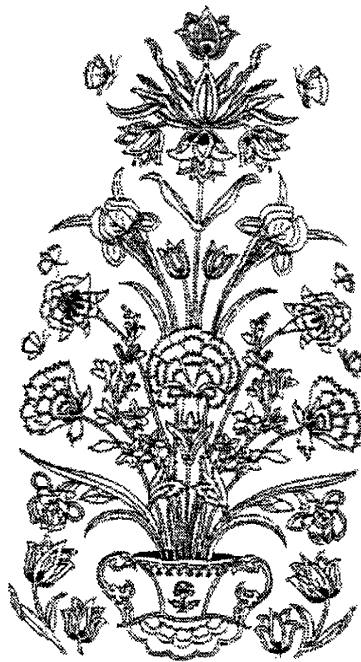
Social and political critique however is by no means the sum of this literature. Many of the stories contain themes of relationships in general; between parents and children, lovers, friends and individuals and their communities. Interpersonal dynamics are explored in all their nuances with the social and cultural background impinging on them to varying degrees. All of the interpersonal struggles are situated within cultural contexts, illustrating the interdependency of the personal with the political. Thus, while these stories introduce the reader to a diversity of Middle East traditions and customs, they give voices and faces to at least a few of the millions of people living in this region.



*Notes by Adrian Cole*

# Growing Pains

## Stories





# Me and My Sister

Alifa Rifaat

*Alifa Rifaat was born and brought up in Egypt, in a "traditional" Muslim family. Her education ended before university, when her parents persuaded her to marry. A widow, she now lives in Cairo with three children. Alifa Rifaat writes only in Arabic, and has limited access to or knowledge of other languages. Her work offers a look into the conditions of women within a male-dominated society, and explores the neglect and mistreatment within family life and relationships. Distant view of a Minaret was first published in English in 1983 by Quartet Books, and two of her stories have been broadcast on BBC radio.*

I was puffing as I went into the house because I'd gone up the stairs two at a time so I could get there before my sister though she's older than me. I heard my eldest sister Dalal tell Mummy as they were waiting for us sitting down for lunch that she wanted to go out in the afternoon so as to be at her friend Su'ad's birthday party. Mummy said what she always says: 'What will people say about us when we're on our own without a man in the house?' Dalal replied in a cross way to frighten Mummy because the doctor said that she was upset about Daddy marrying another wife and that we mustn't contradict her. Dalal said the sentence she always says: 'I don't care about people. Let them go hang. They'll talk in any case so how long shall we go on being frightened of them?' When she saw that Mummy was silent and frowning she said she would take me with her so that Mummy needn't worry. Mummy lifted up her hands to the sky and said the prayer she always says: 'May our Lord fix you up with someone decent who'll marry you, Dalal.' I was standing there happy because I like parties but Mummy told me to go off and put away my satchel and wash my hands and come and have lunch with my sisters. So I went off into the bedroom and threw down the satchel and ran off and sat down at table. I was just drinking my soup when Dalal said to me that I'd eaten enough because I had to get on and study before we went out and that she herself would hear my lessons. Mummy was happy about this and got up to go to sleep in her room.

I sat doing my homework and Nagwa went to sleep in the bed we share and Dalal slept beside Sahar in their bed. After a while she got up and stood in front of me and took hold of the history book and asked me to tell her what were the important things Hatshepsut had done. I told her that Queen Hatshepsut had sent the first expedition to the land of Punt through the Red Sea to bring back ebony. Before I had finished what I had to say I felt the pencil hit against my cheek and saw her looking at me with those black eyes of hers which I feel are swallowing me up in a deep dark well. I was shaking with fear and felt terribly humiliated because she'd hit me in the face. From the moment that Sahar had got engaged before her she used to hit me and Nagwa and the servants for the slightest thing. This time I was really upset because I wasn't in the wrong and I couldn't help the tears coming to my eyes. This made her more angry still and she shouted at me: 'Do your lessons properly, you stupid thing.' I lost my temper and snatched the book from her and pointed at the page and said: 'That's what's written.' She didn't read what was said but looked at the picture of Hatshepsut at the top of the page and said: 'You gone blind? There right in front of you it shows Hatshepsut as a man.' I was really annoyed and said to her: 'This Hatshepsut is a lady except she's got a beard.' She looked at the book again then closed it and said: 'Don't be so childish.' Then she told me to wash my face and put on a dress for going out.

Dalal had been at a French school before sitting at home waiting for someone to come and marry her. She used to know about French history only and didn't know anything about the history of Egypt and was even weak in Arabic. I'm clever at it and like it very much and always the teacher leaves my copy book to the end of the lesson and reads out to the girls the composition I've written. Why does Dalal call me stupid when I say things right? I have often heard her say to Mummy that she was wrong to have me after Daddy married again. Mummy spends most of her time in bed and gets up to say her prayers and eat with us then she sits in the bed again and even guests go and see her in her bedroom. Sahar is the one who runs the house and Dalal looks after the expenses so that Mummy and Daddy won't quarrel about them and she's always tough with us about anything we want. When Daddy comes for one night every week he gives us money to buy sweets with and we kiss his hand. He always says to me: 'Do what you're told and it's not right to argue with your older sister.' I keep quiet but I know that she has of course told him everything that has happened during the time he was away but in her own way so that he'll believe her and not give me my pocket money.

I washed my face and quickly put on my best dress then I kissed Dalal on the Cheek and said I was sorry and she went out with me holding her by the hand as she swung me along with her walking on her high heels. At the corner behind the house a car drew up beside us and a nice-looking young man opened

the door. Dalal pushed me into the back seat and she sat beside him. He raced off till he came to a stop under the shade of a tree far from the street lamp. Dalal then lifted her head which she had kept bent down under the window so no one would see her. The young man asked about me and she said I was her young sister and that she had to bring me because we were a strict family and she couldn't go out alone at night and that though I was young I was very bright and could understand anything that was said and I might repeat it. Of course I was annoyed at what she said about me though I really am clever but I don't split on anyone. After that Dalal and the young man talked in French and I understood that his name was Mahmoud but I couldn't understand the rest of what they were saying.

Then Mahmoud got out of the car and Dalal turned to me and looked at me with those terrible eyes and said in a voice like the school bell that she would tear my eyes out if I said anything to anyone about meeting a man. She put her red nails right close to my eyes and made me swear by Almighty Allah three times that I would bury the secret deep in a well. I was very frightened and very fed up at the same time because I like to tell everything to my sister Nagwa who is my only friend at home and at school. But Mahmoud came back and gave Dalal a bottle of perfume and he gave me a big box of chocolates so I forgot about being annoyed. Then we drove in the dark and came out to the desert and the car bumped about on the sands until we saw the light from a wooden kiosk. He came to a stop far from the light and called the shopkeeper and asked for some lemonade. The old man laughed and said: "The very best quality for the sake of the lady."

Dalal got down and told me to sit in front and she got in the back and Mahmoud got in beside her. The shopkeeper brought them some cigarettes and they closed all the windows and Dalal told me I could eat as many chocolates as I liked. I put the box on my lap and began eating the chocolates and I only noticed later on the car had filled with the smoke of the cigarettes and it was a funny smell and not at all like the smell of the cigarettes that Mummy and Daddy and their guests used to smoke. I felt giddy and wanted to go to sleep. I heard some dogs barking far away and sounds from the back seat and whispering behind me and I tried to guess what they were doing exactly but I couldn't make it out at all. I got fed up and said to Dalal that I wanted to go back home and that I was sleepy. Mahmoud shouted at me to shut up. I was very frightened and went on calling out to Dalal till she answered me and said we were going to leave. After being annoyed with Mahmoud I was happy about him because suddenly Dalal was talking to me in a friendly way also because he had brought me those lovely chocolates. At last we changed places to go back. All the time I was surprised that the shopkeeper didn't bring us the lemonade we had asked for but had instead brought us cigarettes that no one had asked for but I was too shy to ask.

When we went into the house Mummy called me to her room and asked me where we had been so I told her word for word what Dalal had told me to say: 'We were at Su'ad's house near the club and we ate cakes and drank tea and there weren't any men at all.' I also told the story to Nagwa as I got under the warm blankets but I was furious not to have been able to tell her the truth and she might have been able to tell me why Dalal wanted to sit with Mahmoud in the back seat. I went to sleep and woke up next morning feeling tired but I had to get up and go to school.

After that we met Mahmoud many times and each time I would eat a whole box of chocolates. One night towards the end of winter I heard Dalal saying to Mahmoud that someone had gone to Daddy asking to marry her but that she loved him and that he must go to Daddy before he gave his word to the other man. Mahmoud said to her that he was not thinking of marrying and that he wished her all the best. She got out of the car at once and dragged me with her so hard my arm was going to break.

When the time for the next meeting came she told me to go to him on my own and to keep him busy for an hour until she caught up with us. At the appointed time I went out and walked to the corner. I found him waiting so I got in beside him and bent my head down under the window. He laughed and drove the car as he played with my hair. My hair is longer than Dalal's and it's done up with lovely red ribbons. He asked me about Dalal and I told him she had to go somewhere and that she would be coming after an hour. He asked me where we should go till the time for her to come and I said: 'To the man who sells lemonade of the very best quality for the sake of the lady.' He laughed and said I was nice. I was very happy about this and even more happy because he passed by a sweet shop and bought me a box of chocolates with a picture of a white kitten.

When we got to the kiosk he sat smoking the cigarettes with the car windows closed while I ate the chocolates. I noticed he was fed up so I thought it would be nice to give him a chocolate. When I put one in his mouth he bit my finger and laughed. I laughed too and told him he was naughty. He said: 'Come close so I can see how big you've grown.' So I stood up straight for him to see how tall I was but he pulled me down before I hit my head and sat me on his knees. When he began putting his hand on my chest I rounded my shoulders and felt very ashamed and all my body went hot. He laughed and blew smoke into my face and I became dizzy and leaned my head against his chest. I felt very happy because for a long



time I wanted to sit on Daddy's lap but I was always too frightened to ask him. Daddy of course gave us pocket money but never enough to buy a big box of chocolates like the one Mahmoud gave me. I felt I loved him very much and I kissed him on the cheek but it was as rough as a cactus fruit when we pick them from the buses in the garden and eat them green. He looked at his watch and said that Dalal would be coming soon so we drove off in the car.

We found her at the corner so I went behind and she got in beside him and we drove through different streets and did not go the same way we always did. Dalal asked him where he was going. He said that he was going to his house which was better than wandering round the streets. She got annoyed and told him to stop the car because she wanted to go back home. He got angry and turned to her and said: 'Perhaps you'd like to tell me where you've been so as to stand me up for an hour'? She said: 'What's it got to do with you? What do you care'? He let go of the steering-wheel and took hold of her hand and said that he loved her and all at once we found ourselves in the hedge of a house. The accident happened in a flash. I hit my head on Dalal's seat and I gave a scream. When I felt my head I found I had a bump as big as a lemon. I saw Dalal and Mahmoud with blood all over their faces and Dalal looking as though she'd fainted away. I went on screaming and calling for Mummy and Mahmoud shouted at me to shut up or I'd bring all the people round us.

Quickly Mahmoud reversed the car and drove it along the road to our house. He stopped at the corner and put the bottle of perfume that was in Dalal's handbag up to her nose. She opened her eyes and told him she couldn't walk all that way so he drove the car right up to our house. We found Mummy and my sisters standing by the windows and staring out into the dark and they saw Mahmoud helping Dalal to the door and quickly returning to his car. Directly we got inside Mummy cleaned up Dalal's wounds and put her into her nightdress and got her into bed. Nagwa helped me into our bed.

When they asked Dalal where we'd been and what had happened and who was the man who had brought us back Dalal pretended she was too dizzy. Then they turned to me but I didn't know what to say so I pretended to be asleep. When we were alone Dalal opened her eyes and for the first time I didn't feel frightened at all. When she smiled at me I thought of the way she used to hit me in the face. I smiled back at her because I knew she wouldn't hit me again. Then I went to sleep.



## The Pillar of Salt Albert Memmi

### *The Two Pennies*

*Albert Memmi grew up in pre-World War II colonized Tunisia. His semi-autobiographical novel, THE PILLAR OF SALT tells of his identity crisis as the son of a Jewish-Italian father and a Berber mother living in a Muslim Arab country in which the privileged society was French. He is the author of many books including THE COLONIZER AND THE COLONIZED and ARAB AND JEW.*

The very existence of kindergarten was unknown in Tarfoune Street, and school, as a whole, did not assume there, as in middle-class homes, the character of an absolute necessity. I was already quite a grown boy, seven years old, I think, when my parents decided to send me to school. Whereas school seems mere play to most young children, the news of this decision made me cry. My mother tongue is the Tunisian dialect, which I speak with the proper accent of the young Moslem kids of our part of town and of the drivers of horse-trucks who were customers of our shop. The Jews of Tunis are to the Moslems what the Viennese are to other Germans: they drag out their syllables in a singsong voice and soften and make insipid the guttural speech of their Mohammedan fellow-citizens. The relatively correct intonations of my speech earned me the mockery of all: The Jews disliked my strange speech and suspected me of affectation, while the Moslems thought that I was mimicking them. But when I entered school, it was no longer a matter of shades of pronunciation but of a total break.

"How shall I manage to understand the instructor? I've never learned French"!

"Well, he'll teach it to you," my father concluded.

"But how shall I answer his questions *before* he has taught me to speak it"?

I faced an abyss, without any means of communicating with the far side of it. The instructor spoke only French and I spoke only dialect: how would we ever be able to meet?

These childish anxieties may now seem futile and my position is surely not unique. Millions of men have had to lose their basic unity, no longer recognizing themselves and still seeking in vain their identity. But I also say to myself that this confrontation has nothing reassuring about it; that others try to reassemble, without ever managing it, their scattered limbs. This mere fact confirms me in my awareness of the split in myself. All my life I have forced my friendships and my acquisitions to readjust continually to whatever I happened to be.

The first day of school came too soon for my fears. Thanks to remnants from my uncle the tailor, my mother was able to outfit me with a pair of brown pants and an overall apron of black poplin, a material the mere smell of which can still remind me of elementary school. My father had been able to get from Bodineau, his supplier, a fine calfskin school satchel. This was my only scholar's luxury. I was allowed to wear my Saturday jockey cap, which added considerably to my awe and to the solemnity of the occasion. Still, nothing much happened. There was too much confusion, during those first few days of the school year, to allow much attention to be lavished on us, so that I had time to become accustomed to my new surroundings. Without any serious shocks, my sense of alienation was overcome by my curiosity. The school was situated in some old stables of the Bey's palace which had been purchased advantageously by the Alliance Israélite and subjected to minimal alterations; to me, it all seemed most beautiful. Except on a few Saturday walks, I had never had a chance to see any trees or greenery, and our schoolyard had two tall rows of eucalyptus trees that seemed huge to me and elicited my constant admiration. All the classrooms were small, with narrow windows that were closed with dirty gratings; I soon found them warmly intimate. My schoolmates impressed me less favorably, all of them being too noisy and brutal for my liking.

Every morning, before leaving home with my fine satchel slung from my shoulder and my cap pushed down over my eyebrows, I marked time, on our doorstep, with my shoes. I insisted that my mother say, before I leave:

"Peace be with you"!

Only then did I set forth confidently. But sometimes my mother was still angry from some outburst and would utter a curse:

"Go away! May death carry you off"!

Then I would immediately feel a shudder go right through me, and all day I would fear some dreadful event.

Never have I been able to rid myself of this magic spell of language. Whenever a colleague curses me, "May you perish," I feel cold at the back of my neck and foresee the horrors of death. Whenever anyone says "Drop dead"! I can already feel myself begin to fail. It is as if language, far from being a transparent tool, really shares some of the nature of the things it designates as well as some of their weight.

For my ten o'clock snack, my mother always gave me two pennies and a big piece of bread crust, of the bread that she kneaded herself and took to the Arab oven to bake. With my two pennies, I could buy myself a piece of chocolate or the makings of a sandwich. Chaoul, the school janitor, did sell whole sandwiches made of exquisite small loaves of white bread, but these cost ten pennies. So Chaoul would dig with his agile finger into my piece of bread to bury in it a couple of green olives, as many black olives, a sliver of anchovy, a few crumbs of tuna fish, and a bit of boiled vegetable, all of which he then seasoned with olive oil. I watched this carefully to make sure that he gave me all the tuna I was entitled to and that he refrained from giving me any *arissa*, the strange sauce of fire-red peppers that all my compatriots carry with them wherever they travel, for fear of ever running out of it. *Arissa* always burned my palate and gave me a cold sweat.

Generally, we reached the old gateway long before schooltime. We enjoyed the freedom of chatting together before being locked up for three hours within those mouse-grey walls. Besides, we met there all the quick-getaway hucksters who offered us all sorts of cheap dainties. They had learned, from long experience, to classify schools according to the purchasing power of the pupils. We certainly came last but one on their list, only just ahead of the other school of the Alliance that was situated in the heart of the ghetto and where the midday meal and even the clothes of the pupils were distributed free. That is why all these little tradesmen used to bring us whatever they had failed to sell at the gates of the other schools. In October, for instance, the small green apples that had fallen too soon from the tree and had been dipped in a sugar solution with red coloring. We licked the taffy crust until we reached the actual fruit, ate the fruit too, but pulled hideous faces as we did it, with our teeth on edge and our eyes grown dim. I had discovered that if one bit the taffy apple without first licking it the bitterness of the fruit was reduced by the sugar. But then I ate it all so fast that the pleasure was over before I had really experienced it. In spring, the fruit that was sold to us was already full of sunlight: yellow arbutus berries, the less expensive ones still greenish, big as marbles and all kernel, sharp to the taste and giving us belly-aches; the better fruit was of a fine golden yellow or bright red and tasted and smelled exquisitely sweet. Under the pressure of necessity, some of us had even learned to like the cheaper arbutus berries and to claim that they preferred them to the riper ones. To my great surprise, they chose those that were most green and most acid. But I never reached that stage, though some of my schoolmates may actually have been fortunate enough to like the green berries. Toward the same time of year, we were also offered the jujube fruits, small wild berries that were shiny as beads of brown marble or all wrinkled like the cheeks of an old woman, and much more attractive to look at than good to eat. Later, there were also oranges and dates, especially the big yellow dates that have an astringent effect on the mouth, leaving it all dry and resistant to any liquid.

Of all the hucksters, only "Birdie" managed, in all seasons, to achieve the miracle of bringing us real goodies at a reasonable price. He was a tiny man of no specific age, who had adopted as his dress for all times an ancient pair of tuxedo pants, a jacket that had a patch over the left elbow, and a cap of Persian lamb that seemed to overwhelm his birdlike head. He owed his nickname to the sweets of the "Bird" brand that he sold in a biscuit box. This tin box could easily be concealed whenever the cops turned up, as the police, God alone knows why, seemed to be intent on mercilessly pursuing all the little hucksters; so Birdie's biscuit box was his stroke of genius, his secret weapon of defense that allowed him to remain invulnerable, whereas all his colleagues were sooner or later arrested. This miracle box always contained a few defective candies from one or the other of the better makers, some excellent pastries that had been spoiled in the process of baking, or some candied almonds that had failed to acquire the right color while cooking, all of this stock having been sold to Birdie for next to nothing. Even if we failed to get any of these treats, we found at least some cakes made of heavy semolina that were full of bits of straw and somehow numbed our stomachs that were always underfed.

For some time Birdie had been offering us flat Nestlé chocolate bars, together with a colored card. The Nestlé firm was launching a very successful commercial campaign: in the wrapping of each bar they put one or two of these picture cards of which a complete set would fill an album. The prize, for whoever turned in a full album by a certain deadline, was something pretty serious: a bicycle, if I remember right. Each one of these chocolate bars cost seven pennies, but since I had only two pennies a day to spend, I was disqualified from the start. However, I was not aware of this handicap and, as the Nestlé firm gave its albums away free, I went to collect one too.

Every Friday, on the morning before Sabbath, classes began and finished an hour earlier, which seemed to us to be a considerable gain. For this reason, among others, I particularly enjoyed my Fridays,

whereas my mother could never get accustomed to this interruption of our daily routine. Harried by her responsibilities in preparing the three Sabbath meals, she never made a success of the first one, actually the least important one.

This particular day, it was the bread that was lacking when I sat down for breakfast, so she asked to go and fetch it at the baker's oven, which was in the Street of the Sparrows, a blind alley fairly far from our home. As I was not very hungry, this unexpected chore annoyed me and I grumbled, pretended it was already too late, and made up my mind to go off without breakfasting. With the vast selfishness of a child, I guessed quite rightly that this would upset my mother and punish her for her forgetfulness. Finally she lost her temper and, running short of other arguments, called upon heaven as a witness to curse me. But I was stubborn, slung my school satchel over my shoulder, and left the house. When I reached the end of the street, I heard her calling me, so I turned back with some ill will, dragging my feet, to receive from her my two pennies and an unexpected piece of bread crust. She had certainly borrowed it from Joulie, and this gesture made my vague remorse weigh all the more heavily on my conscience. The day had been spoiled for me, by my empty stomach and my confused conscience.

I reached the old iron gate of the school, of course, too early. Birdie's head, with his humble expression, his heavy eyelids that were always lowered, scarcely rose above a compact group of school children, while the other hucksters managed to attract only a few customers. One of them, a new trader, was giving us the old blarney to build up his trade. I noticed Saul as he detached himself from Birdie's group: he was my rival and had thus come to be my first comrade. Our teacher in the first grade used to make us sit in the classroom by order of merit, so that Saul and I occupied the first row almost all year round. Comrades in the front row, we soon became friends by force of habit, though there was some irony to this as Saul was the son of a rich merchant in the covered bazaar, a fact that was each day more noticeable to me. Beneath his black apron that always seemed new, he wore fine cloth pants with mother-of-pearl buttons on the side, which had long aroused my curiosity: what could possibly be the use of buttons without any buttonholes? I had often made fun of them and Saul never knew what to answer. One day, as I repeated my taunts, he took on a superior manner: his mother had explained to him certain facts that he could not reveal to me. In spite of my exasperation and insistence, he absolutely refused to speak. In addition, he always smelled good, every day of the week, which impressed me very much.

I went toward Saul, this particular morning, and greeted him. He smiled amiably, but seemed preoccupied. The news was indeed serious: one of the older boys, the elder of the Garsia brothers, claimed that the Nestlé firm had set the end of the month as the deadline for the set of pictures to be completed, and that a new album was being launched for the following month. Saul was furious for he would never be able to complete his set in time. I watched the whole excited crowd like a spectator who is not involved in what is happening on the race track. The younger Garsia bought two chocolate bars at once and tore one wrapping open: all heads were bent over the card, a bird. That one belonged to a set already completed by all true collectors! He tore the second wrapping: a machine tool, which was better, but still failed to satisfy him.

"I already have it. Who wants to swap it"?

I would willingly have accepted it, but I had no card to give in exchange. Garsia put the pictures carefully away in his wallet, then offered the chocolate bars to Birdie:

"Will you buy them back from me"?

Birdie counted out two pennies twice and took the bars back without their red wrappings. The sons of rich parents, with Birdie's help, had surely worked out the deal among themselves. Too well fed to eat all the chocolate bars that they bought, they sold them back to Birdie for two pennies, and he then sold them to us for three. That way, everyone was satisfied. I could now afford a chocolate bar every other day, if I wanted, as I needed to spend only one of my pennies on the intervening day and could save the second for the morrow. It was difficult to breakfast off bread and a single penny, but I had found a compromise: I bought a chocolate-flavored candy that I placed between my cheek and my lower jaw. I bit into my bread without touching the candy, which then melted slowly, giving me the impression that I was eating my bread with chocolate. I repeated this experiment several times and, for the days of celebration when I could afford a Nestlé bar, I also had a technique of my own for consuming my treat just as I had a plan for purchasing it. First, I economized carefully, eating my bread in large mouthfuls with as little chocolate as possible. Once I had swallowed my bread and assuaged my hunger, I then hesitated a while before suddenly gulping down all the chocolate that was left, I mean more than half the bar. All my mouth would then participate in this orgasm, with chocolate all over my gums, the lining of my cheeks, and my palate. This lasted thirty seconds, but thirty seconds of total bliss, almost making me feel nausea.

But today, I had not yet had any morning breakfast, so that there could be no question of saving. The sandwich that Chaoul, the janitor, prepared for me would scarcely be enough.

Saul felt reassured and went ahead, buying his daily ration of Nestlé. Unlike Garsia, he bought his bars one by one and tore the wrappings slowly, like one of those gamblers who uncover their cards one at a time, a millimeter at a time. He kept all of us on tenterhooks, crowding round him in silence. But he too had no luck. One after the other, he drew a bird, then a second bird, and a fish, all of them run-of-the-mill cards of which he already owned several copies. Saul had thus spent twenty-one pennies and now searched the pockets of his pants and of his overall apron, to find there only a top, some marbles, a piece of string, a two-penny piece, and a single penny, and that was all. On his face there began to appear the signs of a spoiled child's tantrum, and he almost made me pity him. He shook out his crumpled handkerchief: another coin fell out of it. We all rushed to pick it up, another two-penny piece. We were interested in watching the last efforts of the luckless gambler, and only Birdie seemed to remain impassive, watching it all with a kind and paternal look in his eyes.

Graziani, the gateman, then appeared in the entrance, clapped his hands and began to push open the heavy door. The group around Birdie slowly dispersed. Out of a feeling of friendship, I waited for Saul who was now fumbling in his satchel. He finally spoke to me, asking me with great affability:

"Can you lend me two pennies"?

I was his last chance, and I didn't hesitate long. To be sure, I didn't have much time to think it over and the whole situation was too new for me. Poor little rich boy Saul needed my money, my two pennies. I was vaguely and stupidly proud of this. Perhaps, too, I would have been ashamed to say no, and I later felt more resentful toward him because of this feeling of shame than of anything else. Saul had offered me, from time to time, chocolate or candy, but I had never offered him anything.

I knew exactly where my own money was tucked away. But as I always hid it in a tobacco tin, well concealed beneath my apron, in the breast pocket of my shirt, and as Saul was now in a hurry, I fumbled around with my fingers in the pleats of the shirt and Saul became impatient.

"Hurry up"! he exclaimed.

I hastened to open the tin that was rattling with the only sound of my single coin and handed him the two-penny piece that was intended for my sandwich. Saul was thus able to complete the required sum, bought the last Nestlé bar, tore the wrapping, and exclaimed in disgust:

"What? Another fish? Well, I have no luck today."

It seemed to me that nobody had any luck at all that day.

The street was deserted and Graziani was shaking his head with a sad expression, acting as if he were about to close the gate. We rushed in through the opening that was scarcely wide enough to allow a cat to pass.

"*Ragazzi! Ragazzi!*" the old Italian grumbled affectionately.

The massive door shut loudly behind us. We went to our seats in the first-year class and sat still. The crowd was now transmuted into an organized little society that respected order, and silence followed the earlier clamor. It was then that my stomach chose to rumble loud and long as I realized that I would get no breakfast.

I felt that I had been imposed upon. Up till then, I had never experienced the revelation of jealousy and envy. I had envied Saul his fine clothes and his pocket money, but it had been without any true bitterness or animosity. Later, I began to hate the Sauls of life, but the power of the rich, at that time, still inspired in me some respect, as if I were witnessing a constant and almost magical run of luck. I still saw no relationship between their riches and my own poverty, but Saul's self-centered lack of any awareness established the first link between the two. He could take away from me the two pennies for my breakfast in order to purchase himself an unnecessary Nestlé bar, and then was able to throw away the chocolate that I could not afford.

Saul never remembered to repay me my two pennies, which was quite natural, for it was such a small sum . . . .

## **An Egyptian Childhood** **The Autobiography of Taha Hussein**

*Taha Hussein was born in Upper Egypt in 1889 to a large family of modest means. Blinded in childhood from the inept treatment of a local barber /surgeon, he went on to higher education in Egypt and abroad, and became one of Egypt's foremost educators, reformers and authors. He received recognition and honor internationally, and when he died in 1973 his funeral cortege was followed by thousands of Egyptians who respected his dedication to his people.*

### *Chapter One*

He cannot remember the name of the day nor is he able to place it in the month and year wherein God placed it. In fact he cannot even remember what time of the day it was exactly and can only give it approximately.

To the best of his belief, the time of day was either dawn or dusk. That is due to the fact that he remembers feeling a slightly cold breeze on his face, which the heat of the sun had not destroyed.

And that is likely because notwithstanding his ignorance as to whether it was light or dark, he just remembers on leaving the house, meeting with soft, gentle, delicate light as though darkness covered some of its edges.

Then that is also likely because he just seems to remember that when he met with this breeze and light he did not feel around him any great movement of people stirring, but he only felt the movement of people waking up from sleep or settling down to it.

However, if there has remained to him any clear distinct memory of this time about which there is no cause to doubt, it is the memory of a fence which stood in front of him and was made of maize stems and which was only a few paces away from the door of the house.

He remembers the fence as though he saw it only yesterday. He remembers that the stalks of which this fence was composed were taller than he was, and it was difficult for him to get to the other side of it.

He also recalls that the stalks of this fence were close together, as it were stuck together, so that he could not squeeze between them. He recollects too that the stacks of this fence stretched from his left to an ending he could not conjecture; and it stretched from his right to the end of the world in that direction. And the end of the world in this direction was near, for it reached as far as the canal, which fact he discovered when he got a little older. Now this played a great part in his life; or shall we say in his imagination?

All this he remembers, and he remembers how envious he was of the rabbits which used to go out of the house, just as he did, but were able to traverse the fence by leaping over it or by squeezing between the stalks to where they could nibble what was behind it in the way of greenstuffs, of which he remembers particularly the cabbage.

Then he remembers how he used to like to go out of the house at sunset when people were having their evening meal, and used to lean against the maize fence pondering deep in thought, until he was recalled to his surroundings by the voice of a poet who was sitting at some distance to his left, with his audience round him. Then the poet would begin to recite in a wonderfully sweet tone the doings of Abu Zaid, Khalifa and Diab, and his hearers would remain silent except when ecstasy enlivened them or desire startled them. Then they would demand a repetition and argue and dispute. And so the poet would be silent until they ceased their clamour after a period which might be short or long. Then he would continue his sweet recitation in a monotone.

He remembers too that whenever he went out at night to his place by the fence, there was always bitter grief in his soul because he knew only too well that his entertainment would be curtailed as soon as his sister called him to come indoors. He would refuse, and then she would come out and seize him by his clothes while he resisted with all his might. Then she would carry him in her arms as though he were a plaything and run with him to the place where she put him down to sleep on the ground, placing his head on the thigh of his mother, who turned her attention to his poor weak eyes, opening them one by one and pouring into them a liquid which hurt him but did no good at all. But although he felt the pain he did not complain or cry because he did not want to be a whimperer and a whiner like his little sister. Then he was carried to a corner of a small room and, his sister having laid him down to sleep on a mat on which had been spread an eiderdown, put another coverlet on top of him, and left him inwardly bemoaning his fate. Then he began to strain his hearing to its utmost, hoping that he might catch through the wall the sound of the sweet songs which the poet was reciting in the open air under the sky. Eventually sleep overcame him

and he knew no more until he woke up when everybody was sleeping, his brothers and sisters stretched about him snoring loudly and deeply. He would throw the coverlet from his face in fear and hesitation because he hated to sleep with his face uncovered. For he knew full well if he uncovered his face in the course of the night or exposed any of the extremities of his body, they would be at the mercy of one of the numerous evil sprites which inhabited every part of the house, filling every nook and cranny, and which used to descend under the earth as soon as ever the sun began to shine and folk began to stir; but when the sun sank to his lair and people retired to their resting-places, when lamps were extinguished and voices hushed, then these evil sprites would come up from under the earth and fill the air with hustle and bustle, whispering and shrieking. Often he would awake and listen to the answering crows of the cocks and the cackling of the hens and would try hard to distinguish between these various sounds, because sometimes it was really the cocks crowing, but at others it was the voices of the evil sprites assuming their shapes in order to deceive people and tease them. However, he did not worry his head about these sounds or bother about them, because they came to him from afar, but what really did make him afraid were other sounds which he could only distinguish with the greatest effort, sounds which proceeded softly from the corners of the room. Some of them were like the hissing of a kettle boiling on the fire, others resembled the movement of light articles being moved from place to place, and again others sounded like the breaking of wood or the cracking of stems.

But his greatest terror of all was of persons who, in his imagination, stood in the doorway of the room and blocked it and began to make various noises something like the performances of dervishes at their religious exercises. Now he firmly believed that he had no protection from all these terrifying apparitions and horrible noises unless he wrapped himself up inside the coverlet from head to toe, without leaving any hole or crack between himself and the outer air, for he did not doubt but that if he left an aperture in the coverlet, the hand of an evil sprite would be stretched through it to his body and catch hold of him or poke him mischievously.

And so on account of these things he used to spend his nights in fear and trepidation unless he fell asleep; but he did not sleep very much. He used to wake up very early in the morning, or at any rate as soon as dawn broke, and he used to spend a great part of the night between these terrors and his fear of the evil sprites until at last he heard the voices of the women as they returned to their houses after filling their water jars at the canal, singing as they went 'Allah ya lail Allah' (My God! What a night! My God!). By this he knew that dawn had begun to peep and that the evil sprites had descended to their subterranean abodes. Then he himself was transformed into a sprite and began to talk to himself in a loud tone and to sing as much of the song of the poet (as he could remember) and to nudge his brothers and sisters who were lying around him until he had woken them up one by one. And when he had accomplished that, there was such a shouting and singing and hustle and bustle, a veritable babel, that was only restrained when the sheikh,<sup>1</sup> their father, got up from his bed and called for a jug of water in order to wash himself before praying.

Then only were voices hushed and the movement quietened down until the sheikh had completed his religious ablutions, said his prayers, read a portion of the Quran, drunk his coffee and gone to his work. But as soon as ever the door closed behind him the whole family rose from their beds and ran through the house shouting and playing, scarcely distinguishable from the feathered and four-legged inhabitants of the house.

## *Chapter Two*

He was convinced that the world ended to the right of him with the canal, which was only a few paces away from where he stood . . . and why not? For he could not appreciate the width of this canal, nor could he reckon that this expanse was so narrow that any active youth could jump from one bank to the other. Nor could he imagine that there was human, animal and vegetable life on the other side of the canal just as much as there was on his side; nor could he calculate that a grown man could wade across this canal in flood without the water reaching up to his armpits; nor did he conjecture that from time to time there was no water in it. Then it would become a long ditch in which boys played and searched in the soft mud for such little fishes as had been left behind, and had died when the water had been cut off.

None of these things did he ponder, and he was absolutely certain in his mind that this canal was another world quite independent of that in which he lived. A world that was inhabited by various strange beings without number, among which were crocodiles which swallowed people in one mouthful, and also enchanted folk who lived under the water all the bright day and during the dark night. Only at dawn and dusk did they come up to the surface for a breath of air, and at that time they were a great danger to children and a seduction to men and women.



And among these strange creatures also were the long and broad fish which would no sooner get hold of a child than they would swallow him up; and in the stomachs of which some children might be fortunate enough to get hold of the signet-ring that would bring them to kingship. Now hardly had a man twisted this ring round his finger before two servants of the genie appeared in the twinkling of an eye to carry out his every wish. This was the very ring which Solomon wore and so subjected to his will genies, winds and every natural force he wished.

Now he liked nothing better than to go down to the edge of this canal in the hope that one of these fish would swallow him and so enable him to get possession of this ring in its stomach, for he had great need of it . . . Was he not ambitious at least to be carried across the canal by one of the genie's servants in order to see the wonders on the other side? On the other hand he shrank from the terrors he must undergo before he reached this blessed fish.

However, he was not able to explore along the bank of the canal for a great distance, inasmuch as both to right and to left the way was fraught with danger. For to his right lay the Aduites, people from Upper Egypt who lived in a big house and had two large dogs which were always on guard at the door of the house, barking incessantly. They were a by-word among the neighbours for ferocity, for a passer-by had only escaped from them with much difficulty and hardship.

And to the left were the tents of Said-al-Araby, about whose evil doings and cunning there was much gossip, as also about his blood-thirstiness. His wife, Kawabis, wore a great nose-ring and used to frequent the house and kiss our friend from time to time, causing him much pain and no small dismay by her nose-ring. And although he had the greatest dread of going to the right and encountering the two dogs of the Aduites, or of going to the left and encountering the evil of Said and his wife, Kawabis, still he used to find in every part of this somewhat limited and restricted world of his, various kinds of amusement and games, which would occupy the entire day.

The memory of children is indeed a strange thing, or shall we say that the memory of man plays strange tricks when he tries to recall the events of his childhood; for it depicts some incidents as clearly as though they had only happened a short time before, whereas it blots out others as though they had never passed within his ken.

For example, our friend remembers the fence and the cultivated land which lay alongside it and the canal which marked the end of the earth, and Said, and Kawabis and the Aduite dogs; but when he tries to recollect the passing of all these things he cannot grasp anything. It is just as though he went to sleep one night and woke up to find no sign of the fence or the field or Said or Kawabis. And lo! he saw in place of the fence and the field houses and well-ordered streets, all of which were on a slope stretching from north to south down to the embankment of the canal for a short distance. He remembers many of those who used to live in these houses, both men and women, and even the children who used to play in the streets.

Moreover, he remembers that he was able to explore boldly in both directions along the bank of the canal, without fear of the dogs of the Aduites or the cunning of Said and his wife; and he remembers how he used to spend many pleasant and happy hours every day on the canal bank listening to the songs of Hassan the Poet, who used to sing all about Abu Zaid, Khalifa and Diab while he was raising the water by means of a shaduf to irrigate his lands on the opposite bank. How more than once he was enabled to cross this canal on the shoulder of one of his brothers without recourse to the 'ring of kingship', and more than once he went to a place on the opposite side where stood some mulberry trees, of the delicious fruit of which he ate. How he more than once went along the bank of the canal to the right as far as the schoolmaster's orchard and not infrequently ate some apples there, and used to gather mint and basil, but he is totally at a loss to remember how this state of affairs changed and how the face of the earth was altered from its former appearance to this present one.

### *Chapter Three*

He was the seventh of the thirteen children of his father, and the fifth out of the eleven children of his father's second wife. He used to feel that among this enormous number of youths and infants he had a special place distinct from his brothers and sisters. Did this position please him or did it annoy him? The truth is that he cannot definitely say, nor is he now able to form a correct judgement about it.

He experienced much tenderness and consideration from his mother, and from his father lenience and kindness, and his brothers he felt were somewhat reserved in their conversation and dealings with him. But he found side by side with this tenderness and consideration on the part of his mother a certain amount of negligence sometimes, and at others even harshness. And side by side with the lenience of his father he found a certain amount of negligence also, and even severity from time to time. Moreover, the reserve of his brothers and sisters pained him because he found therein a sympathy tainted with revulsion.

However, it was not long before he learnt the reason of all this, for he perceived that other people had an advantage over him and that his brothers and sisters were able to do things that he could not do and to tackle things that he could not. He felt that his mother permitted his brothers and sisters to do things that were forbidden to him. This aroused, at first, a feeling of resentment, but ere long this feeling of resentment turned to a silent, but heartfelt, grief -- when he heard his brothers and sisters describing things about which he had no knowledge at all.

Then he knew that they saw what he did not see.

## The Women's Baths

Ulfat al-Idlibi

*Ulfat al-Idlibi was born in Damascus in 1912. One of the most distinguished writers in Syria, she started writing in the 1950s and has published three collections of short stories as well as works of literary criticism.*

Our household was troubled by an unusual problem: my grandmother, who had passed the age of seventy, insisted on taking a bath at the beginning of every month at the public baths, or market baths as she used to call them.

In my grandmother's opinion the market baths had a delicious ambience about them which we, who had never experienced it, could not appreciate.

For our part we were afraid that the old lady might slip on the wet floor of the baths -- this has often happened to people who go there -- and break her leg, as her seventy years had made her bones dry and stiff; or she might catch a severe chill coming outside from the warm air of the baths and contract a fatal illness as a result. But how could we convince this stubborn old lady of the cogency of these arguments?

It was quite out of the question that she should give up a custom to which she had adhered for seventy years, and she had done so without ever once having been stricken with the mishaps we feared. Grandmother had made up her mind that she would keep up this custom as long as she was able to walk on her own two feet, and her tenacity in clinging to her point of view only increased the more my mother tried to reason with her.

Yet Mother never tired of criticizing her mother-in-law, arguing with her and attempting to demonstrate the silliness of her views, even if only by implication. Whenever the subject of the public baths came up my mother proceeded to enumerate their shortcomings from the standpoints of health, of society, and even of economics.

The thing which really annoyed Mother was that my grandmother monopolized our only maid from the early morning onward on the day she went to the baths. She would summon her to her room to help her sweep it and change the sheets and do up the bundles to take to the baths. Then she would set out with her and would not bring her back until around sunset, when our maid would be exhausted and hardly able to perform her routine chores.

In our house I was the observer of a relentless, even though hidden, struggle between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law: between my grandmother, who clung to her position in the household and was resolved under no circumstances to relinquish it, and my mother, who strove to take her place.

Although girls usually side with their mother, I had a strong feeling of sympathy for my grandmother: old age had caught up with her since her husband had died some time before and left her a widow, and little by little her authority in the home shrank as my mother's authority gradually extended. It is the law of life: one takes, then one hands over to another in one's turn. But that does not mean we obey the law readily and willingly.

I used to feel a certain prick of pain when I saw Grandmother retire alone to her room for long hours after being defeated in an argument with Mother. I would sometimes hear her talking bitterly to herself, or I would see her monotonously shaking her head in silence, as though she were rehearsing the book of her long life, reviewing the days of her past, when she was the unchallenged mistress of the house, with the last word. I would often see her vent the force of her resentment on her thousand-bead rosary as her nervous fingers told its beads and she repeated the prayer to herself:

"Oh merciful God, remove this affliction!"

And who could this "affliction" be but my mother?

Then little by little she would calm down and forget the cause of her anger. There is nothing like the invocation of God for purifying the soul and enabling it to bear the hardships of life.

One day when I saw my grandmother getting her things ready to go to the market baths I had the idea of accompanying her, thinking that perhaps I might uncover the secret which attracted her to them. When I expressed my wish to accompany her she was very pleased, but my mother did not like this sudden impulse at all, and said, in my grandmother's hearing, "Has the craze for going to the market baths affected you as well? Who knows -- you may catch some infection, like scabies or something, and it will spread around the family."

Thereupon my father broke in with the final word: "What is the matter with you? Let her go with her grandmother. All of us went to the public baths when we were young and it never did any of us any harm."

My mother relapsed into a grudging silence, while my grandmother gave an exultant smile at this victory -- my father rarely took her side against my mother.

Then Grandmother led me by the hand to the room where her massive trunk was kept. She produced the key from her pocket and opened the trunk in my presence -- this was a great honor for me, for the venerable trunk had never before been opened in the presence of another person -- and immediately there wafted out of it a strange yet familiar scent, a scent of age, a smell of the distant past, of years which have been folded up and stored away. Grandmother drew out of the depths of the trunk a bundle of red velvet, the corners of which were embroidered with pearls and sequins.

She opened it in front of me and handed me a wine-colored bath-wrap decorated with golden stars. I had never set eyes on a more beautiful robe. She also gave me a number of white towels decorated around the edges with silver thread, saying "All these are brand new; no one has ever used them. I have saved them from the time I was married. Now I'm giving them to you as a present, since you are going to the baths with me. Alas . . . poor me. Nobody goes with me now except the servants."

She gave a deep, heart-felt sigh. Then she called the servant to carry the bundle containing our clothes and towels, and the large bag which held the bowl, the soap, the comb, the sponge-bag, the loofah,\* the soil of Aleppo,\*\* and the henna which would transform my grandmother's white hair to jet black. She put on her shawl, and we made our way toward the baths, which were only a few paces from our house. Times without number I had read the words on the little plaque which crowned the low, unpretentious door as I passed by: "Whoever the Divine Blessing of health would achieve, should turn to the Lord and then to the baths of Afif."

We entered the baths.

The first thing I noticed was the female "intendant." She was a stout woman, sitting on the bench to the right of persons coming in. In front of her was a small box for collecting the day's revenue. Next to it was a *nargileh* decorated with flowers. It had a long mouthpiece which the intendant played with between her lips, while she looked at those around her with a proprietorial air. When she saw us she proceeded to welcome us without stirring from her place. Then she summoned Umm Abdu, the bath attendant. A woman hastened up and gave us a perfunctory welcome. She had pencilled eyebrows, eyes painted with *kohl*, and was dressed very neatly. She had adorned her hair with two roses and a sprig of jasmine. She was very voluble, and was like a spinning-top, never motionless, and her feet in her Shabrawi clogs made a rhythmic clatter on the floor of the baths. Her function was that of hostess to the bathers. She came up to my grandmother and led her to a special bench resembling a bed. Our maid hastened to undo one of our bundles, drawing out a small prayer rug which she spread out on the bench. My grandmother sat down on it to get undressed.

I was fascinated by what I saw around me. In particular my attention was drawn to the spacious hall called *al-barani*. In the center of it was a gushing fountain. Around the hall were narrow benches on which were spread brightly-colored rugs where the bathers laid their things. The walls were decorated with mirrors, yellowed and spotted with age, and panels on which were inscribed various maxims. On one of them I read, "Cleanliness is part of Faith."

My grandmother urged me to undress. I took off my clothes and wrapped myself in the wine-colored bath-wrap, but as I was not doing it properly Umm Abdu came and helped me. She secured it around my body and drew the free end over my left shoulder, making it appear like an Indian sari.

Then she helped my grandmother down from her bench, and conducted us toward a small door which led into a dark corridor, calling out at the top of her voice, "Marwah! Come and look after the Bey's mother"!

With a sigh a shape suddenly materialized in the gloom in front of me: it was a grey-haired, emaciated woman of middle age with a face in which suffering had engraved deep furrows. She was naked except for a faded cloth which hung from her waist to her knees. She welcomed us in a nasal tone, prattling on although I could not catch a single syllable of what she was saying, thanks to the babble of discordant voices which filled my ears and the hot thick steam which obstructed my sight; and there was a smell which nearly made me faint, the like of which I had never encountered in my life before. I felt nauseous, and was almost sick, leaning against the maid for support.

Nevertheless, in a few moments I grew accustomed to the odor and it no longer troubled me; my eyes, also, became accustomed to seeing through the steam.

We reached a small hall containing a large stone basin. A number of women circled around in it, chatting and washing at the same time. I asked my grandmother: "Why don't we join them"?

She replied: "This is the *wastani*; I have hired a cubicle in the *juwani* I am not accustomed to bathing with the herd."

I followed her through a small door to the *juwani*, and found myself looking with confused curiosity at the scene that presented itself. There was a large rectangular hall, at each corner of which stood a large basin of white marble. Women sat around each one, busily engrossed in washing, scrubbing, and rubbing, as though they were in some kind of race. I raised my eyes to look at the ceiling, and saw a lofty dome with circular openings, glazed with crystal, through which enough light filtered to illuminate the hall. The uproar here was at its worst -- there was a clashing of cans, the splashing of water, and the clamor of children.

My grandmother paused for a moment to greet a friend among the bathers, while I found myself following a violent quarrel which had arisen between two young women. I understood from the women around them that they were two wives of a polygamous marriage, who had met face to face for the first time at the baths. The furious quarrel led at length to an exchange of blows with metal bowls. Luckily a spirit of chivalry among some of the bathers induced them to separate the two warring wives before they could satisfy their thirst for revenge.

As we advanced a little way the howling of a small child drowned the hubbub of the hall. Its mother had put it on her lap, twisting one of its legs around her and proceeding to scrub its face with soap and pour hot water over it until its skin was scarlet red. I averted my gaze, fearing the child would expire before my eyes.

We reached the cubicle, and I felt a sense of oppression as we entered it. It consisted of nothing but a small chamber with a basin in the front. Its one advantage was that it screened those taking a bath inside from the other women.

We were received in the cubicle by a dark, stout woman with a pockmarked face and a harsh voice. This was Mistress Umm Mahmud. She took my grandmother from the attendant Marwah, who was being assailed by shouts from every direction:

"Cold water, Marwah, cold water, Marwah"!

The poor woman set about complying with the bathers' requests for cold water, dispensing it from two big buckets which she filled from the fountain in the outer hall. She was so weighed down with the buckets that she aroused pity in those who saw her struggle.

I turned back to Grandmother and found her sitting on the tiled floor in front of the basin. She had rested her head between the hands of Umm Mahmud, who sat behind her on a sort of wooden chair which was only slightly raised above the level of the floor. She proceeded to scour Grandmother's head with soap seven consecutive times -- not more, not less.

I stood at the door of the cubicle, entertained by the scene presented by the bathers. I watched the younger women coming and going, from time to time going into the outer hall for the sake of diversion, their fresh youthfulness showing in their proud swaying gait. In their brightly colored wraps decorated with silver thread they resembled Hindu women in a temple filled with the fragrance of incense. Little circles of light fell from the dome onto their tender-skinned bodies, causing them to glisten.

I found the sight of the older women depressing: they sat close to the walls chatting with one another, while the cream of henna on their hair trickled in black rivulets along the wrinkles of their foreheads and cheeks, as they waited impatiently for their turn to bath.

Suddenly I heard shrill exclamations of pleasure. I turned toward their source, and saw a group of women gathered around a pretty young girl, loudly expressing their delight at some matter.

Mistress Umm Mahmud said to me: "Our baths are doing well today: we have a bride here, we have a woman who has recently had a child, and we have the mother of the Bey -- may God spare her for us"!

It was no wonder that my grandmother swelled with pride at being mentioned in the same breath with a bride and a young mother.

I enjoyed standing at the door of the cubicle watching the bride and her companions. Then I caught sight of a fair well-built woman enveloped in a dark blue wrap, giving vent to overflowing joy with little shrieks of delight. I realized from the words she was singing that she must be the bride's mother:

"Seven bundles I packed for thee, and the eighth in the  
chest is stored;

To Thee, Whom all creatures need, praise be, oh Lord"!

A young woman, a relative or friend of the bride, replied:

"Oh maiden coming from the *wastani*, with thy towel all  
scented.

He who at thy wedding shows no joy, shall die an infidel, from  
Paradise prevented"!

The bride's mother continued the song:

"The little birds chirp and flutter among the trellis'd leaves:

How sweet the bride! The bath upon her brow now pearly  
 crowns of moisture weaves.  
 Thou canst touch the City Gate with the little finger tip,  
 though it is so high;  
 I have waited long, long years for this day's coming nigh"!  
 But the best verse was reserved for the bridegroom's mother:  
 "Oh my daughter-in-law! I take thee as my daughter!  
 The daughters of Syria are many, but my heart only desires  
 and wishes for thee!  
 Pistachios, hazels and dates: the heart of the envious has  
 been sore wounded;  
 Today we are merry, but the envious no merriment shall  
 see"!

The singing finished as the bride and her companions formed a circle around a tray upon which had been placed cakes of Damascene mincemeat, and a second one filled with various kinds of fruit. The bride's mother busied herself distributing the cakes right and left, and one of them fell to my share also!

In a far corner a woman was sitting with her four children around a large dish piled with mujaddarah and pickled turnips, their preoccupation with their meal rendering them completely oblivious to what was going on around them in the baths. When the dish had been emptied of food the mother took from a basket by her side a large cabbage. Gripping its long green leaves, she raised it up and then brought it down hard on the tiled floor, until it split apart and scattered into fragments. The children stumbled over each other to snatch them up and greedily devoured them, savoring their fresh taste.

Then my attention was diverted by a pretty girl, about fifteen or sixteen years old, sitting on a bench along the wall of the boiler-house. She seemed impatient and restless, as though she found it hard to tolerate the pervasive heat. She was surrounded by three women, one of whom, apparently her mother, was feverishly fussing over her. She began to rub over her body a yellow ointment which exuded a scent of ginger (it was what was called "strengthening ointment"). My grandmother explained to me that it reinforced the blood vessels of a new mother, and restored her to the state of health she had enjoyed before having her child.

The attendant Umm Abdu came up to us and inquired after our comfort. She brought us both glasses of licorice sherbet as a present from the intendant. Then she lit a cigarette for my grandmother, who was obviously regarded as a patron of distinction.

It was now my turn. My grandmother moved aside, and I sat down in her place, entrusting my head to the attentions of Umm Mahmud for a thorough rubbing. After I had had my seven soapings I sat down before the door of the cubicle to relax a little. I was amused to watch the bath attendant Marwah scrubbing one of the bathers. Her right hand was covered with coarse sacking, which she rubbed over the body of the woman sitting in front of her. She began quite slowly, and then sped up, and as she did so little grey wicks began to appear under the sacking, which quickly became bigger and were shaken to the floor.

After we had finished being loofah-ed and rubbed, Umm Mahmud asked me to come back to her to have my head soaped an additional five times. I surrendered to her because I had promised myself that I would carry out the bathing rites through all their stages and degrees as protocol dictated, whatever rigors I had to endure in the process!

I was not finished until Umm Mahmud had poured the last basinful of water over my head, after anointing it with "soil of Aleppo," the scent of which clung to my hair for days afterwards.

Umm Mahmud rose, and standing at the door of the cubicle, called out in her harsh voice: "Marwah! Towels for the Bey's mother"!

With a light and agile bound Marwah was at the door of the *wastani*, calling out in a high-pitched tone, like a cockerel: "Umm Abdu! Towels for the Bey's mother"! Her shout mingled with that of another "Mistress" who was standing in front of a cubicle opposite ours, like-wise demanding towels for her client.

Umm Abdu appeared, clattering along in her Shabrawi clogs, with a pile of towels on her arm which she distributed among us, saying as she did: "Blessings upon you . . . Have an enjoyable bath, if God wills"!

Then she took my grandmother by the arm and led her to the *barani*, where she helped her to get up onto the high bench, and then to dry herself and get into her clothes.

Grandmother stood waiting for her turn to pay her bill. There was a heated argument going on between the intendant and a middle aged woman who had three girls with her. I gathered from what was being said that the usual custom was for the intendant to charge married women in full, but that widows and single women paid only half the normal fee. The lady was claiming that she was a widow, and her

daughters were all single. The intendant listened to her skeptically, and obviously could not believe that the eldest of the girls was single, in that she was an adult and was very beautiful. But at last she was forced to accept what the woman said after the latter had sworn the most solemn oath that what she was saying was the truth.

My grandmother stepped forward and pressed something into the intendant's hand, telling her: "Here's what I owe you, with something extra for the cold water and the attendance."

The intendant peered down at her hand and then smiled; in fact she seemed very pleased, for I heard her say to my grandmother: "May God keep you, Madam, and we hope to see you every month."

Then my grandmother distributed tips to the attendant, the "Mistress" and Marwah, as they emerged from the *juwani* to bid her goodbye.

I have never known my grandmother to be so generous and open-handed as on the day which we spent at the market baths. She was pleased and proud as she listened to the blessings called down on her by those who had received her largesse. Then she gave me an intentionally lofty look, as if to say: "Can you appreciate your grandmother's status now? How about telling your mother about *this*, now that she's begun to look down her nose at me"?

As she left the baths there was a certain air of haughtiness in her step, and she held herself proudly upright, although I had only known her walk resignedly, with a bent back, at home.

Now she was enjoying the esteem which was hers only when she visited the market baths. At last I understood their secret . . .





## Three Cloistered Girls

Assia Djebar

*Assia Djebar was born in Algeria in 1936 and educated in Algeria and France. She has used the French language to explore issues of female emancipation and the oppression of women in North Africa. In addition to being a novelist she is also a film maker. "Three Cloistered Girls" is taken from her novel FANTASIA: AN ALGERIAN CALVACADE, which tells the history of Algeria from the capture of Algiers in 1830 by the French, through to the war of liberation in the 1950s. This national history is interposed with episodes from the childhood of a young Algerian girl.*

Three girls live cloistered in an airy house in the middle of the tiny Sahel village, surrounded by vast vineyards, where I come to spend my spring and summer holidays. My stay there, shut up with these three sisters, is my 'visit to the country.' I am ten, then eleven, then twelve.

All through the summer I play with the youngest of these girls who is a year or two older than me. We spend hours together on the swing at the bottom of the orchard near the farmyard. Now and then we break off from our games to peep through the hedge at the village women shouting from the neighbouring smallholdings. At dusk the farm gate opens to let in a flock of goats. I learn to milk the most docile ones. Then I drink from the skin bottle, whose tarry smell makes me rather nauseous. Not being allowed to wander in the dusty lanes of the village is no hardship to me.

The house is large. There are many cool shady rooms filled with mattresses piled up on the floor, and hung with Saharan tapestries woven in the past by the then mistress of the house -- a relative by marriage of my mother, who herself comes from the nearby town.

I never go into the end room: a senile old relative of the family squats there in permanent darkness. Sometimes the youngest sister and I venture as far as the doorway, petrified by the sound of her cracked voice, now moaning, now uttering vague accusations, denouncing imaginary plots. What hidden drama do we touch on, resurrected, revived by the ravings of the old crone in her second childhood, violently denouncing some past persecution in a voice that paralyses us? We do not know the magical formulas, the passages from the Quran, that the grown-ups recite aloud to exorcise these outbursts.

The presence of this ancient, with one foot already in the grave, ensures that the other women of the household never miss one of their daily prayers. They gather in the largest room, next to the kitchen or pantry; one of them sews or embroiders, while another squats on the floor, busily sorting chickpeas or lentils, spread out on white cloths. Suddenly five or six slight figures, their veils covering their heads and shoulders, silently straighten up, keeping their eyes lowered. Frail phantoms, both strengthened and weakened by the propitiatory liturgy, they prostrate themselves several times in unison . . . Sometimes my mother forms part of this group of pious women, making their obeisances, brushing the cold floor tiles with their lips.

We little girls take refuge beneath the medlar trees. To shut out the old woman mumbling to herself, the other's fervent whisperings. We go to count the pigeons in the loft or savour the smell of carobs in the shed, and of the hay trampled under the mare's hooves when she was let out into the fields. We compete to see who can swing highest. Oh! the exhilaration of swinging rhythmically, now high, now low, up over the house and the village! To soar with our legs higher than our heads, till the sounds of the animals and women are all swallowed up behind us.

In a gap in my memory, I suddenly recall one torrid, interminable summer. The raving old crone must have died the previous winter. There are fewer women in the family around: that same season there have been a great number of circumcisions and marriages in the nearby town -- so many new brides to be comforted, congratulated, consoled by the band of frustrated females accompanying them . . . I find the girls of the hamlet practically alone.

In the little farmyard, in spite of the carobs and the pigeons in the loft, I wish I were back at school; I miss the companionship of the other boarders, I describe the basketball games to the three country girls. I must be now about twelve or thirteen. I seem older; probably because I'm too tall, too thin. The eldest of the sisters keeps on bringing up the occasion when I first attended a gathering in the town and I was wearing the veil, and one of the city ladies came buzzing round me like a bee.

'Her son must have fallen in love with your silhouette and your eyes! You'll soon be hearing news of your first proposal!'

I stamp my feet in childish anger exacerbated by an ambiguous unease. I sulk for days on end, refusing to speak to the eldest sister.

During that same summer, the youngest sister and I manage to open the bookcase belonging to the absent brother, which up till then had always been kept locked. He works as an interpreter in the Sahara, which seems to us as far away as America. In one month we read all the novels pushed away indiscriminately: Paul Bourget, Colette, Agatha Christie. We discover an album of erotic photographs and an envelope containing picture postcards of bare-breasted Ouled-Nail girls, loaded with jewels. This brother was extremely strict and before this we were in daily terror of his unpredictable temper; and now we are suddenly aware of his uncomfortable presence during those dim siesta hours. We discreetly close the bookcase as the women rise for their afternoon prayers. We feel we have trespassed into some forbidden territory; we feel we have aged.

\*

That summer the girls let me into their secret. A strange and weighty, unexpected matter. I never spoke of it to any other woman in the family, old or young. I had given my solemn promise and I kept it scrupulously. These girls, though confined to their house, were writing; were writing letters; letters to men; to men in the four corners of the world; of the Arab world, naturally.

And letters came back from far and wide: letters from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, from Arab students in Paris or London. Letters sent by pen-pals chosen from adverts appearing in a women's magazine with a wide circulation at the time in the harems. With every number the subscriber received a pattern for a dress or a housegown that even an illiterate woman could follow.

These sisters were the only Muslim girls in their little village to have attended primary school. Their father -- a robust, pious countryman, who was the most expert market-gardener in the area -- could neither read nor write French. Every year he had to rely on one or other of his daughters to see that the invoices which he had to send to his accountant were correct.

The postman, the son of a local artisan, must have wondered at all these letters from such distant places landing up at his post-office, which no one had ever heard of till then. Nevertheless, he never breathed a word: 'The three daughters of the Sheikh!' He had never set eyes on these girls who must have seemed like princesses to him! . . . The backs of the envelopes bore fancy names borrowed from Eastern film-stars, giving the impression that the senders were women. He was not deceived. He must have mused over the girls' sweethearts, 'suitors' he probably thought. He knew that the girls never left the house, except when their father drove them himself in a barouche to the smartest Turkish bath in the nearby town . . . The continual arrival of these letters, from every corner of the world, must have weighed upon his mind, feeding some secret frustration!

The only thing I can recall about these letters is their proliferation and the number of different places they came from. When the youngest sister and I spent our evenings together, we no longer discussed the novels we had read during the long afternoons, but the audacity needed to carry on this clandestine correspondence. We conjured up the terrible dangers they were exposed to. There had been numerous cases in our towns of fathers or brothers taking the law into their own hands for less than this; the blood of an unmarried daughter or sister shed for a letter slipped surreptitiously into a hand, for a word whispered behind shuttered windows, for some slanderous accusation . . . A secret spirit of subversion had now seeped into the house, and we happy-go-lucky children were casually watching it spread.

The eldest sister, who had a reputation for being very high-and-mighty and never finding any of her official suitors good enough for her, had started this correspondence as a joke. One day, while the women in the next room were starting their prayers again, she had read the following advertisement from the magazine aloud to her sisters:

"Tunisian, aged twenty-two, blue eyes, fond of Farid el-Attrash, seeks girl pen-pal in Arab Country, romantically inclined." . . . Suppose I replied to him'?

I never knew what she wrote to the first, the second or the third correspondent: did she write of her uneventful everyday life, or of her dreams, or of the books she read? Perhaps she invented adventures for herself. I never asked her. I was simply dismayed to discover how quickly she found herself saddled with a dozen distant pen-pals. The youngest sister had almost as many. But the middle one -- the one who had been silently, meticulously preparing her wedding trousseau for years; the second sister, the prettiest, the gentlest, the most docile -- continued to protest that she would never, ever write to a stranger. If she did so, it would indicate that she was prepared to fall in love with him. And she preferred to wait, to get on with her sewing and embroidery, ready in due course to 'love' the eventual fiancé.

And I, at thirteen -- perhaps this time it was during the winter holidays -- I would listen, during these evenings we spent together, to the youngest of these marriageable girls describing the arguments they had had about what to write in their letters. The eldest sister sent her many pen-pals the words of Egyptian or Lebanese songs, photographs of Arab actresses or film-stars. The youngest maintained a sibylline silence about the contents of her own letters . . .

Everything is a jumble in my memories of this last visit: the novels in the brother's forbidden bookcase and the mysterious letters that arrived by the dozen. We amused ourselves imagining what the postman must be thinking -- his curiosity and bewilderment. Moreover, he must have felt vexed that he himself could never hope to win the hand of any of these village princesses!

The youngest sister and I continued our whispered confidences. In the periods when sleep crept over me I imagined written words whirling furtively around, about to twine invisible snares around our adolescent bodies, lying side by side across the antique family bed. The same bed in whose hollow the ancient crone used to give vent in her delirium to a corrosive litany of grievances, harping blasphemously on long-forgotten wrongs.

I was afraid and I admitted it. I was certain a light would blaze down from the ceiling and reveal our sin -- for I included myself in this terrible guilty secret!

The youngest sister went on whispering spasmodically. She was in the grip of her own determined will, while the night thickened around us and all living things had long fallen asleep.

'I'll never, never let them marry me off to a stranger who, in one night, will have the right to touch me! That's why I write all those letters! One day, someone will come to this dead-and-alive hole to take me away: my father and brother won't know him, but he won't be a stranger to me!'

Every night the vehement voice would utter the same childish vow. I had the premonition that in the sleepy, unsuspecting hamlet, an unprecedented women's battle was brewing beneath the surface.



# Family Matters

## Stories





# Gowhartaj's Father

Mahmud Kiyanush

*Mahmud Kiyanush was born in Iran in 1934. He is a prolific publisher of short stories, poems and novels, and a well known literary critic.*

The slim girl pulled down her white, dotted *chador* to the middle of her forehead, unwilling to hide her corn-silk blond tresses, but fearful to leave them exposed, for she had heard the sound of gruff coughing from the courtyard.

"It's father," she said softly.

Her large hazel eyes shone with joy, excitement, restlessness; she blushed to the ears and her oval face grew more innocent and more beautiful. In her eyes and movement there was both love and hope, both anxiety and sadness. She took two hesitant steps to the door of the room.

"Mother, what are we going to do? Are we going to tell him?" she asked, lowering her voice.

The woman was sitting under the mantelpiece, near the samovar. She was thin and her face was wrinkled. She moved a little, her voice calm yet authoritative and bearing a touch of reproach.

"I said I was going to tell him. Stop nagging."

"If they find out . . ." the girl began, worried.

She did not finish. The short, old man entered the room, coughing.

"A girl ought to be modest," the woman said under her breath, as the man continued coughing. "Good heavens! What's the world coming to!"

The old man took a dirty handkerchief out of his tunic pocket and wiped his mouth.

"What? What did you say?" he asked in a low, authoritative voice.

The woman put the tea-glass under the samovar, filling it with the bubbling hot water.

"Nothing. Sit down and drink some *ghandagh*" she said with feigned indifference. "It will soothe your chest."

The old man sat on the small floor mattress and leaned against the beddings which were wrapped in large bedspreads. He coughed again. The woman put the tea-glass and the sugar before him.

"Have you heard that Mashdi Gholam's son has become a *Karbalayi*?" she asked in a mocking tone as the old man continued coughing. "Yesterday their house was mobbed. The whole town had come to get dates, prayer-stones and beads. They had slaughtered a sheep. What pomp and circumstance! May God send them luck! The year we came to this neighborhood, Mashdi Gholam wore an old shoe on one foot and a torn slipper on the other! The way they rob people!"

The old man dropped a few sugar cubes into the tea-glass, and assumed an air of importance, paying no attention to his wife.

"Why are you standing there like a lamp post?" he said to the girl. "Either sit down, or go do something."

The woman felt a smile coming to her lips, but hid it before it spread to her face.

"He's right. Go get your embroidery and sit down here and finish it. What's become of the kind of diligence my generation had? I'd cut a garment in the morning and finish sewing it before sundown."

The girl tried to catch her mother's eyes. Succeeding, she winked at her knowingly and left the room. The old man took a sip from the *ghandagh* and put the glass down.

"Smells like dishwater," he said with a frown.

"Come! Come! Dishwater! What an idea," the woman cut him short. "Are you trying to find something to complain about? I rinsed the glass twice myself, and Gowhar washed the samovar clean as a whistle."

The old man made no answer. He smoothed his short, gray beard. His sad eyes lighted with pride. He shook his head slowly, musing.

"At the time I set out on the pilgrimage to Karbala, if you so much as heard the word "travel" your hair would stand on end. Blood-thirsty highwaymen plundered caravans, terrifying the travelers. They robbed, decapitated, and cut people open. The journey took months. We went day and night, in heat and cold. It was a struggle to get from one village to the next. That was pilgrimage for you! When you saw the dome and the shrine of Hosein you couldn't help weeping for joy."

The woman drank up her tea out of the saucer, then blew at the burning charcoal in the samovar.

"Today, they get to Karbala fast and easy," she said. "And they don't have to spend a fortune. They act like they're vacationing rather than performing a pilgrimage!"

"On my first pilgrimage two men and one woman in our caravan died," the old man continued, as if he had not heard the woman. "We never found out what they died of."

"The pilgrim needs a pure heart and lawfully earned money," said the woman.

Reluctantly, but as if trying to hide his reluctance from the woman, the man took another sip from his glass. He wiped his tear-filled eyes.

"When the Imam calls you, even if you are in your death bed facing Mecca, you'll get up and go," he said with feeling.

The girl, excited as before but now also worried, entered the room, squeezing a big white bundle against her chest. She sat close to her mother, sheltered from her father's eyes. She opened the bundle in her lap and searched through it with nervous fingers until she found the unfinished embroidery and pretended to get busy. But after a few moments she nudged her mother impatiently.

Did you tell him? she questioned with her eyes. Tell him at once, her eyes ordered.

"When it gets close to their arrival," the woman said to the girl, "straighten yourself up and go sit in the parlor. Then bring the tea."

"Fine," the girl said, nudging her mother again, not realizing what she planned to do. But the old man's curiosity was aroused. He turned to the woman, fixed his eyes on her, yet tried to hide his curiosity. The woman assumed an air of importance.

"In half an hour, they're coming to speak about Gowhar," she explained.

The old man pretended that he knew nothing about the matter.

"Who's coming?" he asked in an authoritative voice.

"I told you last night."

The old man said nothing. Uneasy and a bit annoyed, the woman continued.

"Didn't I tell you Manuchehr Khan's mother, Mrs. Razavi, would be coming over to speak about Gowhar? She sent word the day before yesterday that she'd be coming over today to see Gowhar and to speak to us, maybe with her son . . ." She stopped herself and pushed the girl away.

"Get up, girl. Go to the other room," she said nervously. "What's the sense of sitting here and listening to us? By heaven, today's girls are so immodest! In my day, if someone so much as mentioned the word "suitor" we would die of shame. Girls hid their faces from the sun and the moon, let alone people."

The girl hurriedly collected the bundle and left the room. For a while only the boiling samovar could be heard. Finally, the old man resigned himself to the worst.

"Why do they want to talk to me?" he ventured to say. "You, the girl, and the suitor can do what you want."

"For heaven's sake! Aren't you the girl's father? At the ceremonies if you don't give your consent the priest won't marry them. And you say we can do what we want?"

The old man tried hard and finally managed a frown.

"You never worried about having my consent before."

"Good heavens! Are you going to start complaining again? What do you want to do with the girl? Do you want her to become an old maid? Her breasts have grown like two watermelons. Soon enough no one will marry her at all."

The man kept his frown, but tempered it with resignation.

"Woman! How can you give your daughter to someone you know nothing about? These days you can't even trust your own eyes. Besides, they are too high class for us."

"It's true I don't know them," the woman said with convincing assurance. "But you should've heard Fatemeh, the bath-attendant, rave about them. She's known the family for many years. She washes their clothes, works for them, knows everything about them. She says such good things about Manuchehr Khan, and what a gentleman he is."

"Did you say he is a teacher?" the old man asked.

"High school teacher. He's a perfect gentleman -- modest, decent, intelligent. His little finger is worth a hundred like Gowhar's cousins."

The man jerked suddenly. "So now my nephews aren't good enough for you? You'd sell them for an effeminate fop?" he said hotly.

The woman could no longer contain her anger. With a fierce, abrupt movement she removed the teapot from the samovar and placed it under its tap, too angry to turn the tap on, her eyes blazing with hatred and scorn. Her wrinkled face contracted as if she had sipped vinegar.



"If you are planning to disgrace us, say so. You're killing the children and me. Do you want to ruin them all? Your poor sons work their asses off but can't make ends meet. You gave your elder daughter to that good-for-nothing idler. When I see her kids my heart breaks. Poor girl, she hasn't seen a happy day in her life. She hadn't been married for two days when that bitch, his other wife, beat her up for no reason, pulled out her hair in handfuls, and on top of that complained to her husband."

The old man's temper rose. He shut the door, and sat before her, mad as a wounded tiger. He coughed a few times, then put his forefinger to his lower lip.

"Did I tell Moluk to marry that stupid fool?" he asked. "Or was it you who asked him to stay for lunch or supper every time he came over, buttered him up and sang his praises to me day and night? Every evening I came home he was sitting there surrounded by the whole lot of you, tittering and flirting."

As if she was going to attack him, she stretched up, bent forward, made a fist and put it at her lower lip: the image of wonder, denial, and hatred.

"I can't believe it! You talk like he was a stranger. Isn't he your own nephew? Wasn't it you who said, 'Let's give Moluk to Hasan and get rid of her?' The liar will die dumb. A lot of good your pilgrimage has done you!"

The man writhed with anger. He looked as if he was going to hit her on the head with his fist and break every bone in her body.

"Keep your trap shut," he said commandingly and with finality. "Don't force me into an ugly mood or you'll live to regret it till the day you die."

The woman was taken aback. She remained silent and seemed to be deeply in thought, but hatred cried out of her face. She trembled, gnashing her teeth.

The old man's dry, rough coughs were followed by a few forced ones. His face assumed a sickly, weak look. His anger subsided. Her hands trembling, the woman filled the teapot with hot water and set it on the samovar. Then she took the old man's tea-glass, rinsed it with water from the samovar, and poured him another glass of hot water. She placed the glass before him, trying to hide the kindness she felt for him.

"Well, stop getting excited and let's keep calm," she said. "I know whatever I do, I'm in the wrong. It's my luck. I've spent thirty-five years of my life with you and this is what I get from you. What can I expect from a stranger?"

The old man remained silent, trying to regain his calm. His eyes were fixed at a point in the corner of the room without seeing anything. His face mirrored the confused thoughts that crowded his head, thoughts he was going to keep private.

"Well, anyhow, the boy's mother is coming to see Gowhar," the woman said in a mild yet anxious tone. "They want to speak to you. Fortune only knocks once. Of all your children, give her a chance for happiness. She has some schooling; she won't consent to marrying a plain worker."

She realized that she had gone too far and hastily modified her last statement.

"Today's girl knows nothing about life," she said. "All she sees in a man is his suit and tie. She wants a husband who works in an office. She doesn't care if he can make ends meet. She prides herself that her husband works in an office. What can you do? Do in Rome as the Romans do."

There was no conviction in her voice. She was bribing the old man to bring him round. The old man coughed. He took a reluctant sip from the *Ghandagh* and was about to speak when the woman cut him short.

"As they say, tie the donkey where the owner wants. The girl is dying to marry him. I didn't let you notice, but you've no idea how she's been nagging and insisting for the past few days that she wants no one but him. I think he also has seen Gowhar somewhere -- they live nearby -- and she's caught his eye. Well, the rest is up to you. They'll be here. Talk to them. See what's on their minds. Ask about him and his job. Then do what you please."

There was a long silence.

"Well, when are they coming?" the old man finally asked.

"I told you. Any minute now."

She sounded as if she wanted to continue but could not, or did not think it wise to do so. The man rose to his feet weakly, walking like a sick man, his hand on his waist, seeking her sympathy and affection. He sat down again on the floor-mattress, leaning against the beddings. Silence built a wall between them, each inwardly debating, planning, choosing the right words, the woman more intently than the man.

"What can I possibly say to them? I don't even know them." The old man said at last.

“Well, neither do I. You’re a lamb with everybody, but a lion with me. Just say something. Make conversation. If the boy comes, fine. If not, you can find out through the mother what they’re like, to make sure they’re all right. Only . . . Only . . .” she did not finish and remained quiet and anxious.

“Only what? What were you going to say?” asked the old man.

“Nothing.”

“Say what’s on your mind. Don’t beat about the bush.”

“I’m afraid you’ll take offense and lose your temper again.”

The old man was hurt, but he said nothing.

“You see, Gowhar has been nagging . . .” the woman began.

“Nagging about what? What does she want?” asked the old man with indifference.

“You see, she doesn’t want them to find out that . . .” she stopped, hesitant and unsure.

The old man was curious, and curiosity was changing into irritation. The woman suddenly opened her heart.

“What I mean is, don’t say things that will disgrace us. Watch your tongue. We’re old fashioned. We don’t know what the modern folk like, so we’re better off if we keep our mouths shut, or at least if we think twice before saying something.”

“I don’t understand,” said the old man angrily. “First you say they’re coming over to speak to me. Then you say I’m better off if I keep my mouth shut. The modern folks! Why are *you* saying these things? Have you too become westernized? What do you want me to do, sit politely before a penniless fop and his mother, keep my shut, awaiting the pleasure of modern folks?”

The woman was about to say something to pacify him.

“The hell with anyone who is ashamed of me,” he shouted, forcing her into silence. “Anyone, even you, who are my wife.”

She leaned close to him and placed her hand on his knees.

“What do you mean ashamed? she said quietly. “What are you talking about? All I’m saying is tie the donkey where the owner wants. Just this once control yourself and do as the poor thing wants.”

“What the hell do you want me to do?” shouted the man impatiently. “Eat rat-poison? Hang myself? Take a needle and sew up my mouth?”

The woman pretended to sympathize, her voice sad and remorseful.

“What an age! Your own children, who’ve sucked the sap of your life, can’t stand you.” She slowly moved her head from side to side as she talked. “They’d rather you disappeared from the face of the earth.” Sensing that she had gone too far, she hastily changed the subject.

“You see Fatemeh, the bath attendant, has told them some things on her own. They asked her what you did for a living and she told them you were a merchant in the bazaar. How dishonest people are!”

The old man’s face froze with hatred and astonishment. He tried to ignore the pain her words had caused him and to salvage the remainder of his self-respect.

“The hell with what she said. You can’t keep people from talking. Anyway, does a merchant put his business on his daughter’s back to take to her husband as a dowry?”

“No. No. Actually, the rich are less generous than we are. They send off their daughters with no more than the dress on their backs. And the husband is happy he’s married the daughter of so-and-so, the merchant.”

The old man agreed. “Like they say, they don’t care if their bellies are empty, as long as they can keep a servant for show.”

The woman laughed for the first time. Her laughter was empty and cold. The old man remained distant and depressed. There was a knock at the door. The woman jumped nervously to her feet and hurriedly wrapped herself in her *chador*.

“Here they are. Here they are,” she said. “Remember, don’t say anything about what you do for a living. That’s all. Please, just control yourself.”

The old man too had suddenly grown nervous. He turned pale and weak, like the accused facing the prosecutor.

“All right. All right. A curse upon the Devil,” he stammered weakly.

The woman left the room. In the middle of the courtyard she saw the girl going to the door.

“Not you. Get back. Go inside,” she shouted.

The girl froze in her place, then returned hesitantly to the parlor.

## II

The parlor was smaller than the living room. It had a double door and a window. The floor was covered by three rugs that didn't match. Red satin drapes covered the windows and hung over the fireplace beneath the mantelpiece. A portrait of Imam Ali in a gilded frame and a prayer printed inside a decorative border were hung on the wall. On the mantelpiece was a round mirror. The room was dark.

Blushing and trembling, the girl held the tea-tray before the guest, who was sitting near a small footstool at the head of the room. She was middle-aged, had made up on, and did not wear a *chador*. The girl's weak smile expressed servile obedience. She wanted to offer that smile to Manuchehr Khan's mother when her parents were not looking. Her heart fluttered like a captive bird's. Manuchehr Khan's mother looked at her carefully and took a glass of tea from the tray.

"Thank you."

The girl said nothing, but smiled more bravely, her excited glowing eyes betraying anxious desires and longings. She left the room, relieved that she hadn't spilled the tea, or made any mistake. She hesitated at the door, wanted to turn her head but decided not to and disappeared in a hurry.

"Well, do they teach the Koran where your son teaches?" the old man asked after clearing his throat.

"My son teaches high school," the woman said, smiling. "The Koran is taught only at elementary school."

Well, what does your son teach?"

"Mathematics."

"Mathematics," the old man repeated under his breath, not knowing the word. "Times have changed," he sighed. "People have lost their faith because of these satanic sciences."

"Come, Come! Children don't go to school just to learn the Koran," Gowhar's mother said.

The woman smiled with approval. She was about forty-five and swarthy, with dyed black hair and dark brown eyes. She was wearing a thin woolen dress; her legs were fleshly, smooth and shiny.

The old man was sitting at the edge of the chair, fidgeting, and trying to keep his eyes away from the woman's bare legs. A vague sadness lingered at the bottom of his eyes.

"Please have your tea. It'll get cold," Gowhar's mother said, rising. "Would you excuse me? I have to check the dinner."

The woman smiled and was about to rise, but stopped herself. Gowhar's mother rushed to the living room. The girl was watching herself in the mirror and smiling. Hearing her mother's footsteps she turned and sat near the samovar.

"Girl . . ." said the mother, bending and speaking in her ear.

"Did you tell him?" the girl asked.

"Yes, I told him," the woman said, impatiently. "I came to tell you to be more lady-like. You shouldn't laugh, but don't frown either. Just behave like she's an ordinary guest. If she thinks you're immodest, she'll have nothing to do with us."

The girl blew at the charcoal in the samovar. "What did I do? Did I dance in front of her? If her son had been there you'd have a point," she said.

The woman paid no attention to her. "By the way, remember the chairs aren't ours," she said. "You were the one who begged Mahin Khanom to lend them to us. Be careful not to spill tea over them; that would be the end of us."

"All right," said the girl impatiently. "Why do you keep nagging? Would I spill tea over the chairs on purpose? You keep criticizing me."

The mother left the room, assumed a happy calm look, and returned to the parlor without going to the kitchen. This time, Manuchehr Khan's mother automatically half rose in her seat.

"Please do sit down," Gowhar's mother said hurriedly.

The old man took the opportunity, hesitantly rose from the chair and sat on the floor, leaning against the chair. His wife gave him a harsh look, but said nothing and smiled at the woman awkwardly. The old man became nervous and coughed a few times.

"I'm more comfortable on the floor. Well, it depends on what you're used to. In the old days, they sat on cushions -- simple and comfortable. We didn't have all this paraphernalia. People have forgotten their bellies; luxury is all they think about."

"Come, this is no time for such talk," Gowhar's mother interrupted him reproachfully.

The woman fidgeted in her seat and looked at them, then glanced at the door.

"He's right," she said. "It depends on what you're used to. But today you can't live like the old days. Times have changed. But let's talk about what concerns us." She smiled nervously and turned to the old man. "My son wanted to come today," she continued. "But I came alone, so we could talk. Of course, after we come to an agreement he would like to speak to your daughter, and to you too."

The old man grinned, showing his teeth. "Of course. Haste makes waste," he said, smoothing his beard. "Like when you unravel a skein. If you rush, you mess up the whole thing."

"Enough. Lay off your proverbs and your anecdotes," Gowhar's mother shouted. She turned to the guest, smiling apologetically, trying to win her sympathy.

"Khanom, Karbalayi and I -- that is all our family -- believe that a girl should enter her husband's house in her *chador* and leave in her shroud," she said.

Manuchehr Khan's mother grew uneasy at the word "shroud." She placed the empty tea-glass gently on the table and glanced at the door again.

"Yes, everybody feels that way," she said. "Every parent wants his child to be happy. The important thing is that husband and wife be compatible. As they say, they ought to understand each other. And the girl, of course, should know how life is lived today."

Gowhar's mother was about to respond, when she saw that the woman was looking at the door. Gowhar was listening at the door. Her mother looked at the floor, embarrassed.

"Gowhar, where are you? Bring some tea," she called out, smiling awkwardly.

The girl appeared at the threshold in no time, and was greeted by the woman's pitying smile, her mother's angry look, and her father's indifference. Pretending to adjust her *chador*, she exposed her face and her figure, then wrapped the *chador* around herself. Still wearing her guilty and hesitant smile, she took the tea tray from the table.

"No, no, thanks. I don't want any more tea," the woman said. "Come young lady, come and sit down."

As if her prayers had been answered, the girl put the tray down and sat next to her mother, who gave her a reproachful look.

"You don't have to hide yourself in your *chador* like that. There's no man here who shouldn't see you," the mother said. "But you should've brought the lady more tea anyway. Don't you know any better?"

"Please have another glass," she said to Manuchehr Khan's mother. "It's freshly brewed. It's good."

"No thanks. I don't usually drink tea this time of day."

The girl listened to them for a minute, then sat at ease. The old man had been quiet for some time. He shifted his legs and took a deep breath.

"We weavers have a saying that goes like this . . ." he began.

Gowhar's mother angrily cut him short. "Are you going to get to the point, or do you want to give us anecdotes and proverbs? The lady has no time for these things, and you have to be at your office . . . office in an hour."

There was a commotion. The girl looked at her father bitterly and rushed out of the room. The guest frowned uneasily. The old man pulled himself together, but his face hardened with anger. Gowhar's mother was all confusion and didn't know what to say. She expected the woman to rise any moment, curse, and leave. The old man could no longer bear the insults he had suffered.

"What is it? What is the matter with you? What did I say?" he exploded.

The woman fidgeted in her seat and Gowhar's mother blushed with embarrassment.

"No, you didn't say anything wrong," she said to him with feigned calm. "But what's the use of all this talk? Say something to the point rather than . . ."

"Woman, what is it?" he sat on his knees, his anger beyond control. "Do we want to marry our daughter or tell a lot of lies?"

Gowhar's mother was too upset and confused to respond. She looked spellbound. The old man rose, coughed a few times, took his dirty handkerchief from his pocket and walked towards the door. He stopped near the threshold, giving rein to his anger. "I knew from the first this was no use. Let them say what they want. Honesty is the best policy. I am a weaver. A weaver. I don't have an office, and I'm proud of it. I've lived with honesty for sixty years. I didn't cheat anyone, or ask anyone for a handout. And I'll give my daughter to someone who'll worship the ground she walks on."

He left the room, coughing. The woman rose. She stood, amazed and confused, her swarthy face flushed, her eyes full of contempt and regret. Gowhar's mother struggled to her feet.

"I'm really sorry. Forgive me. I'm so ashamed. I wish the earth would open up and swallow me. He is a bit irritable. I don't know what came over him."

"It's all right," the woman said. "It's not important. You must be upset. I'd better go. We can't discuss the matter now. Sorry to have bothered you."

Gowhar's mother followed her into the courtyard.

"I'm really sorry. Don't pay any attention to him," she said at the door. "He's old and senile. Well, when will you come again?"

"I don't know," the woman said. "We'll see. Maybe I'll come with Manuchehr. Good-bye. Please say good-bye for me to Karbalayi."

"I will. thanks for coming. Please give our regards to Manuchehr Khan and Mr. Razavi."

The door closed behind the woman. Gowhar's mother went to the living room, where the girl had curled up in a corner, crying. The old man could be heard coughing. The girl saw her mother and cried harder. She began beating herself on the head, sobbing wildly and shaking. "I'm ruined. Damn you, you fools! You idiots! They won't come back. They won't."

The woman tried to calm her. "Come, come. Let them go. Husbands aren't in short supply. Stop blubbering. Go check the food. Get up! Up! she said and left the room.



# The Name

## Aharon Megged

*Aharon Megged was born in Poland in 1920. His family emigrated to Palestine in 1926. Upon graduating from high school he became one of the founding members of S'dot Yam, a fishing kibbutz on the Mediterranean. Later he worked at a series of odd jobs -- quarrying, fishing, farm labor -- up and down the country. Shortly after World War II Megged spent two years in the United States as a cultural representative on behalf of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. Megged has distinguished himself both as a short story writer and a playwright. Most characteristically a satirist, his humor is gentle, rarely bitter. The Name tends more to pathos than to humor, but its central theme - the conflict and lack of understanding between generations - conveys much of Megged's ruefully ironic viewpoint.*

Grandfather Zisskind lived in a little house in a southern suburb of the town. About once a month, on a Saturday afternoon, his granddaughter Raya and her young husband Yehuda would go and pay him a visit.

Raya would give three cautious knocks on the door (an agreed signal between herself and her grandfather ever since her childhood, when he had lived in their house together with the whole family) and they would wait for the door to be opened. "Now he's getting up," Raya would whisper to Yehuda, her face glowing, when the sound of her grandfather's slippers was heard from within, shuffling across the room. Another moment, and the key would be turned and the door opened.

"Come in," he would say somewhat absently, still buttoning up his trousers, with the rheum of sleep in his eyes. Although it was very hot he wore a yellow winter vest with long sleeves, from which his wrists stuck out -- white, thin, delicate as a girl's, as was his bare neck with its taut skin.

After Raya and Yehuda had sat down at the table, which was covered with a white cloth showing signs of the meal he had eaten alone -- crumbs from the Sabbath loaf, a plate with meat leavings, a glass containing some grape pips, a number of jars and so on -- he would smooth the crumpled pillows, spread a cover over the narrow bed and tidy up. It was a small room, and its obvious disorder aroused pity for the old man's helplessness in running his home. In the corner was a shelf with two sooty kerosene burners, a kettle and two or three saucepans, and next to it a basin containing plates, knives and forks. In another corner was a stand holding books with thick leather bindings, leaning and lying on each other. Some of his clothes hung over the backs of the chairs. An ancient walnut cupboard with an empty buffet stood exactly opposite the door. On the wall hung a clock which had long since stopped.

"We ought to make Grandfather a present of a clock," Raya would say to Yehuda as she surveyed the room and her glance lighted on the clock; but every time the matter slipped her memory. She loved her grandfather, with his pointed white silky beard, his tranquil face from which a kind of holy radiance emanated, his quiet, soft voice which seemed to have been made only for uttering words of sublime wisdom. She also respected him for his pride, which had led him to move out of her mother's house and live by himself, accepting the hardship and trouble and the affliction of loneliness in his old age. There had been a bitter quarrel between him and his daughter. After Raya's father had died, the house had lost its grandeur and shed the trappings of wealth. Some of the antique furniture which they had retained -- along with some crystal ware and jewels, the dim lustre of memories from the days of plenty in their native city -- had been sold, and Rachel, Raya's mother, had been compelled to support the home by working as a dentist's nurse. Grandfather Zisskind, who had been supported by the family ever since he came to the country, wished to hand over to his daughter his small, capital, which was deposited in a bank. She was not willing to accept it. She was stubborn and proud like him. Then, after a prolonged quarrel and several weeks of not speaking to each other, he took some of the things in his room and the broken clock and went to live alone. That had been about four years ago. Now Rachel would come to him once or twice a week, bringing with her a bag full of provisions, to clean the room and cook some meals for him. He was no longer interested in expenses and did not even ask about them, as though they were of no more concern to him.

"And now . . . what can I offer you?" Grandfather Zisskind would ask when he considered the room ready to receive guests. "There's no need to offer us anything, Grandfather; we didn't come for that," Raya would answer crossly.

But protests were on no avail. Her grandfather would take out a jar of fermenting preserves and put it on the table, then grapes and plums, biscuits and two glasses of strong tea, forcing them to eat.

Raya would taste a little of this and that just to please the old man, while Yehuda, for whom all these visits were unavoidable torment, the very sight of the dishes arousing his disgust, would secretly indicate to her by pulling a sour face that he just couldn't touch the preserves. She would smile at him placatingly, stroking his knee. But Grandfather insisted, so he would have to taste at least a teaspoonful of the sweet and nauseating stuff.

Afterwards Grandfather would ask about all kinds of things. Raya did her best to make the conversation pleasant, in order to relieve Yehuda's boredom. Finally would come what Yehuda dreaded most of all and on account of which he had resolved more than once to refrain from these visits. Grandfather Zisskind would rise, take his chair and place it next to the wall, get up on it carefully, holding on to the back so as not to fall, open the clock and take out a cloth bag with a black cord tied round it. Then he would shut the clock, get off the chair, put it back in its place, sit down on it, undo the cord, take out of the cloth wrapping a bundle of sheets of paper, lay them in front of Yehuda and say:

"I would like you to read this."

"Grandfather," Raya would rush to Yehuda's rescue, "but he's already read it at least ten times . . ."

But Grandfather Zisskind would pretend not hear and would not reply, so Yehuda was compelled each time to read there and then that same essay, spread over eight, long sheets in a large, somewhat shaky handwriting, which he almost knew by heart. It was a lament for Grandfather's native town in the Ukraine which had been destroyed by the Germans, and all its Jews slaughtered. When he had finished, Grandfather would take the sheets out of his hand, fold them, sigh and say:

"And nothing of all this is left. Dust and ashes. Not even a tombstone to bear witness. Imagine, of a community of twenty thousand Jews not even one survived to tell how it happened . . . Not a trace."

Then out of the same cloth bag, which contained various letters and envelopes, he would draw a photograph of his grandson Mendele, who had been twelve years old when he was killed; the only son of his son Ossip, chief engineer in a large chemical factory. He would show it to Yehuda and say:

"He was a genius. Just imagine, when he was only eleven he had already finished his studies at the Conservatory, won a scholarship from the Government and was considered an outstanding violinist. A genius! Look at that forehead . . ." And after he had put the photograph back he would sigh and repeat "Not a trace."

A strained silence of commiseration would descend on Raya and Yehuda, who had already heard these same things many times over and no longer felt anything when they were repeated. And as he wound the cord round the bag the old man would muse: "And Ossip was also a prodigy. As a boy he knew Hebrew well, and could recite Bialik's poems by heart. He studied by himself. He read endlessly, Gnessin, Frug, Bershadsky . . . You didn't know Bershadsky; he was a good writer . . . He had a warm heart, Ossip had. He didn't mix in politics, he wasn't even a Zionist, but even when they promoted him there he didn't forget that he was a Jew . . . He called his son Mendele, of all names, after his dead brother, even though it was surely not easy to have a name like that among the Russians . . . Yes, he had a warm Jewish heart . . ."

He would turn to Yehuda as he spoke, since in Raya he always saw the child who used to sit on his knee listening to his stories, and for him she had never grown up, while he regarded Yehuda as an educated man who could understand someone else, especially inasmuch as Yehuda held a government job.

Raya remembered how the change had come about in her grandfather. When the war was over he was still sustained by uncertainty and hoped for some news of his son, for it was known that very many had succeeded in escaping eastwards. Warily he would visit all those who had once lived in his town, but none of them had received any sign of life from relatives. Nevertheless he continued to hope, for Ossip's important position might have helped to save him. Then Raya came home one evening and saw him sitting on the floor with a rent in his jacket. In the house they spoke in whispers, and her mother's eyes were red with weeping. She, too, had wept at Grandfather's sorrow, at the sight of his stricken face, at the oppressive quiet in the rooms. For many weeks afterwards it was as if he had imposed silence on himself. He would sit at his table from morning to night, reading and re-reading old letters, studying family photographs by the hour as he brought them close to his shortsighted eyes, or leaning backwards on his chair, motionless, his hand touching the edge of the table and his eyes staring through the window in front of him, into the distance, as if he had turned to stone. He was no longer the same talkative, wise and humorous grandfather who interested himself in the house, asked what his granddaughter was doing, instructed her, tested her knowledge, proving boastfully like a child that he knew more than her teachers. Now he seemed to cut himself off from the



world and entrench himself in his thoughts and his memories, which none of the household could penetrate. Later, a strange perversity had taken hold of him which it was hard to tolerate. He would insist that his meals be served at his table, apart, that no one should enter his room without knocking at the door, or close the shutters of his window against the sun. When any one disobeyed these prohibitions he would flare up and quarrel violently with his daughter. At times it seemed that he hated her.

When Raya's father died, Grandfather Zisskind did not show any signs of grief, and did not even console his daughter. But when the days of mourning were past it was as if he had been restored to new life, and he emerged from his silence. Yet he did not speak of his son-in-law, nor of his son Ossip, but only of his grandson Mendele. Often during the day he would mention the boy by name as if he were alive, and speak of him familiarly, although he had seen him only on photographs -- as though deliberating aloud and turning the matter over, he would talk of how Mendele ought to be brought up. It was hardest of all when he started criticizing his son and his son's wife for not having foreseen the impending disaster, for not having rushed the boy away to a safe place, not having hidden him with non-Jews, not having tried to get him to the Land of Israel in good time. There was no logic in what he said; this would so infuriate Rachel that she would burst out with "Oh, do stop! Stop it! I'll go out of my mind with your foolish nonsense!" She would rise from her seat in anger, withdraw to her room, and afterwards, when she had calmed down, would say to Raya, "Sclerosis, apparently. Loss of memory. He no longer knows what he's talking about."

One day -- Raya would never forget this -- she and her mother saw that Grandfather was wearing his best suit, the black one, and under it a gleaming white shirt; his shoes were polished, and he had a hat on. He had not worn these clothes for many months, and the family was dismayed to see him. They thought that he had lost his mind. "What holiday is it today?" her mother asked. "Really, don't you know?" asked her grandfather. "Today is Mendele's birthday!" Her mother burst out crying. She too began to cry and ran out of the house.

After that, Grandfather Zisskind went to live alone. His mind, apparently, had become settled, except that he would frequently forget things which had occurred a day or two before, though he clearly remembered, down to the smallest detail, things which had happened in his town and to his family more than thirty years ago. Raya would go and visit him, at first with her mother and, after her marriage, with Yehuda. What bothered them was that they were compelled to listen to his talk about Mendele his grandson, and to read that same lament for his native town which had been destroyed.

Whenever Rachel happened to come there during their visit, she would scold Grandfather rudely. "Stop bothering them with your masterpiece," she would say, and herself remove the papers from the table and put them back in their bag. "If you want them to keep on visiting you, don't talk to them about the dead. Talk about the living. They're young people and they have no mind for such things." And as they left his room together she would say, turning to Yehuda in order to placate him, "Don't be surprised at him. Grandfather's already old. Over seventy. Loss of memory."

When Raya was seven months pregnant, Grandfather Zisskind had in his absent-mindedness not yet noticed it. But Rachel could no longer refrain from letting him share her joy and hope, and told him that a great-grandchild would soon be born to him. One evening the door of Raya and Yehuda's flat opened, and Grandfather himself stood on the threshold in his holiday clothes, just as on the day of Mendele's birthday. This was the first time he had visited them at home, and Raya was so surprised that she hugged and kissed him as she had not done since she was a child. His face shone, his eyes sparkled with the same intelligent and mischievous light they had in those far-off days before the calamity. When he entered he walked briskly through the rooms, giving his opinion on the furniture and its arrangement, and joking about everything around him. He was so pleasant that Raya and Yehuda could not stop laughing all the time he was speaking. He gave no indication that he knew what was about to take place, and for the first time in many months he did not mention Mendele.

"Ah, you naughty children," he said, "is this how you treat Grandfather? Why didn't you tell me you had such a nice place?"

"How many times have I invited you here, Grandfather?" asked Raya.

"Invited me? You ought to have brought me here, dragged me by force!"

"I wanted to do that too, but you refused."

"Well, I thought that you lived in some dark den, and I have a den of my own. Never mind, I forgive you."

And when he took leave of them he said:

"Don't bother to come to me. Now that I know where you're to be found and what a palace you have, I'll come to you . . . if you don't throw me out, that is."

Some days later, when Rachel came to their home and they told her about Grandfather's amazing visit, she was not surprised:

"Ah, you don't know what he's been contemplating during all these days, ever since I told him that you're about to have a child . . . He has one wish -- that if it's a son, it should be named . . . after his grandson."

"Mendele? exclaimed Raya, and involuntarily burst into laughter. Yehuda smiled as one smiles at the fond fancies of the old.

"Of course, I told him to put that out of his head," said Rachel, "but you know how obstinate he is. It's some obsession and he won't think of giving it up. Not only that, but he's sure that you'll willingly agree to it, and especially you, Yehuda."

Yehuda shrugged his shoulders. "Crazy. The child would be unhappy all his life."

"But he's not capable of understanding that," said Rachel, and a note of apprehension crept into her voice.

Raya's face grew solemn. "We have already decided on the name," she said. "If it's a girl she'll be called Osnath, and if it's a boy -- Ehud."

Rachel did not like either.

The matter of the name became almost the sole topic of conversation between Rachel and the young couple when she visited them, and infused gloom into the air of expectancy which filled the house.

Rachel, midway between the generations, was of two minds about the matter. When she spoke to her father she would scold and contradict him, flinging at him all the arguments she had heard from Raya and Yehuda as though they were her own, but when she spoke to the children she sought to induce them to meet his wishes, and would bring down their anger on herself. As time went on, the question of a name, to which in the beginning she had attached little importance, became a kind of mystery, concealing something pre-ordained, fearful, and pregnant with life and death. The fate of the child itself seemed in doubt. In her innermost heart she prayed that Raya would give birth to a daughter.

"Actually, what's so bad about the name Mendele?" she asked her daughter. "It's a Jewish name like any other."

"What are you talking about, Mother" -- Raya rebelled against the thought -- "a Ghetto name, ugly, horrible! I wouldn't even be capable of letting it cross my lips. Do you want me to hate my child?"

"Oh, you won't hate your child. At any rate, not because of the name . . ."

"I should hate him. It's as if you'd told me that my child would be born with a hump! And anyway -- why should I? What for?"

"You have to do it for Grandfather's sake," Rachel said quietly, although she knew that she was not speaking the whole truth.

"You know, Mother, that I am ready to do anything for Grandfather," said Raya. "I love him, but I am not ready to sacrifice my child's happiness on account of some superstition of his. What sense is there in it?"

Rachel could not explain the "sense in it" rationally, but in her heart she rebelled against her daughter's logic which had always been hers too and now seemed very superficial, a symptom of the frivolity afflicting the younger generation. Her old father now appeared to her like an ancient tree whose deep roots suck up the mysterious essence of existence, of which neither her daughter nor she herself knew anything. Had it not been for this argument about the name, she would certainly never have got to mediating on the transmigration of souls and the eternity of life. At night she would wake up covered in cold sweat. Hazily, she recalled frightful scenes of bodies of naked children, beaten and trampled under the jackboots of soldiers, and an awful sense of guilt oppressed her spirit.

Then Rachel came with a proposal for a compromise: that the child should be named Menachem. A Hebrew name, she said; an Israeli one, by all standards. Many children bore it, and it occurred to nobody to make fun of them. Even Grandfather had agreed to it after much urging.

Raya refused to listed.

"We have chosen a name, Mother," she said, "which we both like, and we won't change it for another. Menachem is a name which reeks of old age, a name which for me is connected with sad memories and people I don't like. Menachem you could call only a boy who is short, weak and not good-looking. Let's not talk about it any more, Mother."

Rachel was silent. She almost despaired of convincing them. At last she said:

"And are you ready to take the responsibility of going against Grandfather's wishes?"

Raya's eyes opened wide, and fear was reflected in them:

"Why do you make such a fateful thing of it? You frighten me!" she said, and burst into tears. She began to fear for her offspring as one fears the evil eye.

"And perhaps there is something fateful in it . . ." whispered Rachel without raising her eyes. She flinched at her own words.

"What is it?" insisted Raya, with a frightened look at her mother.

"I don't know . . ." she said. "Perhaps all the same we are bound to retain the names of the dead . . . in order to leave a remembrance of them . . ." She was not sure herself whether there was any truth in what she said or whether it was merely a stupid belief, but her father's faith was before her, stronger than her own doubts and her daughter's simple and understandable opposition.

"But I don't always want to remember all those dreadful things, Mother. It's impossible that this memory should always hang about this house and that the poor child should bear it!"

Rachel understood. She, too, heard such a cry within her as she listened to her father talking, sunk in memories of the past. As if to herself, she said in a whisper:

"I don't know . . . at times it seems to me that it's not Grandfather who's suffering from loss of memory, but ourselves. All of us."

About two weeks before the birth was due, Grandfather Zisskind appeared in Raya and Yehuda's home for the second time. His face was yellow, angry, and the light had faded from his eyes. He greeted them, but did not favor Raya with so much as a glance, as if he had pronounced a ban upon the sinner. Turning to Yehuda he said, "I wish to speak to you."

They went into the inner room. Grandfather sat down on the chair and placed the palm of his hand on the edge of the table, as was his wont, and Yehuda sat, lower than he, on the bed.

"Rachel has told me that you don't want to call the child by my grandchild's name," he said.

"Yes . . ." said Yehuda diffidently.

"Perhaps you'll explain to me why?" he asked.

"We . . ." stammered Yehuda, who found it difficult to face the piercing gaze of the old man. "The name simply doesn't appeal to us."

Grandfather was silent. Then he said, "I understand that Mendele doesn't appeal to you. Not a Hebrew name. Granted! But Menachem -- what's wrong with Menachem?" It was obvious that he was controlling his feelings with difficulty.

"It's not . . ." Yehuda knew that there was no use explaining: they were two generations apart in their ideas. "It's not an Israeli name . . . it's from the Golah"

"Golah," repeated Grandfather. He shook with rage, but somehow he maintained his self-control. Quietly he added, "We all come from the Golah. I, and Raya's father and mother. Your father and mother. All of us."

"Yes . . ." said Yehuda. He resented the fact that he was being dragged into an argument which was distasteful to him, particularly with this old man whose mind was already not quite clear. Only out of respect did he restrain himself from shouting: That's that, and it's done with! . . . "Yes, but we were born in this country," he said aloud; "that's different."

Grandfather Zisskind looked at him contemptuously. Before him he saw a wretched boor, and empty vessel.

"You, that is to say, think that there's something new here," he said, "that everything that was there is past and gone. Dead, without sequel. That you are starting everything anew."

"I didn't say that. I only said that we were born in this country . . ."

"You were born here. Very nice . . ." said Grandfather Zisskind with rising emotion. "So what of it? What's so remarkable about that? In what way are you superior to those who were born there? Are you cleverer than they? More cultured? Are you greater than they in Torah or good deeds? Is your blood redder than theirs?" Grandfather Zisskind looked as if he could wring Yehuda's neck.

"I didn't say that either. I said that here it's different . . ."

Grandfather Zisskind's patience with idle words was exhausted.

"You good-for-nothing!" he burst out in his rage. "What do you know about what was there? What do you know of the people that were there? The communities? The cities? What do you know of the life they had there?"

"Yes," said Yehuda, his spirit crushed, "but we no longer have any ties with it."

"Your have no ties with it?" Grandfather Zisskind bent towards him. His lips quivered in fury. "With what . . . with what do you have ties?"

"We have . . . with this country," said Yehuda and gave an involuntary smile.

"Fool!" Grandfather Zisskind shot at him. "Do you think that people come to a desert and make themselves a nation, eh? That you are the first of some new race? That you're not the son of your

father? Not the grandson of your grandfather? Do you want to forget them? Are you ashamed of them for having had a hundred times more culture and education than you have? Why . . . why, everything here" -- he included everything around him in the sweep of his arm -- "is no more than a puddle of tapwater against the big sea that was there! What have you here? A mixed multitude! Seventy languages! Seventy distinct groups! Customs? A way of life? Why, every home here is a nation in itself, with its own customs and its own names! And with this you have ties, you say . . ."

Yehuda lowered his eyes and was silent.

"I'll tell you what ties are," said Grandfather Zisskind calmly. "Ties are remembrance! Do you understand? The Russian is linked to his people because he remembers his ancestors. He is called Ivan, his father was called Ivan and his grandfather was called Ivan, back to the first generation. And no Russian has said: From today onwards I shall not be called Ivan because my fathers and my fathers' fathers were called that; I am the first of a new Russian nation which has nothing at all to do with the Ivans. Do you understand?"

"But what has that to do with it?" Yehuda protested impatiently. Grandfather Zisskind shook his head at him.

"And you -- you're ashamed to give your son the name Mendele lest it remind you that there were Jews who were called by that name. You believe that his name should be wiped off the face of the earth. That not a trace of it should remain . . ."

He paused, heaved a deep sigh and said:

"O children, children, you don't know what you're doing . . . You're finishing off the work which the enemies of Israel began. They took the bodies away from the world, and you -- the name and the memory . . . No continuation, no evidence, no memorial and no name. Not a trace . . ."

And with that he rose, took his stick and with long strides went towards the door and left.

The new-born child was a boy and he was named Ehud, and when he was about a month old, Raya and Yehuda took him in the carriage to Grandfather's house.

Raya gave three cautious knocks on the door, and when she heard a rustle inside she could also here the beating of her anxious heart. Since the birth of the child Grandfather had not visited them even once. "I'm terribly excited," she whispered to Yehuda with tears in her eyes. Yehuda rocked the carriage and did not reply. He was now indifferent to what the old man might say or do.

The door opened, and on the threshold stood Grandfather Zisskind, his face weary and wrinkled. He seemed to have aged. His eyes were sticky with sleep, and for a moment it seemed as if he did not see the callers.

"Good Sabbath, Grandfather," said Raya with great feeling. It seemed to her now that she loved him more than ever.

Grandfather looked at them as if surprised, and then said absently, "Come in, come in."

"We've brought the baby with us!" said Raya, her face shining, and her glance traveled from Grandfather to the infant sleeping in the carriage.

"Come in, come in," repeated Grandfather Zisskind in a tired voice. "Sit down," he said as he removed his clothes from the chairs and turned to tidy the disordered bedclothes.

Yehuda stood the carriage by the wall and whispered to Raya, "It's stifling for him here." Raya opened the window wide.

"You haven't seen our baby yet, Grandfather!" she said with a sad smile.

"Sit down, sit down," said Grandfather, shuffling over to the shelf, from which he took the jar of preserves and the biscuit tin, putting them on the table.

"There's no need, Grandfather, really there's no need for it. We didn't come for that, said Raya.

"Only a little something. I have nothing to offer you today . . ." said Grandfather in a dull, broken voice. He took the kettle off the kerosene burner and poured out two classes of tea which he placed before them. Then he too sat down, said "Drink, Drink," and softly tapped his fingers on the table.

"I haven't seen Mother for several days now," he said at last.

"She's busy . . ." said Raya in a low voice, without raising her eyes to him. "She helps me a lot with the baby . . ."

Grandfather Zisskind looked at his pale, knotted and veined hands lying helplessly on the table; then he stretched out one of them and said to Raya, "Why don't you drink? The tea will get cold."

Raya drew up to the table and sipped the tea.

"And you -- what are you doing now?" he asked Yehuda.

"Working as usual," said Yehuda, and added with a laugh, "I play with the baby when there's time."

Grandfather again looked down at his hands, the long thin fingers of which shook with the palsy of old age.

“Take some of the preserves,” he said to Yehuda, indicating the jar with a shaking finger. “It’s very good.” Yehuda dipped the spoon in the jar and put it to his mouth.

There was a deep silence. It seemed to last a very long time. Grandfather Zisskind’s fingers gave little quivers on the white tablecloth. It was hot in the room, and the buzzing of a fly could be heard.

Suddenly the baby burst out crying, and Raya started from her seat and hastened to quiet him. She rocked the carriage and crooned, “Quiet, child, quiet, quiet . . .” Even after he had quieted down she went on rocking the carriage back and forth.

Grandfather Zisskind raised his head and said to Yehuda in a whisper:

“You think it was impossible to save him . . . it was possible. They had many friends. Ossip himself wrote to me about it. The manager of the factory had a high opinion of him. The whole town knew them and loved them . . . How is it they didn’t think of it . . .?” he said, touching his forehead with the palm of his hand. “After all, they knew that the Germans were approaching . . . It was still possible to do something . . .” He stopped a moment and then added, “Imagine that a boy of eleven had already finished his studies at the Conservatory -- wild beasts!” He suddenly opened eyes filled with terror. “Wild beasts! To take little children and them into wagons and deport them . . .”

When Raya returned and sat down at the table, he stopped and became silent, and only a heavy sigh escaped from deep within him.

Again there was a prolonged silence, and as it grew heavier Raya felt the oppressive weight on her bosom increasing till it could no longer be contained. Grandfather sat at the table tapping his thin fingers, and alongside the wall the infant lay in his carriage; it was as if a chasm gaped between a world which was passing and a world that was born. It was no longer a single line to the fourth generation. The aged father did not recognize the great-grandchild whose life would be no memorial.

Grandfather Zisskind got up, took his chair and pulled it up to the clock. He climbed on to it to take out his documents.

Raya could no longer stand the oppressive atmosphere.

“Let’s go,” she said to Yehuda in a choked voice.

“Yes, we must go,” said Yehuda, and rose from his seat. “We have to go,” he said loudly as he turned to the old man.

Grandfather Zisskind held the key of the clock for a moment more, then he let his hand fall, grasped the back of the chair and got down.

“You have to go . . .” he said with a tortured grimace. He spread his arms out helplessly and accompanied them to the doorway.

When the door had closed behind them the tears flowed from Raya’s eyes. She bent over the carriage and pressed her lips to the baby’s chest. At that moment it seemed to her that he was in need of pity and of great love, as though he were alone, an orphan in the world.



# The Night of the Festival

by Fawzi Abdel Kader el Milady

*El-Milady was born in Egypt in 1928. He received a B.A. in 1948 and went on to take degrees in Political Economy and Law. He has written both novels and short stories, and is a member of the African and Asian Writers' Union.*

Tonight the festival would begin. The sun was ready to disappear and the streets of the village were empty of passers-by, or nearly, as each family gathered for the meal that would break their fasting the moment the voice of the muezzin rang out in the village announcing the passing of the last day of Ramadan.

In the home of Hajji Guma', the hajji sat by the food. He was slipping the beads of his rosary through his fingers as he murmured some Ramadan prayers and blessings. Sitting near him were his wife Haniya, his daughter Khadija, and his brother's daughter Nafusa. His two young sons, Madbuli and Ali, had been given the mission of watching the road outside the house to alert the family to the arrival of the chief engineer. 'Chief engineer' was what the family had called the oldest son Munir since he had graduated from the College of Engineering the year before. Anyone looking at Hajji Guma' would perceive that he was thinking deeply about something.

What was occupying the hajji's mind was not the delay in Munir's arrival, for he had promised during his last visit to arrive the night of the festival and spend the vacation with them. He would certainly fulfill his promise. Nor was the hajji anxious about those eight pounds which Munir usually sent by post at the beginning of each month to help support the family. He was confident he would bring the money with him. In fact he might even bring twice as much because of the festival. He knew his sister Khadija was engaged to marry her cousin and needed money for the wedding costs. What was preoccupying the hajji's mind and really making him nervous was how he would broach with his son the subject on which the family had reached a decision the week before.

With shrewd foresight, the hajji had decided to ensure the happiness of his daughter Khadija's marriage to his nephew Mas'ud by arranging the engagement of his son Munir to Mas'ud's sister, Nafusa. This way he would return his brother's favor and guarantee the happiness of the family forever. He knew that his brother Hajji Abd Allah was wealthier than he, as he owned seventy feddans and Hajji Guma' only had eight. His son Munir, however, had become a chief engineer with a monthly salary of almost forty pounds. Moreover, his niece Nafusa had been fond of the boy since childhood.

Hajji Guma' was overjoyed by this idea and told his wife, whose heart danced with delight. She insisted on his going to his brother to discuss the matter with him so that Khadija's happiness and her husband's good treatment of her could be guaranteed.

The hajji had hesitated at first. How could he know that his son, who had lived many years in Cairo and only saw the village during his summer vacation, would agree to marry his cousin, who had only been to town a few times in her whole life? But his wife insisted on his presenting the idea to his brother. If his agreement was assured -- as was most likely -- then it would be easy to convince Munir to conclude the engagement, or even the wedding contract, during the festival holiday.

Hajji Abd Allah did not disappoint the hopes of his brother and sister-in-law. He made it clear that he was overjoyed by the idea, that there would be no way he could possibly oppose it since he remembered he had recited the opening prayer of the Qur'an, the Fatiha, for Munir and Khadija when they were both infants in their cradles. It would be impossible for him to renege on a commitment of that kind. Although Hajji Guma' could not remember anything about that recitation of the Fatiha, he appropriated it with great enthusiasm and said that he too would never think of parting two children united by the words of the holy Qur'an. In fact it was for this reason that he had brought up the subject.

When Hajji Abd Allah held out his hand to him to recite the Fatiha again, he felt as though all the happiness of the world had been placed before him. Prior to his departure glasses of fruit juice were handed around several times. A trilling ululation burst forth from the inner reaches of the house. Hajji Guma' recognized the voice of his brother's wife.

When Hajji Abd Allah stood at the door bidding his brother farewell, his brother whispered to him not to worry about the preparations, for he would be responsible for the expenses and the wedding party for the two couples would be the same night.

When Hajji Guma' tried to protest, he smilingly reminded him that they were brothers and that among benevolent people there could be no question of reckoning up accounts. They agreed that the wedding contracts would be made the first day of the festival.

Hajji Guma' had been picturing all this to himself while he waited for his son's arrival as though sitting on hot coals. One question passed through his mind. What would happen if Munir did not come tonight? If he did not come, the marriage contract could not be concluded tomorrow. This matter, however, could be dealt with. The one which made him really nervous was what would happen if Munir arrived and disliked the idea of conducting the marriage in the way his family desired? The hajji closed his eyes in order to dismiss such a thought from his mind.

If he refused, the hajji thought to himself, he would be an ungrateful son. It was true Munir relied mainly on his own opinion and did not concern himself too much with the way things were done in the village. But he loved his mother a lot. Even now he still kissed her hands whenever he was about to set out on a trip, asking her to bless him. His mother should be the one to undertake the task of convincing him. Why not, since she was the one who insisted on his raising the subject with her brother-in-law and settling the matter before the arrival of the bridegroom.

The muezzin's voice flowed through the village, announcing the sunset prayer and the end of the fast. The hajji set aside his thoughts and concerns. He found his wife and niece staring at him anxiously. He said no more than: "Perhaps he's been delayed on the road. Let's wait a little." He rose to perform the sunset prayer and his wife got up to pray with him. Khadija excused herself, telling her parents she had not yet done the ablution necessary for prayer. She took Nafusa aside and started telling her what she had seen in Cairo when she had visited her brother there, three months before. Whenever Munir was mentioned, Nafusa would lower her eyes and smile. Then she would start up the conversation again and ask her cousin to provide her with more details about Cairo nights and diversions. The two kept up a long conversation which was not interrupted until Hajji Guma' called them to have something to eat. Munir was evidently going to be late, and they had been fasting. Khadija said she wasn't hungry. She preferred to wait for her brother, even if he did not arrive until midnight. She broke her fast with a glass of apricot juice which the family had made that morning in honor of the chief engineer's arrival. Nafusa followed Khadija's example and accepted a glass of the juice. They resumed their conversation. Nafusa whispered to Khadija that she had learned from her mother that Mas'ud would very soon become the owner of twenty feddans, which his father had recently decided to give him. He would accompany him to the land registry office immediately after the holiday celebrating the end of the Ramadan fast. Then they would conclude the transaction. Nafusa leaned toward her cousin and kissed her on both cheeks. The two boys, Madbuli and Ali, came home just as the muezzin was giving the call for the evening prayer. They said they were worn out from watching the road so long with no results. Their mother suggested they should rest for awhile and then return to their posts so they would be there to meet their brother when he arrived.

Just then, an employee of the telegraph office arrived, out of breath. He presented a telegram to Hajji Guma' and asked him to sign the receipt. The hajji signed the form with difficulty, for he did not read or write very well. He handed the telegram to his daughter Khadija for her to open and read, saying: "My God, let it be good news." It must be a telegram from Munir, he thought. Perhaps he'd been delayed. Khadija looked at the bottom of the telegram. It was signed Munir Guma'.

When Khadija finished reading the telegram she turned very pale. It fell to the ground. Hajji Guma' jumped to his feet, alarmed. "What's happened? Tell me. Has something happened to Munir?"

Khadija did not answer. She gave the telegram to Madbuli and asked him to read it to his father. Madbuli began reading. "Best wishes for the holiday. I will be married tomorrow to the daughter of the head of the company."

There was a short silence. Then Hajji Guma' spoke. "He has an excuse. He did not know what we have been planning. God help him."

Haniya wondered if the hajji would decide to attend the wedding party. His eyes were wet with tears. "He has not invited us to the party," he said. "For this he is to be excused also. I would have liked to attend my son's wedding, but I am a person who understands the world. The party will be attended by important people. It would not be suitable for the father of the bridegroom to attend in clothes like these." The hajji pointed to what he was wearing. "Munir knows our financial circumstances. He did not want us to spend more than we can afford. So he's not inviting us to the party. Don't forget he has many financial burdens. This wedding will cost him a lot of money."

Haniya looked at her husband. "You should send him a telegram of congratulations."



“There’s no need to send a telegram,” Khadija interjected. He sent us a telegram because we were expecting him. An express letter will get to him tomorrow afternoon. I have a number of stamps on hand.”

Khadija rose at once and went into the adjoining room. She returned shortly with a piece of white paper, an envelope, and five postage stamps. She sat down and wrote a letter to her brother in her father’s name, congratulating him on his marriage. She read aloud as she wrote. The hajji muttered to himself, “it’s fate. There is no might or power save God’s. I have not been trying to advance my own interests. What was important to me was his own good. I am afraid for him concerning this marriage. The matter is in God’s hands.” As Khadija sealed the envelope she told her cousin, “Let’s go out and get some fresh air. We’ll drop the letter in the mail box.”

The two left the door of the house, leaning on each other. As soon as they were a few yards from the house, Khadija tore the letter in two. Nafusa took one half and each crumpled the half of the letter in her hand until it became a little ball of paper. When they reached the river, each threw her wad of paper into the water. They stood watching as the current swept the bits of paper far from the shore. Then they began to cry.



# Women's Voices

## Stories





# Year of the Elephant

by Leila Abouzeid

*Leila Abouzeid was born in 1950 in a Moroccan village where her father was an interpreter in the French administration. She was six year's old when Morocco gained its independence from France and she chose to go to a Moroccan lycee, rather than a French school, where Arabic was a major part of the curriculum. After graduating from Mohammad V university in Rabat she worked as a journalist and in Moroccan television. Her book THE YEAR OF THE ELEPHANT was the first novel by a Moroccan woman to be translated from Arabic into English. She dedicates it to "...all those women and men who put their lives in danger for the sake of Morocco". The book tells the story of a peasant woman who fought alongside her husband for her country's freedom and is rejected by him once independence has been achieved and he occupies a government position.*

I come back to my hometown feeling shattered and helpless. Yesterday, anxiety was tearing me apart, but today despair is tormenting me even more. I wanted certainty, but when I found it, it only pushed me over the brink into total emptiness. Yesterday seems long ago and life stretches endlessly ahead. Forty years have left me haunted by bitterness. I say forty although it may be more. It seems like a hundred. I have lived without ever clearly seeing the man I married, the man I didn't know until yesterday. And here I am home again, a stranger among strangers. I left just short of my twentieth birthday and haven't been back since my mother died. For whom or for what would I have returned?

This town, my home, had lain buried in my mind like some official document, forgotten until a need for it arose. When he said, "Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides," I automatically remembered the town.

The other passengers on my bus are getting their things together, absorbed in their own troublesome thoughts. What am I to do now? I've heard of freed prisoners returning to their prisons. Now I understand that, but I feel I can never retrace my steps no matter what fate holds in store for me. Anyway, I'm not afraid and have no desire for revenge. I feel neither sorrow nor hatred, nothing but a vague awareness that something inside me has been extinguished, has finally come to a halt. And yet I have kept sleeping and waking. The soul is the dividing line between the living and the dead. If only I had been torn up by the roots. The thought of death attracts me, but I lack the will to die. Strange how we cling to life!

He had simply sat down and said, "Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides." My papers? How worthless a woman is if she can be returned with a paper receipt like some store-bought object! How utterly worthless!

Those few seconds destroyed the whole foundation of my being, annihilated everything I trusted. My jaw dropped as I stared at him.

"Why?"

"I haven't got a reason."

He picked up the car keys and walked silently out of the house. I don't remember losing consciousness but I woke up with my body contorted, my hands stretched out like those of a corpse. My mind adjusted slowly, as it had on that long-ago day when I opened the door to a stranger who said with an Algerian accent, "They have locked him up."

It is the worst possible time in my life for such a disaster to strike. My family all lie in their graves in the town cemetery. What am I to do?

From the bus window, I had surveyed the impact of the storm, recognized its ominous signs. Trees lay in the middle of the road amidst the rubble of uprooted shacks. The scene reminded me of the flood seven years ago that had swept away everything and left our town in ruins. What the forces of storm and flood destroy is enough to build entire cities. My heart contracted, knowing that this storm was but a warning of worse to come, but I could not worry about that.

The passengers get off at the town gates and disappear. Only the sound of the wind remains. The old café stands empty as it has for some time, its chairs set upside down on the tables. Cold and poverty have conspired against it, but it continues to resist death like the townspeople themselves.

I cross the square, breathing in the smell of the town, a mixture of moist earth and dung, and walk through the gates. In the past I had felt intoxicated every time I passed between these portals, but now as I look beyond the town walls at the dilapidated rooms with their rows of arched windows lining the river bank, I feel nothing. Have I lost my own identity?

The flood has gouged the river bed deeper, but less water flows in it. The sound of the remaining trickle is eerie and forlorn in the bleakness of the town's dirty lanes and peeling walls. There are a few small shops scattered about: a charcoal vendor, a tailor, a grocer with mostly empty shelves. The shops belonging to the Jews stand padlocked and boarded up. They once had schools and synagogues, but when they left, business slumped and prices fell. They traded and sold beer and practiced magic, then emigrated, group after group. Boats carried them away from Tangier, leaving only their ghosts to roam the town.

A figure floods back into my memory, a stout woman of average height, her shoulders covered with a shawl that hangs down in a broad triangle bordered by tassels like those of a flamenco dancer. An image going back thirty or thirty-five years. The Jewish women would stand leaning against the side of Rahma's door.

Whenever I used to come into our alley, I would find one of the Jewish women at Rahma's door. There existed an inviolable pact between her and these women. She read their fortunes and they brought her various offerings in exchange, kissing her hand and blessing her as they left. Probably, the business ceased being profitable long ago and she has withdrawn into the darkness of her house.

Even if I were to forget everyone else on the street, I would never forget her. Of her I have vivid memories. From the day I opened my eyes on the world, I watched her and felt the impression of her grow increasingly stronger in my imagination. She was a colossal figure, above and beyond anything the mind could conjure. Her hair was red from frequent henna dyeing, her head wrapped in a yellow shawl with silk tassels dangling and glittering at its edges among the wisps of her curls. She had a loud voice, a brash, impudent manner, and could pummel her opponents with abuse as easily as a fighter with his fists.

She spent every day on her doorstep, wrapping a blanket around her legs during cold spells. No one could come down the alley without informing her of his or her business, and no two people could stop to converse on any subject without her joining in. She was a woman unlike any other in town, and her reputation carried from the plains to the mountains. Her vast mind stored all sorts of secrets and scandals, ready for use if the tide turned against her. When Rahma declared war, all the women of the alley rushed to watch from their doors and roofs, passersby flocked around, and the whole street took on a carnival like air.

Nothing upset her except insinuations about her unknown origins. Who was she? Where had she come from? How did she get here? In my whole life I never met anyone who knew. That was one secret she kept and which she'll carry to the grave.

That such questions remained unanswered deepened the sense of mystery and provided fertile ground for rumors. She was a sorceress, an informer, she "had a past." God knows the truth, but such talk wounded her and impelled her to continue on the warpath and spurn any offer of a truce. Thus, from her open door she issued a constant stream of insinuating song which fell on her enemies like spears.

Inspired by the intimations of our parents, we were all convinced that her house possessed a magic room into which she threw mischievous children. Inside that room, we believed, stood casks and large clay jars filled with treasures from the time of King Solomon, and a long tunnel was supposed to lead from the room to the grotto under the town gates and eventually to a terrifying dungeon beneath Meknes.

One day she quarreled with my mother. The two exchanged insults as Rahma sat in her usual position, blocking the door of her house with her massive frame. Shortly thereafter, she abducted my little sister, and watched from her observation post and tapped her cane with slow deliberation as we rushed around the town frantically searching for the girl.

After the abduction incident, this strange woman soared into my imagination on wings with which I was eager to fly. She dazzled me, casting her spell over me and drawing me to her like a moth to light. I vowed to infiltrate her kingdom and the mysteries behind it, and so began to curry the friendship of her daughter. Yes, she had a daughter, younger than I, whom she claimed to be her own, though of course we didn't believe it at all. She was never separated from the girl nor from her cane, and when she walked she would lean alternately on both as she tottered along, pausing for breath now and then, an effort which seemed to stifle and paralyze the whole street.

I made enormous efforts to befriend the girl, so when Rahma finally invited me to play hopscotch with her daughter, I eagerly accepted. She watched us as we began the game and took turns jumping on one foot over the squares which covered the middle of the alley. Some days passed before the relationship became secure enough that I was asked inside the house.

The other children stared after me in amazement as I disappeared through the door. I felt hypnotized by awe and by terror of the unknown, and walked expectantly with a steady step like someone going into a horror movie, knowing what was to come. I surveyed the place with a hasty but comprehensive glance. There were a few casks, several locked doors, a spacious courtyard with a fig tree in the center, and in the tree's trunk a collection of reed dolls sitting on some small cushions.

As enchanting as the dolls were, my attention immediately turned to the locked doors—so suspicious in the gloom and silence—and to what treasures those casks might contain. Suddenly, from behind one of the doors came a noise like someone walking on straw. All my senses tuned into the sound as I pictured bizarre humanlike creatures with hoofs, horns, and tails lurking on the other side. I tried to convince myself that it was just some household animal, a goat perhaps, but my suspicions were too deep to accept such a mundane explanation, so I stuck to my first impression.

When I lived in Rabat after independence, I went out on the night of *al-Qadr* to stroll about the old city visiting the tombs of *sheiks* and *imams*. I made my way through a crowd dotted with groups of children who were fasting for the first time. The girls were all dressed up, their small faces so painted that they looked like little dolls wrapped in white cloth. Other youngsters roamed about the city cafes ingratiating themselves with the customers by offers of shoe shines. Still others turned into temporary street hawkers selling candles at shrine entrances, pulling on the sleeve of each visitor until he or she became irritated, then pouncing on the next victim.

Under a long arcade, in the midst of a crowd swarming like an army of ants, I noticed a group of beggars, their songs of praise heard clearly in the din even from a distance. Among them, to my utter amazement, I saw Rahma's daughter, with a baby in her arms. Her head was bowed, her hair covered with dust, her hands more emaciated than any I had ever seen. Suddenly she raised her head and our eyes met. I recoiled in horror, but the surge of bodies pushed me away and I found myself in the courtyard of a shrine. The emaciated hands and the forlorn look remained etched in my mind. What had happened to her? Certainly women today face all kinds of problems, but what could have led to this?

I was paralyzed by confusion and embarrassment, and afraid of coming face to face with her a second time. I stayed in the shrine a long while before working up the courage to leave. When I finally emerged, she was no longer where she had been, nor anywhere in sight. It was unlikely that I'd come across her again in such a mass of people. After that night I looked for her every time I went to the old part of town, but never saw her again.

And now here before me is Rahma's house, halfway up the alley on the right, its ironclad door bolted shut. Has she gone to the next world? And our house, the same as always. We had divided it up among ourselves from the very start, and after we left, tenants rented the rooms. I walk through the front entrance and find all the doors surrounding the courtyard closed to the cold air, just as we used to do at the beginning of autumn.

I knock on the door of my room and rouse its occupant. She recognizes me when I let down my veil, and after some urging, shows me in. The humble condition of the room fills me with similar humility. I search my mind for a way to tell her why I have come but succeed only in prolonging her discomfort. She seems to be preparing herself for the worst, and is not surprised when I finally tell her that I need the room back for myself. She still assumes I am deceiving her in some way, and I have learned long ago that you can't convince someone without an explanation, so I speak plainly and to the point, watching to see how she reacts.

"I've been divorced and have nothing to my name but this room."

Her brow wrinkles as she opens her mouth, then shuts it again. For our people, divorce is a catastrophe, an absolute disaster. Any objection she might raise is shattered with one decisive blow. There is nothing more to add.

"I'll get out."

I mumble my thanks and she urges me to stay for a glass of tea, but I decline. I know what a glass of tea means to a poor woman, and my most urgent concern is to find a place to spend the night. She escorts me to the door, and I move with great difficulty as though I were handicapped in some way.

Mud, dung, ruins, animals, a garbage collector playing the *mizmar* behind his donkey which is loaded down with refuse. A town mired in the depths of history except for the electric lines and the plastic bags everywhere. I reach the small white shrine with the dome on top. My shoes are caked with mud. I wipe them off and carry them inside with me. The *faqih* sits in the corner, keeping warm in front of a brazier. He is old as our house. As soon as I see him, I feel reassured. I had feared that he, like Rahma, might have passed on. But nothing about him has changed, as if in his world time does not exist. Or perhaps something has changed. His beard seems to have grown whiter. I take his hand and feel its warmth and softness as I kiss it. He doesn't look up. I sit down, lift up the edge of the mat, and slide my shoes underneath it. His body is thin, his turban thick and spotless, his robe white. He possesses that graceful beauty of old age. How old is he? Seventy? Eighty? More? That's what we said during my childhood, during the days of my grandmother. She had been one of his followers, may God have abounding mercy on

her soul. She never ceased to praise him and would get so carried away in his presence during the *dhikr* sessions that she'd lose consciousness. When there were no sessions she'd cry and complain. She took me along whenever she visited him, and I always felt a sense of apprehension as we came to the shrine. She would let the wool veil drop from her face, the veil that made our women appear like white tents walking down the alleys. Every time we arrived at the fruit vendor and turned the corner to the shrine, fear crept into my heart, to the point that the two, the vendor and the fear, remained linked in my mind long after I had grown to womanhood.

I gaze at the *sheikh* as he silently recites verses from the Quran. My anxiety is so intense I feel as if I might choke. I can't say what I want to say. Why are words so inadequate? On the wall an old placard displays the name of Allah in large letters. A globe of colored glass hangs decoratively from the ceiling. I listen as the *sheikh* mutters in his provincial Berber accent, which neither his memorization of the Quran nor a lifetime spent in the town has managed to refine.

"So despondent were they that the earth, for all its vastness and their own souls, seemed to close in upon them."

I freeze in amazement at the eloquence of the words. That was what I had been struggling to say, the exact expression, as if the words had me in mind. The *sheikh* falls silent and I speak.

"May I spend the night here...sir?"

I want to call him by name but can't remember it. He looks up at me and I can see on his face the purity of his heart.

"Have you no other place?"

"No place but this. I was divorced today."

His face clouds over and even I feel jolted by the words. Strange how they retain their bite. Feelings of grief and misery rise from my breast and stick in my throat as tears begin rolling down my cheeks.

"Don't cry."

The tears come faster until I am sobbing. I weep for my life and for my alienation in my own town. Then I dry my eyes and wipe my nose.

"Your accent is a local one," the *sheikh* observes. "Don't try to hide it."

It is true, it had stuck to me like the smell of fish. My accent and my room are all that this town has bequeathed to me.

"Then you don't recognize me, sir?"

"Why, no."

"I'm Zahra, Kanza's granddaughter. She was always coming to see you, right up to the time of her death."

His face lights up with joy, but he seems astonished that a person can change to such an extent.

"This is what fate has led to," he says with a resigned sigh.

"This is what independence has led to," I counter.

"But why?" he asks.

Fury rises up inside me and I exclaim bitterly: I don't eat with a fork. I don't speak French. I don't sit with men. I don't go out to fancy dinners. Is that enough or shall I continue?"

"Those are their standards?"

"I'm nothing but an old coin fit only for the museum shelf. Their positions in society now call for modern women."

He looks as if he were listening to someone who has just returned from Mars.

"Principles are the most fragile of man's possessions," he murmurs. "How easily people forget!"

"You have nothing?" he asks.

"Nothing but a room in my father's house that should be free soon, and a maintenance allowance for three months and ten days."

"The town is full of your relatives."

"Only distant ones. And I haven't seen them in years, so what's the use? I know what they'll say." "You've been gone so long we've forgotten you...How do you stand it?...You've hurt us so much..." No, I'm not going to look up any of them."

"Loneliness is a hard thing for a woman in your situation."

"I despise everyone, including myself. There seems to be such a malaise and feebleness permeating everything. What's wrong? Is it a black magic spell?"

"Be careful now. You're walking on dangerous ground."

"But the prophet himself had spells cast on him," I insist.

"May God's prayer and peace be upon him."



“Did you know that?”

“All magicians shall not prosper however skillful.”

“Is it the evil eye at least?”

“Only God knows.”

“And God? Does He let one down?”

He looks away as a bead drops down his rosary, and resumes his muttered recitations.

“Why does God permit injustice?” I ask.

He continues under his breath: “Prayers for the prophet dispel sorrows and cleanse the spirit as filth is cleansed from a white robe.:

“The country is wallowing in filth!”

“But it is not completely devoid of good. If it were not for that, anger would have consumed us all.”

“Are we not already consumed? The whole taste of life has spoiled. Misery flows through the air and mingles with our very breath.”

“No pain lasts forever.”

“Well, I’ve decided to live with it. Men I know try to cure it with alcohol, but I confront it completely sober.”

“So rejoice. Endurance is the mark of faith.”

“I’d have lost my mind without it.”

“These things will pass and a reward awaits you in the next world.”

“And what’s in this one? Nothing at all, or hardly anything.”

“The one is temporary while the other is truth itself, so let us have faith and praise God.”

We cease speaking and he rises and goes out, then returns with a clay bowl filled with water, barley bread, and some black olives wrapped in paper. We eat the bread and the olives in silence. Afterwards, he brings me a mattress and a blanket, bids me good night and leaves.

The efforts of the day have exhausted me. I thought that I fell asleep immediately, but in the morning I remembered hearing the sound of rain falling on the grape leaves in the nearby houses, a sound that seems to have come from my childhood.

I remain alone in the shrine until sometime after noon when I venture forth to see the woman. Since the Jews have left, I know she’ll have no problem finding another room.

At the entrance to our alley some girls are playing with a rope, and others are carrying babies on their backs. Their faces are radiant despite their poverty, and reflect good health, due I surmise to the plentitude of milk. Families here send their cows to the mountains but keep one or two close at hand, consuming some of the milk themselves and giving the rest away, much to the good fortune of poor children like these.

I pause to watch the girls. Their exuberance amazes me, so reminiscent of my own in this alley four decades earlier. If we had known then what awaited us in adulthood, we would have cherished that precious childhood joy. I tremble in fear of what the coming years hold in store for these girls.

“Whatever the law provides!” And what is that? Expenses for a hundred days? That shows the extent of the law’s regard for women. Throw them out on the streets with a hundred days of expenses.

The woman’s belongings stand in the courtyard of the house. She soon appears with a porter who loads everything on his shoulders and trudges out, his head bent down on his chest. The woman presses the key into my hand and hurries to catch up with him.

I stand looking around my room, so desolate in its emptiness, so oppressively small. But at least it is mine, and I praise God for that.

I return to the *sheikh* to tell him that my room is free. “I can’t thank you enough for your help.”

“Thanks be to God.”

I kiss his hand and get up to leave, but he calls out to me.

“Take the blanket...and the mattress.”

I want to thank him but can’t find the words. In my whole life I have never found myself in such a helpless situation. I put the bundle on my head and walk humbly home through the alleys.

The *sheikh* is a fountain of goodness in an age when even preachers are adulterers and drunkards.

In my room, in my father’s house, I spend the second of my hundred nights, counting them as Scheherazade once counted her own.



# A Wife For My Son

by Ali Ghalem

*Ali Ghalem is an Algerian film maker who has three feature-length films to his name, including a screen version of "A Wife For My Son". He has won the silver medal at the Verona film festival and the Special Judges Award at the Pardes Festival. The book explores the struggle for emancipation fought by Fatiha, the central character, and although it deals explicitly with life in Algerian society it also evokes the wider experience of women everywhere in their overcoming of societal obstacles and the determining of their own fate. In this excerpt, Fatiha is being groomed for the wedding ceremony and all of her fears and confusions about the event are examined, in addition to the attitudes of other members of the community, especially the women.*

Fatiha sat stiffly in her wedding dress and waited. Her mother entered, carrying a tray of henna, followed by the other women adorned in gold trimmed velvet and silver laced muslin of many hues, deep blue, green, pink and garnet red. Magic, movement. A vivid kaleidoscope. Putting on their wedding jewelry they looked at each other, admired each other, found fault with each other. Some of them had antique noble airs about them, like idols or tragic actors with enlarged and darkened eyes, with silver plates and chains, bracelets and silk scarves. They sat majestically on the cushions arranged around the large room; each covered with a fabric as sumptuous as the women's clothes. They smiled at Fatiha who responded with a timid acknowledgment. Houria rolled up the sleeves of her blue velvet dress and carefully applied the henna to her daughter's hands.

"My dear, you are more and more beautiful!"

Fatiha smiled at her mother and contemplated her hands while they were being dyed red. Houria was surprised at her daughter. Always so lively, talkative and gay. Now so silent! Why had she changed so much? She refused to let herself believe that Fatiha was simply unhappy. As soon as the thought made its way into her consciousness, she energetically pushed it back.

"You're just intimidated my pretty, my dear, my treasure . . . I was too, back then . . . but I was happy . . . so happy . . . but I didn't show it . . . She's so like me . . ."

And to convince herself:

"Are you happy, my pretty?"

Fatiha did not answer; she was still looking at her hands. For a moment she wished her husband would come and free her from all this quickly. The husband she had yet to meet and knew almost nothing about . . . The absence of even an idea of his face was intolerable. It was as if he didn't really exist. An intolerable absence, and the intolerable presence of everything demanded of her to become his wife. What was demanded of him to be her husband? She had no idea.

The presentation of the gifts began. A smiling woman placed a package on the big tray and extended a thousand good wishes; another offered money. Houria, still carefully applying the henna, announced the sum loudly, smiled and bowed while the women again yelled loud youyous. Fatiha just listened and watched. All the joy and excitement became more and more agonizing. She could no longer hold back her tears. Only an old cousin noticed. She came towards her; caressed her cheek with a sympathetic look, leaned over and whispered into her ear:

"You must smile at life, my angel, because if you don't, life will shrivel up like an old sheepskin in the sun." Fatiha laughed.

"So, you see . . . we laugh like that, over nothing . . . and everything becomes as pink as your dress! Believe me . . . you have to smile at life, my angel."

She gave Fatiha another pat on the cheek, then called all the young women over to give them henna which would promote their swift marriage. They ran over with outstretched hands and laughing, turned around, the center of their palms colored with the magic red.

Fatiha caught sight of Myriem who came quickly to her. They embraced and looked deeply at each other with affection. They didn't need words to understand each other. Myriem saw Fatiha's distress; she understood her desires and dreams and her refusal to accept her fate. But what could she say when things were done like this? . . . impossible to change.

Leila, a young cousin, began dancing to the sound of the darbouka and tambourine. Her hips wrapped in a red, yellow and gold scarf, her agile shoulders, the beauty of her movements, of her arms and hands, of her rhythm, her sensuality, simultaneously full and light, all of this enticed Fatiha and Myriem. Some of the young girls joined the dance. The women began clapping their hands to the

beat. Myriem wanted to bring her friend into the dance, but Fatiha remained still, her hands and feet bound in cloth, a prisoner of tradition. Aïcha, not missing a thing, approached Myriem and vigorously pulled her towards the dancers. She wanted to stop this conspiring. Her intuitive sense told her that her daughter-in-law had to be shielded from these friends whose lives would go on for a while as unmarried young women, some as school girls. Fatiha saw Myriem, followed by her mother-in-law, turn and give her an impish smile.

Aïcha was a beautiful woman who did not look her fifty years. Agile in spite of her dimensions and often exuberant, she seemed energetic and dictatorial, proud of the power and authority vested in her within the limits of a woman's universe. Next to her, Houria seemed discrete, reserved, and she was just that. Affectionate, calm and gentle, undemanding and very devoted to others, she smoothed out more conflicts than she provoked. Her presence was serene. She spoke little, listened and rarely gave an opinion. She considered her own opinion of little importance, accustomed to following her husband and always smiling as if life had spared her worry.

Fatiha, after comparing the two women, so different from each other, wondered how she would be able to live without her mother and with that woman who was to be her mother-in-law. Why did she have to change homes? Why did women always have to go live with their husband's family? She knew that if she had asked these questions she would be told to hush up . . . just crazy ideas . . . they get you nowhere, her mother would say. . . Everyone has their crazy ideas . . . she would have to silence her 'crazy ideas.' Be quiet . . . she had remained silent for days. What she wanted to say was not what was expected of her. It made her apprehensive. She sensed it would go on and on . . . for a long time . . . for a long time. She recalled the day Myriem tried to comfort her:

"Fatiha, are you in love with someone?"

"No, that's not it . . ."

"Then, why are you so sad?"

"Because I don't want to get married like this! I want to go on at school; I don't want to live like our mothers, stuck in the house. I want to work! Why do they decide everything for us like in the old days?" Myriem could find no answer.

"You're lucky, you are."

"Oh! . . . for how long? My mother spoke to me about Haddad's son, the one who works in the Ministry of Agriculture. I wouldn't be surprised if . . ."

A young pregnant woman walked through the courtyard carrying a bucket of water and some washing.

"That's my sister-in-law. Don't you recognize her?"

Fatiha could not. In eight years of marriage she had had six children; four of them had died. She was always sad and Myriem could not understand what had happened between her and her brother.

"My brother is very hard on her. I don't know why. And she takes it all without a word. She's completely passive."

"I don't want to live like that!"

"But your husband lived in France, Fatiha, he can't be like my older brother! He's more old fashioned than my father! He won't accept the smallest change. If it were up to him I would've never gone to school!"

"No . . . I don't want to live like that!"

Madame Suissi, Fatiha's former sewing teacher, had just come in and brought Fatiha out of her reveries. She came towards her with a smile, gave her a kiss and handed to Houria the gift that Fatiha's wrapped hands could not take. They looked at each other and remembered . . . their opposition to this forced marriage; their efforts to stop it; their powerlessness to change anything at all. Madame Suissi knew Fatiha had decided to become a teacher like herself but never dared to say so. But she could have. She was angry with herself for not having been able to convince Fatiha's father. She knew she had deeply disappointed the pupil she loved dearly. Fatiha had been cheerful, lively and intelligent, sensitive and always interested, full of questions and enthusiasm. She was angry with herself. It was not the first time it had happened and unfortunately it would not be the last. At times she was able to win over the parents of her students and change their futures, but this was very rare. In this case she had not succeeded and since she could only find words that avoided the issue, she simply said:

"How beautiful you are Fatiha!"

Fatiha, choked up, holding back her tears, tried to smile and lowered her eyes. Yes, Madame Suissi had disappointed her, but she did not blame her. What she could do was very limited in the face of her family's determination! Houria quickly took Madame Suissi to the table in the same way Aïcha

had taken Myriem, and with the same concern; to protect the young bride. She invited her to have some cake and drink whatever she wanted, leaving her with Myriem, who had just noticed her teacher.

When Houria looked at her daughter she saw she was alone, withdrawn, lost in the contemplation of her bound hands. She remembered the day her husband had pushed her to announce the good news, she could see her dear little girl slowly going through her morning routine, so nonchalant.

“Hurry up, dear, you’re going to be late again! Hurry up . . .”

She would very much like to be able to say those words again this morning . . . Her daughter was being taken from her . . . She could see her in her blue kabyle dress, with her long flowing hair.

“But dear, you haven’t done your hair yet!”

Fatiha’s burst of laughter . . . that marvelous laugh of hers!

“Why are you looking at me like that this morning? What’s the matter?”

“It’s just . . . just . . . never mind . . . hurry up . . .”

She hadn’t the nerve to tell her. Her father told her of the future marriage that night; Fatiha was still; she suddenly lost her color and broke into tears. Houria recalled Madame Suissi’s visit to talk about Fatiha.

“Fatiha is such a good student . . . it would really be a shame to . . .”

“Marriage is a more important thing than school for a woman!”

“She’s still so young; she has so many plans; she likes learning so much . . .”

“Marriage is more important . . .”

Her father was so self-confident, calm and preoccupied with order and tradition.

“Fatiha is a very gifted, she . . .”

“Fatiha is getting married; a woman’s place is in the home with her husband and her children; that’s where she has to put these gifts, as you say, to work.”

“But one doesn’t prevent the other, Mr. Kaddour! Today everybody’s work is needed, including women’s . . .”

“No! No! Not when men are unemployed.”

“But women working doesn’t increase men’s unemployment, Mr. Kaddour, to the contrary.”

“You can’t make me believe that!”

“It’s the truth all the same . . . and what’s more . . . now women want to learn, work, and choose their own husbands. . .”

“Then what was the use in winning our independence if we’re just going to copy everything the Europeans do? No! All that’s no good! I know about life, madame, I come from a peasant family and I’ve been working in hotels for a long time now . . . I know about life . . . we want our daughter to be happy.”

Houria had been silent throughout but each and every word of the conversation was engraved in her memory; she would not dare give her opinion; as a general rule what the father did was right . . . but why force Fatiha now? Why not wait a while longer? There was no rush.

Houria and Madame Suissi were reliving the same scene. Madame Suissi could not get it out of her mind; she thought of how powerless she had been to communicate with M. Kaddour; he agreed so naturally with his own decisions, so self-confident because he based himself on respect for the family order established for centuries for the good of all. Nothing she could have said would have broken through his convictions or have changed his mind. Then what would make him change his mind? Time? Probably . . . but how much time? She realized that as long as the Kaddours of this world could not be made to change their minds and accept that women could be trusted in modern social life the same way they had been trusted in family life, the same way they were trusted in the hard times of war, women’s lot would only change with great difficulty. In order to alleviate some of the pessimism of her conclusions, she began thinking that maybe Fatiha’s husband would understand her, be free from the prejudices paralyzing women’s legitimate aspirations . . . why not?

The atmosphere grew more and more lively, the excitement rose; the dancers, more and more numerous, were seized by the rhythm. Houria decided it was time to unwrap Fatiha’s hands and feet. This was done quickly. The henna was perfect.

Houria looked at her daughter with such tenderness that for an instant Fatiha felt happier; she felt like dancing and let herself be led by a cousin; her eyes caught the attentive look of Yamina, her young sister-in-law, and she smiled at her. Yamina responded with an affectionate wave of her hand. They were attracted to each other; they would be sisters; they would like each other. . .

While Yamina watched her young sister-in-law dance, one of Aïcha’s cousins eyed her. She found her absolutely charming and ready to be promised to a husband.

“Your daughter is pretty, Aïcha!”

Aïcha smiled with pride; it was true . . . Yamina had a nice face and a good character which was better yet!

“My sister has a son . . .”

“She’s still young, but we’d better start thinking about it! We have to marry our daughters while they’re young, like in the old days! It’s the wiser thing to do these days!”

“I was promised when I was ten . . . and with God as my judge . . . I have never regretted it . . .”

Yamina watched the dancers. How could she possibly guess that her mother and a cousin were deciding her future! Being of a docile and obedient nature, she did not suffer from her mother’s authoritarian character; she admired her and tried to imitate her in all the household chores; she knew how to do these things very well. . .

Houria contemplated her daughter, who at last seemed to be happy, letting herself be swept up by the joy of dancing. These kids! What’s going through their heads? Their sadness . . . like a cloud . . . like a very small cloud . . . that’s youth . . . and that’s the way it should be! Houria took a deep breath, Fatiha was happy. Thank you God! Thank you!

Fatiha danced with a liveliness unleashed by her anxiety, her worry, her regrets; she danced to forget and for the moment she felt free.

# The Shame

by Yusuf Idris

*Yusuf Idris, one of the Arab world's best known fiction-writers, was born in 1927 in the village of al-Bayrum in Egypt's Nile Delta. He studied medicine at Qasr al-Ayni hospital in Cairo, graduating in 1951. While some of his early stories had appeared in magazines, his first collection of short stories was published in Egypt in 1954, ARHKAS LAYALI, THE CHEAPEST NIGHTS. He eventually gave up medicine to devote his time to both fiction-writing and journalism, as the literary editor of Egypt's al-Ahram.*

I believe they still refer to love as The Shame over there. They probably still hesitate to talk about it openly, making only covert allusions, even though you can see it in the hazy look in their eyes, and when the girls blush and shyly look down.

Like any other, the farm was not a big one. The few houses were built with their backs to the outside, the doors opening onto an inner courtyard where they celebrated their weddings and hung their calves when a sick one was slaughtered to be sold by the *oke* or in lots. Events were few and could be foretold in advance. Day began before sunrise and ended after sunset. The favourite place was in the doorway where a north breeze blew and where it was pleasant to doze at noon and play a game of *sigá*.

Nothing much happened, and whatever did happen was predictable. You could be sure for instance that the scrawny little girl playing hopscotch would marry in a few years. Her complexion would clear and her angular body would take on softer curves, and she'd end up with one of those boys in tattered *gallabiehs* next to their skin, diving off the bridge like chained monkeys to swim in the canal.

Sometimes things did happen that were neither expected nor predictable. Like the day screams were heard coming from the field. They ripped the vast emptiness of the countryside, warning of some fearsome event. And although at first the people did not know where the sound was coming from they found themselves running to help, or at least to find out what had happened. But that day there was no need for help. The men returning to the farm tried to avoid answering when the women asked what had happened. For they could not bring themselves to say that Fatma had been caught in the maize field with Gharib. For both were no strangers to the farm. Fatma was Farag's sister, and Gharib was Abdoun's son and the matter had been plain to all.

It was a small farm where everybody knew everybody else, and private affairs did not remain private. People even knew when someone had money hoarded away, exactly how much, where it was kept, and how it could be stolen if one had a mind to. Except that no one ever stole from another. If at all, they stole from the farm crops; petty thefts like a lapful of cotton or some corn-cobs. Or sometimes they would dip into the drainage canal of a rice field when the watchman wasn't looking, and take all the fish without sharing it with the bailiff as the understanding went.

Everyone knew Fatma and all there was to know about her. Not that she had a reputation or anything like that. It was just that she was pretty; or to be more accurate the prettiest girl on the farm. But that was not the point, for if a fair skin was the yardstick by which beauty is measured in the countryside, Fatma was dark. The point was that no one could explain what it was about that girl that made her so different from the others. Her cheeks were hale and ruddy giving the impression that she had honey for breakfast and chicken and pigeon for lunch, when her daily fare was plain curd cheese and pickled peppers, onions and scorched fry. Her eyes were black and beady and incessantly alive with a piercing look which made it hard to hold them for long. To say that her hair was soft and black, and that her floating black gown did not conceal her provoking curves would not do her justice. It was not her looks that made her what she was, but her intense femininity. A gushing, throbbing, devastating force which it was hard to trace to any definite source. The way she smiled, the way she turned her head to look behind her, the way she asked someone to help her with her water jar; her every movement was a provocation. There was witchery in the way she tied her only cabbage-green headcloth at a slant to reveal her smooth black hair. There was witchery in the dimples in her cheeks when she smiled, and in the trail of her rippling laughter; in the very sound of her languid, fluid voice which she knew how to modulate and distill into drops of the purest female seduction, every single drop of which could quench the lust of a dozen males.

Fatma aroused men, almost as if she was made for that. She even aroused the dormant virility in little boys. When they saw her coming, they felt a sudden urge to uncover themselves. And they often did, raising their *gallabiehs* well up above their knees and no amount of shouting or scolding would make them let up, for they themselves could not explain this urge to expose themselves in her presence.

That's why she was a worry to Farag, her brother, who was a poor lonesome *fellah* who owned nothing but his cow. The bailiff would not let him have more than three *feddans* to cultivate. His attempts every year to increase his share by half a *feddan* invariably ended in failure. Nevertheless he was a strapping bulk of a man. In one meal he could devour three whole loaves of bread, if he had them, and down the entire contents of the water cooler in one gulp. The calf of his leg had the proportions of a thigh. But his life was a torment on account of his sister. She lived with him and his wife who had a flat nose and a pale face and was a good sort on the whole, except when she drew Farag's attention to his sister's breasts, insisting that Fatma wobbled them on purpose when she walked. Also to the kohl with which she lavishly bespattered her eyes, and the chewing gum she was always asking people going to market to bring her. Farag had no need to be reminded of all this. He could see for himself, and it made his blood boil. Yet he had no real reason to reprove Fatma. She was no different from the other girls. They all dressed alike, they all smeared their eyes with kohl, and they all chewed gum. She was never caught in dubious situations, and her conduct was above reproach. Even when his wife accused her of colouring her cheeks with the wrapping paper of tobacco cartons, he had unwound his turban and wetted one corner with his spittle and rubbed her cheeks with it until he nearly drew blood, but nothing had come out. All he could do that day was glower at her, contenting himself with giving her a sharp scolding, while Fatma could think of no reason why she deserved to be treated that way. Warned and threatened by Farag, she well understood the meaning of The Shame. She was not guilty of it, nor did it even cross her mind to contemplate it. Indeed she would rather have died.

Because she knew that people loved and spoiled her, she behaved like anyone used to receiving affection. She was natural, and her reactions came from her heart. She knew her looks were what attracted people to her so she took care of them, never appearing unwashed or uncombed. When she worked on the fields she protected her hands from getting scratched by slipping on the socks she borrowed from Om George. She was ever careful not to offend when she spoke by using bad language or coarse expressions. Everyone loved her; everyone was her friend, and she loved them all in return. That was why she could not understand why her brother was so harsh with her, or the reason for the poisonous looks he kept darting at her.

Nor did Farag himself. All he knew was that he had to answer for his sister and for her screaming femininity. Every lustful look directed at her dug into his flesh. He could not wait to marry her off, preferably in another town, and rid himself of the responsibility. But in this respect Fatma was not doing so well; suitors were few, or none to speak of. For who was the fool who would want to be saddled with that heap of seduction? And once married what was he going to do with her? People in those parts did not marry in order to enjoy beauty and then put up walls to protect it, because in the first place they did not live for enjoyment. They were happy enough to survive. When they married it was for the sake of an extra pair of hands, and eventually a progeny to swell the labour force. For this reason Fatma remained without suitors.

Not that the farm lacked men or young boys, and Fatma like other girls worked as hard as any of them, going to the fields at dawn and returning with the call for prayer at sunset. But unlike the other girls she stirred trouble wherever she went. That's why Farag lived in constant fear which he concealed behind a boisterous front. Much of the jolly atmosphere of the farm came from him when he fooled around with the men and made a mockery of their false airs of decorum. He challenged the boys to swimming races, and toppled baskets off the women's heads, and even the most demure did not escape his pranks. At weddings he wore his white *gallabieh* and his raw silk turban and cropped his hair short; he shaved his beard smooth and danced for the groom. He never failed to shower the bride with the traditional gift of money, not forgetting the bailiff and the cattle overseer, and anyone else standing around. All from the money he made on the side stealing cotton from the storehouse, or filching a bale on its way to the truck.

He spent lavishly and filled the farm with his exuberance, and he was popular everywhere. So that though his sister's irresistible appeal caused even the stones to stir, and though the men, torn with their passion, smouldered with desire for her, Farag was a friend to them all. In deference to him they looked away when they met Fatma, and when one of them allowed a sigh to escape, someone was always there to call him to order.

And so Fatma remained like a luscious fruit, ripe yet forbidden. None came near her, or allowed anyone else to come near her, while their hearts continued to pine. Old and young lusted for her. But Farag was always there. His wild laughter reminded them of his presence and warned them of The Shame, and they would return to their senses and rush to perform their afternoon prayers, or go round to the corner shop for a glass of tea.

And today she was caught in the maize field.

Not for the first time. She was always being caught with someone. Now in the maize field, now behind the stables, now under the thresher. Always by imagination. Rumours which invariably turned out



to be false. For there was bound to be rumour wherever she went, just as sighs were bound to rise in her wake.

There was no malice in the people. They were decent kindly folk who wished for others what they wished for themselves. You could see their goodness even in their geese as they collected near the threshing floor, and cackled down to the canal to splash about and teach their young to swim. At sunset they returned, hundreds of them cackling back to their pens which they found by instinct. And when a foolish one strayed into a neighbour's pen by mistake, your neighbour would be at your door with the stray creature even before you realized it was missing.

Everyone on the farm was under Fatma's spell. She was loved by all. If she went to a wedding it was she who outshone the bride. This strange magnetism was the reason why they feared for her. They feared she might slip, for they could not believe a woman so desirable could long resist The Shame. Their conviction of this even led them to pick the man with whom she was likely to commit The Shame, and that was Gharib.

Gharib was the son of Abdoun. In spite of his age no one called Abdoun 'uncle.' He was an irritable old man addicted to chewing tobacco and drinking sugarless coffee. He quarreled on the slightest provocation. Even the bailiff took care to keep out of his way. He was never known to have had a decent word for anyone. His talent for swearing was revealed at its best when a calamity befell the farm. Then he would take his position by the canal, like a bird of ill omen, and holding his *gallabieh* up by the hem, he would curse and swear, at the same time spewing out his tobacco chew and spluttering abuse on the peasants as if they alone were responsible for the misfortune. But nobody seemed to mind him for they knew there was no harm in him.

As for Gharib, he was mistrusted by all. He was rude and impudent, and he grew a forelock which he was fond of showing off, smooth and shining beneath his white woolen skull-cap. What's more, he had an eye for women and thought nothing of setting out to seduce them – which was why people were wary of him – without much caring whose wife it happened to be.

In spite of his father's ungainly appearance, Gharib was a good-looking boy, and although weather-beaten, his complexion was not too dark. He spoke little but his speech was engaging, perhaps because he sounded so carefree, speaking with the raucous rasp of an adolescent. Somehow he escaped the doltish look common to peasant boys, his clothes were always clean, and he was quick and sharp-witted which was probably what made him so smug. He worked tirelessly, and sang lays, and he owned his equipment for making tea which he was always pressing on his friends. When night fell, he could not bear the narrow confines of his house, and he would go outside, to seek the comfort of the hay near the barn. There he would sit proudly feeling his thighs and his chest, and brag to his friends about his amorous exploits – a field where he was highly proficient and they were hopelessly inept.

His flirting was flagrant and undisguised. He would eye the women boldly from the legs up, with a glint of irony in his look, or it could have been a repressed chuckle. He couldn't help it if his look unsettled them. A woman knew when he looked at her that way they he divined her thoughts, and if her thoughts were dwelling on The Shame, which more often than not was the case, she would realize he was stripping her with his eyes and she would get so confused trying to cover herself up that her defences would weaken and she could not help but succumb. As the number of his victims grew, so did his vanity, and the glint in his eye became bolder still.

There was something in the boy that set him apart from other men. Perhaps it was his intense virility. It was enough for a woman to catch sight of the back of his neck or the cord of his underpants for her limbs to melt. He didn't worry much about his methods. All means were fair which led him to a woman. At weddings he used to force himself into their midst making them freeze where they stood. At the mill he was only too pleased to carry their baskets or turn the wheel of their hoppers. Even the sick he did not spare. And except for his fear of the bailiff's rifle he might even have sneaked in to Om George by night. When people complained to Abdoun, he flared up at them, his face contorted into an angry scowl. 'There he is,' he would say, 'do what you like with him. I wash my hands.'

But there was nothing much anyone could do. For though Gharib was short he had the strength of a bullock. He was quite capable of lifting the heavy iron water-wheel with one hand while he broke a man's neck with the other, the same ironical glint never leaving his eye.

Of all the men he was the most virile, and of all the women Fatma was the most seductive, and it was only natural that they should be coupled by gossip. And yet they were poles apart. Fatma avoided him because of his reputation, while secretly he was intimidated by her. Although he could deftly handle the bailiff's servant girl, or Shafia, the widow with the many children, when it came to Fatma it was a different matter. For Fatma was a creature apart.

Sometimes he liked to brag to the boys, sleeping on the hay with him, that she was in love with him, and that she sent him messages. But he was the first one to despise himself for his vain boasts. He worked in the fields like a stallion, everywhere sweeping the women off their feet with his irresistible appeal. But with Fatma he was quite powerless. For her part she feared him, so that if he happened to greet her, his heart pounding as he did so, her reply would come curt and timid. She feared him because she feared The Shame while he feared her because he feared to fail, and all the time their names continued to be linked and Farag continued to hide his misgivings behind his show of goodwill, while playing up to Gharib who was the source of his greatest fears. It all went on covertly. On the face of it they were all happy kinsfolk living in brotherhood, and the farm was small and Abdoun's house was only three houses away to the right of Farag's, and there were practically no incidents of geese going astray.

Meanwhile they all lived on the brink of expectation. Things were bound to come to a head, like waking up in the middle of the night at the sound of a gun-shot or a cry coming from the fields to announce she had been caught there with Gharib.

It wasn't long before it happened.

It took no one by surprise, They took the incident for granted as something they had expected sooner or later. Even the children – in their private world where they fabricate their own gossip and hold their own notions about grown-ups – even they realized that Fatma at last had committed the forbidden thing their parents had long warned them against. Fatma had committed The Shame.

So when they saw Farag leaving the field for the first time without his turban, his head uncovered, his waistcoat unbuttoned, with mud clinging to his trousers, and when they saw his ashen face and trembling moustache, and his bloodshot eyes, they huddled close to the stable wall as, instinctively, they felt the enormity of what had befallen Farag. They followed him stealthily through the gateway of the farm until he reached his house. They saw him bawl at his young son who was drumming on an old rusted can. They heard him ask his wife in a low hoarse whisper to bring him his water-pipe, and stood watching him as he inhaled deeply, puffing out the smoke in dense clouds like those which came from damp logs burning in the oven.

When a few men began to go in, they were emboldened to creep in after them. But they were careful to stand near the door watching what was going on with diffidence. Not that anything fearful was going on. Farag, pale and silent, was puffing away quietly, regularly renewing the supply of tobacco, while the men sat round him, embarrassed and self-conscious. When one of them stirred uneasily, feeling compelled to say something to soften the blow, Farag would look at him and quietly offer him a puff from the water-pipe to keep him silent. The thing he had dreaded for a long time had happened at last, and nothing he or anyone else could say was going to make it change.

He remembered how he used to watch his sister's body moving beneath her torn floating black gown, or see her flesh through the holes; how whenever he watched her laugh or speak, or even eat, the blood would race to his head and he would look at her with eyes like hot pokers, or burst into wild laughter by which he hoped to conceal his lurking fear of the impending disaster. Often he had asked himself what he would do if – God forbid – the thing should happen. His hair would stand on end at the thought and he would look at Fatma again and wish he could wipe her off the face of the earth. And now that it had happened it was his duty to act like a man and a brother. It was his duty to kill her and kill Gharib – kill the sister whom he had carried in his arms as a child across the canals, and whom his dying mother had left to his care. It was his duty to kill Gharib, the worthless dog he had sheltered and fed, always half expecting to be betrayed.

Only blood was going to redeem what had happened. But before he made himself guilty of their blood, their own guilt must be proved. He was about to bring ruin on himself and his wife and his children, and it must not be for nothing. Let him smoke then and wait before he took up his knife. The decision was cold and merciless and irrevocable. For Farag was a farm man, and farm people were accused by village folk of being lax in matters of morality. He was going to show them that farm people have a moral code as lofty as their own and that they do not tolerate The Shame.

An enormous black mass with myriad arms and heads was seen coming in the distance, moving in a cloud of dust. It was the women marching resolutely in their ragged black gowns, driving Fatma before them, white as a sheet, the colour gone from her cheeks. There was no trace of beauty now in her face, and her head was covered with her shawl like a woman in mourning as she stared about her, her face a deathlike mask.

They made a lot of noise as they came nearer, arguing in shrill tones. Some said she should be taken to the farm-steward's house while others insisted her place was in her brother's house and that it was more proper for her to be taken there. After a good deal of squabbling she was conducted to the steward's house which stood in a corner of the farm, while the children stopped at the door and waited.

As for Gharib, they said he was last seen heading for the fields. He had run away, perhaps never to return, they said.

Suddenly all was confusion, thoughts were blurred and vision was impaired and no clear course of action seemed open. The men kept silent while the women heaped curses on Gharib, asking God to blight him with a deadly plague. Yet even the women's loud jabbering failed to lift the gloom that was slowly settling on the farm making even the dogs cower quietly in their corners.

Over at the steward's house the ring was closing in on Fatma. She was being badgered with questions, but even before she answered no one was prepared to believe her. She told them she had been taking Farag's breakfast to him in the fields that day, that she was just crossing the canal when Gharib suddenly appeared out of nowhere and tried to grab her by the hand and pull her to him. She fought him and cried out for help. Here she interrupted her rambling account. But the women urged her on. People came to her rescue, she went on, but Gharib had vanished into thin air. They did not believe her. There was more to this. No there wasn't, Fatma insisted. That wasn't true, and they shook their heads and each presented her own interpretation of Gharib's grabbing of Fatma's hand with all the colour her imagination could bring to it. They were seized by a mad fever to know exactly what had happened, which grew increasingly wild and more persistent as Fatma refused to say any more. Even the men sitting round Farag, far from Fatma and her circle, seemed to have caught the same fever although they appeared more restrained.

'Wait and see, folks,' someone would say in kindness, 'perhaps nothing happened.'

No one could ignore any longer what they had tried to suppress, now that it had happened. No one was astonished for it was not difficult to imagine the result when a man found himself alone with Fatma, much less when that man was Gharib. Who was going to believe that she had resisted? If she had indeed been alone with him, all was lost. The important thing now was to find out if all was really lost. Even Farag, as he guessed at the people's secret thoughts, wanted to know the truth not for its own sake but in order to make sure that Fatma was no longer his sister and that he was free to deal with her as he saw fit.

Strangely enough, women are bolder than men when it comes to such matters. They were quick to whisper it first amongst themselves, and then to Farag's wife – who had left the house to go weeping and wailing over Fatma – and then to Fatma's aunt. When they told Fatma herself, her face darkened, her nostrils quivered with anger, and a few tears fell from her eyes, fewer than the drops of juice squeezed out of a green lemon. She screamed at them that she was not going to let them do anything of the kind. She swore on the Koran that she hadn't been touched. 'You're afraid of the examination, so something must have happened,' they all said. All of a sudden she flushed crimson, unable to utter a sound. She who had once believed it herself, and who had been told by others that she did not know what it was to be shy.

Had such a thing happened in a village the people would have done everything to cover up for one of their own. But on a farm where nothing stays hidden, what was the use? Everyone, old and young, was on tenterhooks to know if the inevitable had happened to Fatma as they had predicted.

The horror of what she was about to face made her grow faint. They splashed water on her face and put an onion to her nose to make her come round. Her head reeled at the thought that she was being accused of the most infamous of crimes, that she was entirely at the mercy of these people, defenceless against their savage prying, within sight and hearing of her own brother and her relatives and all those who used to love her and whom she used to love. She looked up at the circle of women and pleaded for mercy. They only stared with mournful eyes from which all doubt had gone. 'Very well,' she said with a stony face, 'I am ready.'

By then Farag's head was in a daze from too much drawing on his water-pipe on an empty stomach. His head was lowered, resting on his hand. Were he not a man he could have been taken for a grief-stricken widow bemoaning a dead husband.

There was no one on the farm more expert on such matters than Sabha, the *mashtah*, who was not a professional like the others. She owned an old manual sewing machine and took in sewing for men and women alike. She looked younger than her years, with a clear complexion and a good-natured motherly air about her. But when she spoke she betrayed herself for what she was: a tough, matter-of-fact woman who had knocked about a good deal, with much experience of both men and women, and who did not inspire much confidence.

When Fatma announced she was ready they should have called in Sabha, but they hesitated. They were keen on having the truth, and although Sabha was experienced in such matters and they were certain that she would know immediately what there was to know, they did not trust her, for she was held in

disrepute. True she was the only dressmaker on the farm and she sewed for everybody, but to be seen in her house, even though only to try on a *gallabieh*, was compromising. It was well known that Sabha did not mind herself and her house being used as a screen for the clandestine meetings of men and women who had a perfectly good reason for being there. No one of course had actually seen anything. It might have been true, just as it might have been a groundless rumour, but what was certain was that Sabha was a shady character. She might find out the truth and withhold it, or she might say the opposite of what she knew. 'There's only Om George,' said Farag's wife.

The women agreed immediately. Om George was the only 'lady' on the farm, and the only one who was educated and could read and write. What was more she came from the town, where people knew all about everything.

The children pushed and shoved as they crowded round the long procession leaving the steward's house on its way to the bailiff's. Eager yet dejected, the crowd stumbled on down the narrow lanes littered with dirt and piles of rice straw. It was still daylight although the sun was going down. Fatma, in their midst, walked blindly on, her face ashen, her heart sunk to her feet, feeling with every step that she was trampling on it. Trampling on her innocence and the sweet memories of her childhood, and the days of her girlhood when she sang at wedding feasts, dreaming of her own wedding day, and the music, and the ritual night when her hands would be dyed with henna – the night when all would stand waiting for her to come out like a queen. And now they were waiting for her too. Hundreds of eyes riveting on her everywhere she looked, ravenous and brutal, raping her without shame as she staggered on, bleeding in her heart, barefooted, humiliated, driven without mercy.

Her friend Hikmat tried to pull her veil down to cover her face but she pushed it back. What was the use of covering her face when all of her was bare?

Sadly, inexorably, the mass of women moved on, heads and arms squirming, a trail of children and hungry dogs behind, all enveloped in a veil of dust. The geese along their path scared away, and overhead the birds and doves flew to their nests and the women trudged on, grim and resolute, till at last they reached the bailiff's house.

At that moment Dorgham the watchman was having another of his fits, bawling as usual, while nobody paid attention, for people by now were used to his outburst. He was the only man on the farm who came from Upper Egypt, and he had been watchman to that threshing floor since the day he arrived. He was now well over seventy and still at the same job. He had a huge black head and thick black features constantly knitted into an angry scowl. His hair was kinky and now quite grey, and his long white whiskers made him look like a mastiff. Sweat was constantly pouring from his face so that it glistened as though it were smeared with grease, and he spoke in fierce grunts which nobody understood. The sight of anyone coming near the threshing floor was enough to send him into a rage. After living thirty years on the farm he still did not know anyone by name, nor did he care to, and so long as people stayed away from his threshing floor he left them alone.

Now he was barking at Gharib whom he had discovered hiding under a pile of maize. The boy had just come out of hiding, sneaking back to the farm in order to watch the result of his atrocious act. His already dusky face had browned to a dull tan. He wore his skull-cap low on his forehead, no longer displaying his cherished forelock. It was a much subdued Gharib huddling there beneath the maize, glum and repentant, as his own depravity revealed itself to him in all its starkness. As the procession approached and Fatma appeared he sank deeper in his hiding place and looked away.

It was his dread of Fatma and the fact that she was unattainable that had kindled his desire. And the more desperately he wanted her the more distant she had seemed. He had not intended any harm. All he wanted was a little recognition, a sign that she was aware he existed, if only a careless look over her shoulder. But that never came, and he retaliated by an even more fevered pursuit of other women, never for a moment giving up his passionate longing for one look or one word from Fatma.

That wasn't the first time he had hidden, watching for her as she carried her brother's breakfast to the field, swaying in her black gown, the sweet breath of her body blowing over the trees, and the meadows, and the stream, filling the earth with her fragrance. Many times before he had stood watching for her, unobserved, afraid to be discovered, but that day for the first time he did not care if he was. He wanted her to see him. For the first time he longed to commit that Shame which had kept him sleepless and tormented, tossing on the straw. And yet he would have been content only to speak to that girl who was neither his sister nor his mother and listen to her timid reply.

No sooner had he appeared before her, emerging from the field, than she stood rooted where she was as though she had seen him stark naked. As though it were The Shame itself looming before her.

That very Shame of which Farag's bloodshot eyes, branding her like fire, had given her warning. The basket fell off her head. She screamed in panic. Everyone came rushing at the sound. In one second the whole world was tumbling about her ears as Gharib took to his heels and vanished in the fields.

Contrary to what they expected, Om George crossed herself and expressed her genuine sorrow over the whole affair, promising to do her best to help to find out the truth. She swore by the living Christ that she would get her husband to lock up Gharib in the police station, and get the police officer to tie him to the tail of a horse and hang him on a telephone pole. Om George was well known for her piety. She was well-bred and dignified. Nobody knew her real name. She used to force her husband to take her to church in town every Sunday morning in spite of his grumbling. He was used to spending Saturday evenings drinking *arak* in the neighbouring village where Panayoti, the grocer, also served liquor to those who wanted it.

Om George was fair and short with greying hair and three dots tattooed on her chin. She knew all about Fatma, and she was rather fond of the girl. Often she used to send for her to come and help her with the biscuits Abu George couldn't do without for breakfast. Or sometimes just to keep her company, or fill her in on the latest gossip as she was forbidden to mix with the women of the farm. Had it not been for the difference in age she might have been her best friend.

It was with the deepest humiliation that Fatma stepped into the bailiff's house. She was going there now not because she was wanted, but in order for Om George to arbitrate on her honour; the woman who only a few days before had kissed her mouth saying that had they been of the same religion she would have taken her for wife to her brother who was a cashier in the province of Beheira.

She stood petrified on the threshold but the women dragged her in and her veil slipped off her head. Om George went round to see that George was out of the house and that the doors and panes and shutters were properly barred. Fatma fought with all the strength of instinctive shyness, but they had fallen on her, forcing her down on the bed while one woman tied up her hands and two others got hold of her legs. Many hands stretched towards her: veined, ugly, dry hands. Eyes bulged, intent in their search for honour, seeking to guard it. Burning, piercing, boring through her, even when they no longer knew what they were looking for. Om George was all in a quiver as though she were the one about to go through the ordeal. She kept rebuking the women, in vain, at the same time reassuring Fatma, also in vain, while the struggle went on amidst muffled cries that gradually died to a chill whisper. A stillness heavy with expectation hung over the room and spread slowly outside, to the house, and onto the farm, and over the whole universe. It hung gloomily over the heads of the people sitting with Farag and those hanging around near the irrigation pump or out in the fields, following in their imaginations what was going on at the bailiff's house.

The whole farm was lulled to a hush except Dorgham. Only one man was there to give him an ear and that was Abdoun, Gharib's father. Lifting his *gallabieh* by the hem he had rushed to the threshing floor in search of any living soul before whom he would vent his fury and curse Fatma and his son and the entire farm – even if only Dorgham.

Suddenly a loud trilling-cry coming from the room where Fatma was imprisoned, tore the silence. It was followed by others, alternating with cries of, 'All is well! Thank God, all is well! Honour is safe.'

Only then did Farag look up. 'Bring her to me,' were the first words he uttered.

A few moments later, no sooner had Dorgham's vociferating died down than a tremendous racket was heard starting near the shaft which fed the old water-wheel. It was deep enough to hold three men standing on one another's shoulders, and there just at the edge was old Abdoun catching his son by the scruff of the neck, and with all his tottering strength trying to throw him in. From all around men had gathered round him in an effort to quell his fury and save Gharib from his clutches. Every time he failed to budge Gharib his vituperations redoubled and his curses poured like burning lava. Anyone watching this performance could have no doubt of Abdoun's genuine intention of drowning his son. But there was something, perhaps an imperceptible inflection in his voice, or in his choice of insults, which suggested that Abdoun was at heart not ashamed of his son. If anything, that he was secretly proud to have sired a seducer no woman could resist, and that his son was accused of rape.

Meanwhile at Farag's house a regular massacre was about to take place. Farag was beating Fatma with the coffee grinder, and Fatma was howling with pain. Farag's wife was screaming in terror lest he should kill his sister and get himself into trouble. The neighbours' wives were screaming too, while everyone else from inside and outside the house rushed to hold him back, in vain. Farag was like a maddened beast heeding nothing but his wild intent to murder his sister. And yet there was something wanting in the measured force of his blows and the look in his eye strangely void of emotion. It was just that although Fatma's innocence was proved, and his honour was untouched, he felt bound to perform some

spectacular act by which to reply to the people's gossip and the many speculations that had crossed their minds.

Of course Abdoun never drowned his son, and Farag never murdered his sister. The sun went down as always, and as always people brought their cattle home from the fields, having loaded the donkeys with their fodder. Smoke began to rise through the cracks and over the roof-tops of the mud houses, and cooking smells drifted in the air with the glow of sunset. The men went to evening prayers, and the women finished going up and down to feed the animals and lock up the chickens in their coops for the night. By the time the call to the night prayer echoed above the rooftops, all was quiet on the farm again. Everything concerning the incident had been hashed and rehashed until lamps flickered and died. Sleep crept in with the growing darkness and tired bodies stretched on their mats and lay still.

After everyone had gone to sleep and Fatma was alone, weary and broken, she began to cry. Her tears flowed in spite of herself, streaming down onto the mud oven where Farag had forced her to sleep without mat or cover. Her body shook with her sobs, so did the chicken coop by her side, and the oven, and the house, and the entire farm, until she nearly woke the people from their sleep. She gave herself up to her pain and wept far into the night, racked by her suffering.

During the days that followed, well-meaning friends tried to persuade Farag to accept Gharib when he proposed to marry Fatma, but he wouldn't hear of it and they had to give up. As for Gharib, he never talked about Fatma any more. As a matter of fact he stopped talking about women altogether. He cut his forelock and he took to observing the prayers regularly, but that did not prevent him from hanging around the farm, and loitering by the open widow of Farag's house.

Fatma, on the other hand, was locked up in the house, forbidden by Farag to step outside or even to go to work although he was in dire need of her earnings. It made no difference, for she had renounced the world, and was quite content with her seclusion. The bloom was gone from her cheeks, and her eyes had lost their lustre. She had grown to look like a sluggish beast: cowering, inert, unsmiling. There was submission in her voice, and her tone had lost the sparkle where her intense femininity rang with every inflection.

Nevertheless none of all this lasted very long. Fatma did not remain a prisoner for ever, and Gharib's zeal for prayer fizzled out, and Farag went back to his boisterous clowning. For after many and many a market day, everything that happened was stowed away in the storehouses of memory. Peacemakers had seen to it that Abdoun was reconciled with his son, and all was well between them. Gharib even grew his forelock again and once more he was entertaining his friends with tales of his amorous exploits. Not without a shade of bitterness. For Fatma was up and about again, ravishing as ever, wearing her headcloth at a slant, holding her gown by the hem, her willowy grace driving the men out of their senses. She greeted everyone on her way. Everyone except Gharib; not deliberately, but simply because she did not see him, as if he had never existed.

Fatma had returned to her old way of looking and talking and smiling and bewitching the men just as before. But people wondered sometimes. She had acquired something new, something they did not know her to have before. Or perhaps one should say she had lost something: that thing that gave her purity. The quality that gave sincerity to her smile and made her anger real. She had lost her innocence. Now she was a creature of guile and deceit and concealment.

That was not all. If Farag happened to catch her leaving Sabha's house, and he dragged her home, and locked the door and grabbing her by the hair asked her what she was doing there, she could stare him in the face and answer boldly, 'I was having a fitting. Get out of my way.' And she would shake herself free of his grip and stand in a corner of the room rearranging her hair, with her lovely eyes looking straight at him, defiant, unflinching and unabashed.

# The Assassination of Light at the River's Flow

By Khayriyah Ibrahim as-Saqqaf

*Khayriyah as-Saqqaf was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia in 1951. She holds degrees in literature and education from Saudi Arabia and the United States, and is the first woman editor of one of Saudi Arabia's leading newspapers.*

*The stage on which action began was at 450 Km., where the road is exploded by thorns. The period is between Wednesday, 19.5.1401 and Wednesday, 25.5.1401. The event is assassination.*

The distance between moves was the bridge between my heart and theirs, between my soul and theirs. As I saw the bridge destroyed, movement collided with empty space.

\*\*\*

I was dreaming that my holiday would come on a spring like day, when smiles and laughs, dew, rain, breezes, the flow of water, the murmurings of doves, and all tenderness would converge in meaning and love . . .

Wednesday. How beautiful are Wednesdays, when joy comes to my heart like a bird that has flown for seven days and then landed on my hand. It comes like a legendary or mythical appointment with joy, it kisses me when I am thirsty for tenderness and hungry for a morsel of "I will see my mother and father for the weekend." I will carry my books to them, and my rosy notebooks, and show them all I have learned. That is the meaning of Wednesdays.

I will tell them of my girl friends, Samar from Lebanon, Sahar from Egypt, Aisha from Malaysia, and Khadijah from Pakistan. I will tell them of their lives, their thoughts, and their imaginings that float on the edges of clouds. I will tell about the faces of our teachers, full of their stories and titles, experiences and travels, knowledge and philosophy. I will describe the green vast spaces we imagine, and our small, crowded, beautiful and safe school world surrounded by its four grand walls that separate us from the external world.

Everything outside: that is the name of the big city in which sleep the rich and the poor, the famous and the unknown, and the schools, institutes, hospitals, monuments, and all the attractive shops. Noises come from every corner. We hear its sounds, smell its air and feel its climate along the road between our school and the airport, where we can glimpse its glittering streets from behind our veils. But when we read its newspapers and magazines, we do not find the city's smells. Even television transmits only routine and unimportant things. We prefer to sit down to a cup of warm tea and talk about our teachers' faces and the graffiti on our walls, and about Samar's weekly letters from her fiancé. We do not even listen to the radio unless we want to know the number who have died in some battle or famine, or about the blood that has been shed somewhere since dawn.

But this Wednesday I decided to stay at school to study for the midyear exams. Oh, my mother, your face is illuminated, how I love that face! My eyelashes stand still in respectful love whenever I see you. My mother, your face is a mysterious world. And my father, my dear father. They say that men are strong, but I wish you were stronger in front of my mother. My heart beats . . .

In a moment I was able to push away the notion of despair. I could see my parents in the next holiday, carrying the results of my exams. They would be proud, and forget that I was one whole week late. They would welcome me with kisses, and maybe a bundle of roses -- my success gifts.

Still, something mysterious whispered inside me, the familiar and troublesome heartbeats of time, beating fear, caution, expectation, sadness, happiness, laughter, anxiety and contentment all at once. Days are stops, hours are alarms, seconds are reminders . . . -- of what?

\*\*\*

"Raha!" said our dorm supervisor, "You must travel to your parents right away!"

My heart beat like a dove in one's hands. "What happened? Is my father sick?"

"Oh, Raha, do not be fearful, he will be all right." Those were the words I heard or thought I heard as the car sped to the airport. I did not see the city. I had left my room so quickly, grabbing

only my black 'aba'ah, that I left my books and notebooks. Even my written secrets lay unfolded in my room.

I imagined my father asleep on the bed. Oh, Allah, please, do not shock me, do not annihilate me! Would he be able to talk to me? How would I talk to him? Would he know me? Was it a traffic accident? How did he get sick on Wednesday? Or had he been sick for some time, and not told me? Oh, my father, my world that I trust! Who would await me in the airport? In moments I would know everything. We were landing, and time stretched, my steps became heavy, the space between the plane and my home became mountains on my feet.

And then truth committed suicide. Sweat covered my eyelids and forehead and fingers as I stared at him. There he was, my father, standing before me in full health, smiling to me, waiting for me. I had no voice, something whispered deep inside me, a dead body lay between his feet and mine, a silly lie.

Why did she lie? Dare she do that without being asked to? Who would tell her to lie? But then my heart pointed toward the sky to be forgiven for not trusting that faithful supervisor who took me to the plane with fear and love, praying with me for my father's recovery. She believed the story. So who . . .

It was I who needed prayers.

\*\*\*

The day passed in the anxiety of the secret of this lie. Silence contained me. My mother's fixed face did not attract my eyes. My father's face contained nothing reassuring. My little brother was busier than usual. My house, the home that I counted the hours to come to, was saturated by cautious silence and suspense. What did they know? What were they hiding? Why the lie?

The fear was merely the announcement of what was coming. In the evening my mother followed close to me and sat down near me, with words in her eyes that did not content me. My father sat near her, and my brother closed his door behind him, turned off the radio and sat down across the room. After some moments of terrible silence my own voice cut its darkness and I begged, "What is wrong? Tell me, get me out of my fears!"

"There is nothing wrong, my daughter, it is a matter that might please you," said my mother warily. My heart pounded to dizziness, there was something inside me . . . "We would like you to agree to marry," she went on. "A man who has asked for your hand before. You wanted more time, more education, and you have had it. We do not see any obstacle now. He will cherish you, and you will be happy."

"Not that rich, old, fat Fahid?"

As I felt the sting of my mother's hand across my cheek I saw that my father's face was red. "You are arrogant! How dare you! We have made a match for you that every girl would envy! He is mature, he likes you, he will give you everything, he will take care of you. How dare you be ungrateful?" my mother was shouting.

"Made it? You made the match already?" I looked at my father, who just nodded, looking hurt, and I remembered how it was last year, when I watched from my window as my uncle brought Fahid to our house, and how he looked at me when I helped serve dinner, and how I had nightmares of lying in his sweaty bed. But what objection could I make, in my inexperience? I knew nothing evil of him. I had only begged for time, hoping that someone young, someone like the man Samar was going to marry, someone I could plan with, talk with, whose embrace I could long for, would ask for my hand.

"I can't. I can't!"

"What humiliation is this! What nonsense are you learning in that school? What will everyone say?"

"They'll say that you love somebody else," taunted my little brother. "That you've been seeing men. Maybe that you've had an affair."

"Say something to her!" my mother ordered my father.

"Don't betray us," my father pleaded. "Trust us. Trust us! Agree, go back for your examinations, finish the term, graduate, come back home to your wedding day. Be happy!"

"I can't marry that man!"

"You will," said my mother.

"I will not! Will you force me to death?"

"Death is simpler, if you insist on refusing."



\*\*\*

I ran to my room crying. I could hear my brother's door slam, hear my mother yelling her complaints to my father, hear her voice getting louder, and then she was in my room carrying a stick. She beat me until I crumpled on the floor and then she pulled my hair, the hair that she had taken such care of all my childhood, brushing it, shaping it, showing it off to her friends, calling it the waves and ripples of a beautiful deep black river. Sixteen years of her fingerprints were on my hair.

I had thought that she wanted me to be beautiful among my friends. I did not know she was only preparing me for sacrifice, like a herder who fattens and grooms his goat for the sale. Again and again, she pulled my hair. My youth fell between her hands. My nose bled, her hands were wet with my blood, and I screamed in fear of the blood. I remembered the radio's voice as my classmates and I listened, crying, because of the blood of war victims flowing on paved roads under neon lights.

My mother's heart was the heart of a dumb hangman who has killed his feelings to do his job, a stupid hangman more attached to his full pocket than his heart. She was not my mother. This was a devil. She hardly resembled my mother. Was this another plot? The brainwashing they talked about?

The woman pushed me to the floor and left, slamming the door.

\*\*\*

I cried until the pain and fear solidified. Then I wiped my face, gathered my clothes, and braided a rope of my hair. I tried to tie it around my neck, but it wouldn't strangle. My mother had given me life, she had given me death, but the death came too slowly.

In the next three days I slept once and dreamed I'd had a nightmare, and my supervisor was waking me . . . I woke expecting my supervisor to be calling us, but it was only a sweet dream. No one visited me, I did not eat anything. I lay behind my door thinking of my school, my classmates, my teachers, my secrets in my notebooks, my secret dreams of love, secrets between myself and my pen, myself and the sky. Dreams as big as space -- now reduced to nothing but soap foam, bubbles smashed by mother's blows.

Oh, how great you are, Allah! You made my heart, my feelings! No one can own another's heart, you decreed it so! Even if thy room is a locked jail, even if my parents are my jailers and my terror, my heart is still alive. My only escape is through Fahid's bed, and I refuse it, refuse it! My heart is still alive!

I heard my father answer the telephone: "Raha is sick, she cannot study for a while, she must travel," he lied. I wished I were deaf, or incapable of feeling. Tell them the truth, I screamed in silence, tell them that Raha is beaten, jailed, torn, bleeding, and half her hair is sleeping on the floor!

I hear the key opening my door. Her face advances toward me. She plants her glare into me. She advances, I focus on her face, I feel that my eyes will explode. I don't know in what wave I drowned.



# My Mother

## Fadhma Amrouche

*Fadhma Amrouche, poet and singer, was born in an Algerian Berber village in 1882 or 1883. She was the illegitimate daughter of a young widow, and owing to the demands of the local "code of honor" her mother was forced to entrust her to the care of French nuns. At the French mission she received an education and eventually married a Berber teacher and moved to France. There she became known as a poet and a singer of traditional Berber folk songs. She began MY LIFE STORY: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BERBER WOMAN, from which this story is excerpted, in 1946 and completed it in 1962, at the age of eighty. The tale is set at the end of the 19th century. A young widow confronts tradition and alienates her husband's family when she keeps her land to manage by herself; later she has an illegitimate child and both must endure rejection by society.*

My mother came from Taourirh-Moussa-ou-Amar, a few miles from Tizi-Hibel, my village. She belonged to a very good family called Aith Larbi-ou-Said. She was given in marriage when very young to a man much older than herself, quite an old man who had a daughter older than my mother.

My mother never complained about this man, who loved her after his own fashion. She gave him two sons, my brothers Mohand and Lamara. This man had a much younger brother who was childless. The latter wanted to draw up a deed whereby he bequeathed all his property to his wife. Before he could carry out this intention his elder brother set an ambush for him and the next day he was found dead against a haystack in an isolated spot outside the village known as Sebala, the place where all the villagers erected their haystacks. The murderer was never discovered and the case was filed and disposed of.

My mother told me that from that day her husband was under a curse. He was afflicted by a terrible disease: his whole body was covered with blisters, filled with liquid and this yellow liquid ran down his legs.

'The year of his death,' my mother said, 'there was a miraculous crop. In living memory the fig trees had never been loaded with so much fruit, the vines with such bunches of grapes, nor had such fine ears of corn ever been seen.'

'When we went out to the fields, he would lift up the branches and say, "Look woman, look at all the good things God gives us!" And I would reply quietly, "*Ma ne der!*" (If we live long enough.)

'One day, when I answered him in these same words, he fell into a sudden rage and shook me, shouting, "We shall live, woman! We shall live!"

'He was not to see the figs ripen, nor the grapes. The crops had scarcely been gathered in, when he died.'

Her husband had not even been buried when my maternal uncle, Kaci Aith-Larbi-ou-Said, came to my mother and ordered her to leave her home. 'You and your children must come to live with us,' he insisted. 'Our mother will bring them up and you must marry again.'

'I shall stay with my children, in my own home,' she replied, thus defying her brother and the local customs. (These required a widow's children to return to the dead husband's family when they reach the age of seven, while she can choose either to live with her own parents or with her late husband's family while waiting to remarry.)

My uncle, who was very tall, seized a tile from the roof and threw it at her, fortunately missing. He went straight to the *tajmaat* (assembly place) and declared in the presence of witnesses, 'As from this day, I repudiate my sister Aini. She is no longer a member of our family; whatever she does, whatever becomes of her, we dissociate ourselves from her fate. She is a stranger to us.'

He returned to his village and, from that day, my mother never saw her father's house again.

She saw to the burial of her husband, according to the tradition. With money that she borrowed in anticipation of her grape harvest, she bought a couple of oxen which she sacrificed for the repose of the soul of the deceased. The meat was divided among the whole village. Every family got a share, one portion per person. In addition a funeral banquet was served at the *tajmaat*, intended primarily for the poor who were thus able to feast on *couscous*.

My mother was left on her own at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three, with two children, the elder one five or six and the younger one three. She was very beautiful, with a clear pink complexion and blue-grey eyes, rather short and stocky, with broad shoulders, a strong chin and a low, obstinate forehead. She set to work bravely. She did the housework, fetched water, ground corn for the day, prepared her meals in the evening. During the day she worked in the fields.

When she needed a man's help she had to pay very dearly for it. In the winter, when the olives were ripe, she gave five days' work gathering the fallen fruit in return for one day's work from a thrasher.

But she was young and foolish. In her courtyard there lived a young man from the same family as her old husband. She fell in love with him. And the inevitable happened. She became pregnant and the young man denied that he was the father of the child.

Kabyle customs are cruel. When a woman transgresses she must disappear, she must not be seen again. The family must not be sullied by her shame. Before the French rule, summary justice was practiced: the relatives took the offender out into the fields, killed her and buried her under an embankment. But at that time, the French legal system was struggling to wipe out these brutal customs and this was my mother's salvation.

When she was no longer able to hide her condition my brothers' uncles – the old husband's brothers – had a meeting. They decided to drive my mother out and take over the children whose property they coveted. When they tried to force her to leave, she went to the magistrates and laid a charge against them.

The magistrates came up to the village. The tribunal appointed a guardian and a deputy guardian for the children, drew up an inventory of my mother's property and left with the decree that no one must harm the widow or orphans.

On the night of my birth my mother was all alone with her two small children: there was no one at hand to assist her or to go for help. She delivered herself and bit through the umbilical cord. The next day one old woman brought her a little food.

When I was nine days old my mother tied me warmly to her breast, for it had been snowing, and set out, with a child in each hand, to lodge a complaint with the public prosecutor against my father. She wanted him to recognize me and give me his name. He refused because he was engaged to a girl from the village who came from a powerful family; they threatened to kill him if he abandoned this girl and he was afraid!

The case dragged on for three years. All this time, through heat and cold, my mother returned to plead and harass the magistrates. All the witnesses agreed that the man was indeed my father, for I was his living portrait. After three years he was sentenced to pay damages – the sum of 300 francs! – which my mother refused to accept, but since the law at that time forbade the establishment of paternity, he could not be forced to recognize me; so the seal of shame was branded on my forehead.

In despair, my mother plunged me into the icy waters of the spring. But I did not die.

My mother went about her usual tasks, night and day, with no assistance: washing, carding, combing, spinning and weaving her wool, ploughing her fields, gathering her figs, grapes, olives, doing her housework and cooking, sifting and grinding corn, barley, acorns, carting water, carrying wood.

When I was tiny, she left me sleeping until she returned; when I was a bit bigger she left a little pitcher of water next to me and a bowl containing a small portion of *couscous*.

When I woke up I picked at the grains of *couscous* with my fingers and when I had eaten it all I sucked the water out of the pitcher through its little spout. Then I went back to sleep until my mother's return. Sometimes, when she had to stay out late, a good-natured neighbour agreed to look after me for a short while, but this was rare.

The world is a cruel place and 'the child of sin' becomes the scapegoat of society, especially in Kabylia. I cannot count the blows I received. What endless bullying I suffered! If I ventured into the street, I would risk being knocked down and trampled upon.

The first picture that I can recall is of a summer's day, with a leaden sun beating down on a steep and dusty road; I see a lad of about ten driving some animals before him, and then a toddler, little more than a babe, all pink and white with fair, curly hair, running after him screaming, '*D'hada! D'hada!*' (Big brother, big brother!) Then all is silence.

Then there immediately follows another picture: that of a house whose open door lets in a shaft of sunlight; in the sun, a woman bends over a naked child, whose body is covered with cactus spikes; hot tears fall on this bruised body from which the woman extricates the thorns, one by one.

I learned later that this child was me: I had followed my brother who was driving the oxen to the drinking trough and a vicious boy had pushed me into the hedge of prickly pears. My mother took fright. What was she to do with me? How was she to protect me from people's cruelty? She could not keep me shut up, but she was afraid that if I went out I would be killed and, in the eyes of the law, the blame would fall on her.

She heard that at Ouadhias there was a convent of the White Sisters, who took in little girls and looked after them. She thought that if she entrusted me to these nuns she would have no more worries on my account; no one would hurt me any more. Nevertheless, she held out for a long time as she loved me, I

was her child. She had refused to give me to the magistrate's wife, who was childless and had wanted to adopt me after the incident of the cactus hedge, but seeing that I was still a victim of ill-treatment, she decided to take me to the White Sisters.

On Wednesday, market day, my mother lifted me on to her back and took me to Ouadhias. I have very little memory of this period of my life. Pictures, nothing but pictures. First, that of a very tall woman, dressed all in white, with black beads. Another object made of knotted rope hung next to the rosary – probably a whip; I learned later that she was the nun in charge of the little girls. There were other children with me, but all older, among these was Tassadit Aith Ouchen-Felicite, of whom I shall speak later.

According to my mother, I must have stayed for a year in this house – probably from the summer of 1885 to 1886. Every Wednesday, my mother came to see me; she would bring me the best things she had, hard-boiled eggs, girdle cake, pancakes, sweet white figs. So that the other children shouldn't take it out on me, she shared everything she brought amongst them all. Once a long time passed without a visit. Weeks went by. When I finally saw her again, she was pale and had lost weight. She explained that my brother Lamara had had a fight with a boy of his own age; she had tried to separate them and the other child's father had thrown a stone at her which had hit her on the forehead. She had been carried home unconscious. Her life had been in danger for several days, but she had recovered, and she lifted my little hand to her head, so that I could feel the hole there.

From this whole period of my life, I can only recall the tune of *Ave Maria Stella* and the impression of the chapel, all lit up, with the officiating priest holding out the monstrance. (For a long time after I had left Ouadhias, I wondered what all that meant.) But, most of all, I am haunted by a terrible picture: that of a tiny girl standing against the wall of a corridor: the child is covered with filth, dressed in sack-cloth, with a little mug full of excrement hung around her neck. She is crying. A priest is walking towards her; the nun who is with him explains that she is a wicked little girl who has thrown her comrades' thimbles into the privy and so has been made to climb down into it to retrieve them: she is covered with the contents of the cesspool, which also fill the mug.

In addition to this punishment, the child was also flogged till she bled: when my mother came the following Wednesday, she found me still covered with the marks from the whip. She stroked my bruises, then sent for the nun and, pointing to the weals, she said, 'Was it for this that I entrusted my daughter to you? Give her back to me!' The nun undressed me, even stripping me of my chemise. My mother took off her headscarf, knotted two corners together over my shoulder, pinned the material together on the other shoulder with a large thorn, by way of a clasp, untied her wide woolen girdle which she fastened round her head, and lifted me on to her back.

And so I left the Sisters of Ouadhias.

While I was at Ouadhias, a man from the village had asked my mother to marry him; he was not from our clan; he was young and strong and promised to support her and her children; my mother agreed, as my brothers were not yet able to defend her or indeed to look after themselves.

This man went to see my mother's family, taking the bride-price, but my uncle Kaci refused the money, saying he no longer had a sister. So my mother remarried, but she wouldn't go to live with her husband's family, who in any case would not have accepted her.

Her brothers tried once again to drive my mother out and to take over her children and her property; and once again she had to go to the law. She had the last word: she kept her home, her children and the man who had taken on the burden of marrying her and protecting her.

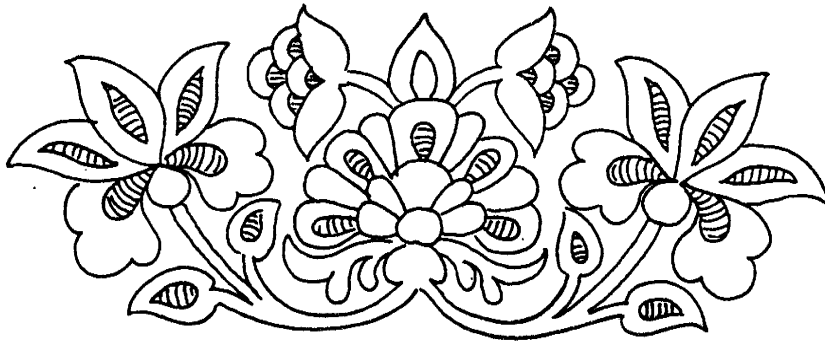
He kept his word until the day when his elder brother died, and he had to take this man's place in looking after his own family: his elderly father, his mother and his brother's widow. A little girl was born from my mother's second marriage, inheriting my mother's lovely blue-grey eyes.

My mother was a stout-hearted woman. She was in the habit of saying, '*Tichert-iou-khir-t'mira guergazen*' (The tattooing on my chin is worth more than a man's beard!) And it was true. I only saw my mother weep twice: when I was thrown into the cactus hedge and when she heard of her own mother's death. The thing that grieved her most was to be separated for ever from her family. Half-way between Taourirh-Moussa –ou-Amar and Tizi-Hibel there was a stream where the women went to do their washing, near the hamlet of Tagragra. Every Wednesday, on market day, my mother would meet my grandmother there. They would each bring some delicacy to offer to the other. But one morning my grandmother did not turn up; a neighbour told my mother that her mother had died during the night. The whole day my mother waited outside the house while acquaintances pleaded with my uncle Kaci to let her come in and say her last farewell to the dead woman; my uncle Kaci was adamant. My mother came home broken-hearted. I was at home at the time as it was the holiday to celebrate the feast of the sheep, which fell that year during the

summer, and my little sister and I were witness to her despair, without understanding what it was about, but the memory is still vivid.

In the autumn, the *kaid* sent for my mother and said, 'Your daughter Fadhma is a burden to you, take her to Fort-National where a school for girls has just been opened, she will be happy and treated well, and the Administrator will take her under his wing. You will have nothing more to fear from your first husband's brothers.' My mother held out for a long time, but her young husband, as well as the village people, who still considered me the child of sin, were disapproving. In October or November 1886, she agreed to give me up. Once again she took me on her back and we set out. I cannot recall this journey; I can only remember that as we climbed down towards the river we picked arbutus berries to eat – I can still see the red fruit. This brings us to the end of the first part of my childhood. I returned to the village from time to time, for the holidays, but I was never ill-treated again.

# **Outsiders Stories**







## The Errand

by Yusuf Idris

*Yusuf Idris, one of the Arab world's best known fiction-writers, was born in 1927 in the village of al-Bayrum in Egypt's Nile Delta. He studied medicine at Qasr al-Ayni hospital in Cairo, graduating in 1951. While some of his early stories had appeared in magazines, his first collection of short stories was published in Egypt in 1954 (Arhkas Layali, the Cheapest Nights). He eventually gave up medicine to devote his time to both fiction-writing and journalism, as the literary editor of Egypt's al-Ahram.*

Whenever anyone mentioned Cairo in his presence El Shabrawi got terribly upset. It made him feel cheated of his life and he would suddenly long to go back if only to spend one hour at El Kobessi or Mo'Allem Ahmed's in the quarter of El Tourgouman. His memory took him back to the days when he was a conscript and he used to go the length and breadth of Cairo every week, and he would hanker for one of those daytime shows he used to attend at the National Cinema. He sighed bitterly every time, for it was not too much to ask God to arrange for the proper circumstances and a little money to make his wish come true. 'I'll give my life for one hour in Cairo,' he never tired of saying.

But he didn't have to go to quite that extreme for things looked up unexpectedly, all of a sudden, and his wish came to be realized in a way he least suspected. One day as he was sitting in his usual place at the police station, as he had for the past four years, a large crowd of people suddenly came barging in. After many questions and in spite of the racket, he was able to make out that they were bringing in a mad woman from Kafr Goma'a accompanied by her relatives and friends. Everyone was yelling at once as more and more people kept coming in, attracted by the noise, until the place was in an uproar. A beam of hope made his heart flutter. Obviously the woman would have to be sent to the asylum in Cairo with a special escort, and he couldn't think of anyone better qualified for the task than himself.

He found it no problem to get the job. There was no need to send mediators to plead with the adjutant, since all his colleagues bluntly refused to have anything to do with it, and when he volunteered of his own free will there were no objections and the matter was settled right away. Immediately he dispatched Antar, the errand boy from the station canteen, to inform his wife he was going away. She was to send him some food wrapped in his large handkerchief and the fifty-piastre note she would find hidden in the pillowcase.

In half an hour everything was ready: the Health Inspector's report written and the railway ticket-forms filled. All he had to do was board the train and he would be in the heart of Cairo. He could hardly believe his luck. He couldn't believe he was going to see Cairo again and go on a tram ride and meet his old friends and dine on grilled meat at Mo'Allem Hanafi's. His joy knew no bounds as he walked resolutely to the station at the head of more than a hundred people all recommending that he be kind and patient with Zebeida.

He was given a twenty-piastre tip by her father, and ten by her husband. He shook his head many times and kept up a broad smile and told everyone not to worry. He was going to be like a true brother to her, born of her own mother and father. It was a strange procession running through the town, with El Shabrawi at the head. People stopped to stare. Those who knew him asked where he was going.

'Only round the corner,' he replied with modesty.

'How far?' they persisted.

'Oh, only up to Cairo,' he said with feigned indifference.

'Lucky man!'

His belly tingled with excitement.

After a long wait the Delta train came puffing in. He got on with Zebeida who sat down quietly beside him. Presently the train started. El Shabrawi felt for his papers for the third time. They were safe in his inside pocket. Seeing all was well and everything in order, he removed his wide uniform belt and relaxed, sitting back a little, almost forgetting Zebeida.

After a long time the loitering and meandering and interminable stops came to an end and the train crawled into Mansourah like a long caterpillar. When they got off, El Shabrawi crossed the bridge holding Zebeida by the hand, all the time invoking the blessings of the Sayyeda Zeinab. He looked for the train to Cairo and found it crouching in its place, waiting for him. He got on and sat Zebeida near the window. When the lemonade man came round he bought two glasses which he gulped down one after the other. Then he bought a third one which he offered to Zebeida who rejected it irritably. He patted her soothingly on her back and gulped it down himself.

The train began to move. The passengers were sitting snugly in their seats, idly staring at nothing. Zebeida was looking out of the window like a child, a beatific smile on her face, while El Shabrawi lost himself in visions of approaching bliss.

Just before they reached Simbellawen Zebeida suddenly turned round and beat her breast violently, looking at El Shabrawi in a strangely accusing manner. The latter snapped out of his visions with a jolt.

'What . . . what's the matter?' he asked anxiously.

She gave no reply but, holding her hand above her mouth, let out a joyful trilling-cry which she followed by a string of others. A sudden hush fell on the carriage and the passengers all turned to stare. El Shabrawi's head reeled with embarrassment as he fumbled for an explanation. He tried to swallow but his throat felt dry. He turned to Zebeida and implored her to stop, gently patting her hand.

'There, there, now, don't worry, everything will be alright. Please . . .'

Finally she calmed down. But the passengers did not. They began to comment on what had just happened in low whispers that grew steadily louder, never taking their eyes off Zebeida or El Shabrawi.

'Must be his wife, poor dear,' he heard a woman say.

A peal of laughter rang out at one end of the carriage. The man sitting in front of him woke up and cleared his throat. Two children stood on their seats to get a better view. El Shabrawi broke into a sweat that seeped through his khaki uniform. He felt like changing the bitter taste of his mouth so he opened his large handkerchief in order to spit in it but his throat was too dry and he folded it up again and put it back in his pocket.

'What's wrong with the lady, Officer?' asked his neighbour, who did not seem to appreciate the situation.

'Oh, n . . . nothing,' replied El Shabrawi. He was able to recover his speech though his knees still felt rather watery. 'Just a little . . .,' he said making a circular motion with his hand near his temple. The man shook his bulk and nodded knowingly. El Shabrawi was still moving his hand when Zebeida turned on his again.

'What do you mean, nothing? Who said there was nothing?' she asked in a shrill cry.

El Shabrawi looked at her with genuine alarm as she poked her face close to his. He leaned back until his head hit the wall, placing his knotted handkerchief, with its contents, between them. She stopped abruptly and stood up with a jerk. She peered unsteadily at the ceiling and screamed again at the top of her voice. 'Who said there was nothing? Down with the Omdah of our town Ibrahim Abou Sha'alan! . . . Long live His Majesty the King, President Mohamed Bey Abou Batta!' And another trilling-cry went up.

The carriage was now in utter pandemonium. Sleeping passengers woke up. The man sitting in front of El Shabrawi pulled his basket from under his seat and hurried away. In one second Zebeida and El Shabrawi had half the carriage to themselves, while the rest of the passengers huddled apprehensively in the far corner. Some left the carriage altogether while a few remained out of curiosity. El Shabrawi's uniform was now drenched in perspiration. He tried to force her back into her seat but she jerked his hand away.

'Down with our Omdah!' she shouted again to the tune of more trilling-cries. 'Long live His Majesty the King, President Abou Batta!'

Everyone was laughing, even the boys selling peanuts and soft drinks. El Shabrawi joined in too, seeing no reason why he shouldn't, but he soon had to stop as the situation suddenly threatened to take a turn for the worse. Zebeida was preparing to take off her dress, the only garment she had on. He made an effort to grab hold of her hands but she pushed him away, still uttering her piercing cries. Soon they were caught in a scuffle. He won in the end, forcing her back into her seat, and tying her down with a muffler which a passenger lent him -- but not before she had flung his tarboosh out of the window. He was incensed, for throughout his years of service he had never once been seen without it, and now he had to suffer the indignity of remaining with his head uncovered except for his cropped, scanty hair. With that much accomplished Zebeida was apparently still not satisfied. She continued her volley of trilling-cries, and every time it was down with the Omdah and long live the President.

As the train neared Bilbeiss she was starting to calm down and some of the bolder passengers were encouraged to return to their seats. Infuriated by the loss of his tarboosh, it was all El Shabrawi could do to refrain from throwing her overboard. There was nothing for him but to simmer in his rage until the train pulled in at Cairo.

He waited until all the passengers got off, then he caught her arm like a clamp and marched her out. As they walked down the platform he relaxed his grip a little when he saw she was following meekly, tame as a lamb.

The imposing structure of the station hall filled him with awe, but in his present state of mind he was in no mood to relish his surroundings or to allow happy memories to invade his thoughts. Immediately he boarded a tram, with Zebeida obediently in tow, and got off at Ataba. From there he took a short cut to Al Azhaar Street where he bought himself a new tarboosh with the twenty piastres her father had given him, cursing Zebeida all the time, together with her father and his illicit money. The new tarboosh bothered him, it weighed a ton.

Taking thought he decided to get rid of Zebeida before he gave himself up to the joys of the capital. So he squeezed with her into another tram. As it wound its long, tortuous way through the crowded streets of Cairo El Shabrawi sat reviewing all the mishaps he had suffered up until now and glumly contemplated those yet to come.

Somewhere in the middle he remembered Zebeida and threw a quick glance in her direction. With her jaw hanging open, a fatuous and placid expression on her face, she was leaning heavily on the man standing next to her. The latter had his eyes on the paper he was pretending to read, but seemed obviously to be enjoying himself. El Shabrawi pulled her away roughly. The placid expression vanished and a nasty look came in its place. Once again the trilling-cry went up, and again it was down with the Omdah and long live President Abou Batta. The conductor blew his whistle and stopped the car midway between stops. He went up to El Shabrawi and ordered him to take Zebeida and get off, roundly abusing him for exposing his passengers to so dangerous a creature.

Finding himself in the street again El Shabrawi decided it would be wiser to cover the rest of the way to the Governorate building on foot. Zebeida walked alongside on his right, her trilling-cries rending the air. A large crowd was collecting behind them as they walked along, El Shabrawi hardly daring to raise his eyes from the ground in his mortification.

The guard at the door anticipated some sensational happening as he saw the crowd approach. El Shabrawi enquired about the Governorate doctor. The guard's practised eye took in the situation at a glance. He was very sorry indeed but it was past six and there was nobody there. El Shabrawi's heart sank.

'And what do I do now?'

'Come back tomorrow,' the guard returned calmly.

'Tomorrow?'

'Morning,' he specified. He turned and shouted at the crowd which began to disperse loaded with a stock of anecdotes.

El Shabrawi begged to be allowed to stay the night. Having nothing more to add, the guard did not bother to reply, and knowing better than to argue El Shabrawi grabbed Zebeida by the hand again and moved away. Slowly, the enormity of his predicament began to dawn on him. With Zebeida tied to his neck there was nowhere he could stay the night. He was tired and worn out and he had had nothing to eat for hours.

He walked into the nearest café in Bab El Khalq and sat down, keeping her close by his side, paying no attention to the many stares that fastened on them. He ordered tea and a water-pipe and was just starting to give himself up to the delicious euphoria that was spreading to his tired limbs when a sudden rumbling in his belly made him almost double up with pain. He realized he couldn't wait. He must find the toilet. When he enquired of the waiter, the latter pointed to a place not too far off. But he had to park Zebeida somewhere. He took a look round the place and noticed a man sitting near them who was wearing a coat on top of his *gallabieh*. It was not difficult to start a conversation with him. It turned out he was a police detective and El Shabrawi found himself obliged to tell him the whole story, asking him in the end if he'd mind keeping an eye on Zebeida while he went to the loo. No sooner had the man accepted with reluctance that El Shabrawi had shot out of sight.

When he got back he found the café had turned into a fun-fair, with Zebeida as the star attraction. Furiously he pounced on her and dragged her away with profuse apologies to the police detective. He walked out blindly with no idea where to go. It was getting dark and the glaring lights of the city dazzled him with memories of those bygone days, sadly overshadowed by all he was having to endure.

Probing his memory he recalled a distant relative, a student of agriculture. His memory threw up the address as well, somewhere in Giza, but when he got there he lost his way as he had only been to the house once before and that was during the daytime. He found it in the end, however, after a long search, and his relative gave him a warm welcome, asking where he'd been all this time and how everybody was. El Shabrawi was just about to open his mouth and explain the purpose of his visit when Zebeida, until now on her best behaviour, sent up one of her choicest trilling-cries. If he had had a knife on him El Shabrawi would gladly have cut her throat. He didn't even try to explain why he was there, but hurriedly took his leave and scuttled away allowing his relative only snatches of the story.

When the streets contained them once more, he dug his fingers fiercely into her arm and longed to crush her bones. The thought of murder occurred to him even though he knew it meant a life sentence. He was past caring. Meanwhile Zebeida was waddling along beside him like a goose, totally impervious to the threats he kept muttering at her between his teeth. Suddenly he had a flash of inspiration as the thought of murder and the life sentence he was prepared to face made him see visions that evoked the police station. He could think of no better place to take shelter that wretched night. So they got on a bus and a moment later they were standing before the sergeant on duty at the Sayyeda headquarters. Being well-practised by now, it did not take El Shabrawi long to sum up the situation for him. The sergeant shook his head slowly.

'That's a responsibility I will not risk.'

'Take us into custody then,' suggested El Shabrawi, his rage starting to mount.

'That's still a responsibility,' returned the sergeant indifferently.

As he left the building El Shabrawi was bitterly cursing responsibility and everything to do with it, including himself for having volunteered like a fool to take Zebeida to Cairo. For a moment he considered an hotel but gave up the idea when he remembered he would have to account for Zebeida, plus the fact that would fleece him of at least fifty or sixty piastres which anyway he didn't have. The Sayyeda Zeinab mosque, which was not far off, seemed to offer the only solution, so he took himself there and, grabbing Zebeida, pulled her down by his side as he sat down on the ground by the wall. He was now on the verge of tears and only his pride kept them back. He could think of no one in the world more miserable than himself at that moment.

The place was swarming with the usual crowd of saintly idiots and half-wits always to be found in profusion around a shrine, so that when Zebeida started up her piercing cries her voice was lost in the din of their mutterings and the chattering of the women and the giddy whirlpools of the rings of *zikhr*. El Shabrawi was glad of that. Something like relief began to ease his torment at last, for now Zebeida was in her element. Nothing she could do was going to appear odd in those surroundings. It was he, rather, who was feeling out of place and he longed to lose his reason too and join these carefree people in their bowers of lunatic bliss.

Slowly, and in spite of himself, he began to relax, forgetting his troubles and his frustrations as he sat watching their antics. They were quite an entertaining lot. They did what they liked and nobody stopped them. He turned his attention to a Sheikh who was lying down near him at the foot of the wall. Leaning his head on his arm, the man was watching the people come and go with perfect detachment, a rapt expression on his face and a look of pure contentment in his eyes. Every now and then he would look down, then up at El Shabrawi, then in a mocking drawl order him to repeat the profession of Allah's unity, fixing on him a relentless stare. El Shabrawi could only comply.

As the Sheikh lay there, his vacuous thoughts dwelling on nothing, a cigarette stub fell at his side. Nonchalantly he picked it up and inhaled deeply, enjoying the smoke with obvious relish. He fixed a rapturous gaze on El Shabrawi as the smoke coiled slowly round his face.

'Say there is but one God,' he ordered again in dead earnest, which made El Shabrawi chuckle in spite of himself. Suddenly he longed to lie down too, brainless and free of care like the Sheikh. That reminded him of Zebeida. He turned to look at her and was overjoyed to see she was beginning to yawn. Little by little her body relaxed, her eyelids drooped and slowly she sank into sleep.

Now for the first time El Shabrawi was able to contemplate her face. She wasn't pretty, but her skin was fair and she was small. Her feet, weighed down by heavy anklets, were covered with bruises and layers of mud. The peaceful mask of her face now totally concealed her insanity. El Shabrawi noticed that her gown was torn and her thigh showing through. He covered her up and looked away. Then he turned to the Sheikh and engaged in an endless rambling conversation with him until the latter fell asleep.

As the dark and the silence grew, and the saint's followers bundled up and lay snoring by the wall like tired monkeys at the end of a long day, El Shabrawi realized his angry mood had left him. He couldn't recall the exact moment when it had happened; he settled down, resigning himself to the snoring that rose all around him, nearly raising the saint from the dead. Although it had been a long day and he was worn out by the journey and all he had gone through, he decided to sit up through the night. He could hardly wait for daylight to come as he dozed fitfully, his eyes never leaving the big clock in the square.

On the dot of seven he was standing in the Governorate building waiting for the doctor and shooing away the crowd that had collected like flies. Zebeida meanwhile was sustaining a new barrage of trilling-cries. Finally the doctor arrived, and after many ordeals El Shabrawi and Zebeida were conducted to his presence. He turned her papers over and scribbled something.

'Take her to the Kasr el Eini to be put under observation.'

They withdrew, and hopping again from one tram to another, found their way to Kasr el Eini. There, he stopped a man for information but got no answer. Another looked at Zebeida and walked on. Finally an old nurse showed them the way to the out-patient clinic.

The doctor in charge listened patiently to Zebeida calling for the Omdah's downfall and long life for the President. And he laughed long and heartily as he questioned her and she ranted in reply. El Shabrawi looked on hopefully, beaming with pleasure, seeing they were getting on so well. But the doctor at last put on a serious expression and informed them there was no room in the observation department. He put that in writing on the papers.

'Where do I go now?' asked El Shabrawi, his soul about to leap from his breast.

'Back to the Governorate.'

'Again?'

'Again.'

The entire globe seemed to weigh on his head as he walked out of the building. Thoughts of murder returned. He would kill the lot. Zebeida, the doctors, the lot, and then he would feign insanity and that would be all. But it was only a fleeting notion.

He trekked back to the Governorate building and arrived gasping for breath. The doctor turned the papers over and asked El Shabrawi if they had brought a relative with them. His heart sank as he said they hadn't. The doctor explained that the hospital forms could not be filled out except in the presence of a relative. He must take her back where they came from.

El Shabrawi paled.

'You mean take her back to Dakahlia?'

'That's right.'

Come to think of it, El Shabrawi told himself, perhaps it was just as well. But a sudden thought struck him.

'But that's not possible, my Bey, I have only one return ticket form, for me alone.'

'I told you, one of her relatives must be present.'

'Please, my Bey, I beg of you.'

'That's a responsibility I am not prepared to take.'

El Shabrawi had more than his bellyful of responsibility by now. Just as he was about to give vent to his fury and smash everything in sight, the air was rent by one of Zebeida's choice trilling-cries and in less than a second she had ripped off her threadbare gown and dashed out stark naked into the courtyard while everyone looked on, speechless and immobile.

El Shabrawi was the first to move and he shot after her like a dart. A crowd of policemen and detainees ran to encircle her. El Shabrawi succeeded in holding her down but she wriggled out of his hands, calling for the Omdah's downfall. Then she turned and dug her teeth viciously into his flesh. He cried out in pain and came down harshly with a slap on her face. Blood trickled slowly through her teeth. She was carried back struggling and screaming, wildly shouting her battle-cry, her shrieks piercing the sky.

It took four people to get her into the straitjacket.

She rolled on the ground as she fought to get free, foaming at the mouth, her face scarlet with the streaming blood. The doctor filled out a form in a hurry, and El Shabrawi looked on horrified, his whole being wrung with pity at what Zebeida was doing to herself.

The sight of Zebeida in a straitjacket made him realize for the first time that she was really insane. It was a shock. He realized too that she had no understanding whatever of the things she was saying, that she was not to be blamed for what he had gone through, and that she had had nothing to eat or to drink since they had left their town. The sight of her rolling and writhing on the ground filled him with pity.

'Alright,' the doctor was saying.

Now at last Zebeida was off his hands and he was finally rid of her. When that moment arrived he had promised himself a feast in celebration. But now he felt strangely unmoved, as if none of it all had anything to do with him.

The ambulance arrived and Zebeida was hustled in calling long life to His Majesty the President, her shrill cries never relenting, to the delectation of the jeering crowd.

Suddenly El Shabrawi darted forward like one stabbed in the heart and begged the driver to wait. He ran to the corner and bought her a loaf of French bread and a piece of *halva*, which he gave to the policeman escorting her.

'Will you see that she eats them,' he pleaded, 'and will you take good care of her? Please . . . for the sake of all your departed loved ones . . .'

When the car rolled out of sight El Shabrawi stole away straight to the station. He had had enough of Cairo, and enough of the whole world. From time to time he'd stare at the hand that had struck Zebeida and his flesh would creep with a sense of shame he had never known before in his life.

# Memed My Hawk

by Yashar Kemal

*Yashar Kemal was born in 1922 in a cotton-farming village in Turkey. Although his father's family were well-to-do land-owners, his mother's family were brigands. At the age of nine he started going to school in a distant village, walking to and fro each day, where he learnt to read and write. Eventually he went to a secondary school in Adana for three years. In the early fifties he went to Istanbul and started working as a reporter. His first book of short stories Yellow Heat was published in 1952. Memed My Hawk, his first novel, published in 1955, won the Varlik prize for best novel of the year and sold over a quarter of a million copies. The story takes place in Ottoman Turkey, Chapter two describes Memed's flight from a brutal landlord and how he finds a friendly family who gives him shelter.*

The boy running through the thistles was panting. He had been running now for a long time without a stop. All at once he halted. Blood was oozing from where the thistles had scratched him. He could hardly stand. He was scared. Would he escape? Fearfully he looked over his shoulder. There was no one in sight. He felt more hopeful, turned to the right, and ran for a while. Then he was so tired that he lay down to rest among the thistles. To his left he saw an anthill. The ants were big and the entrance to their nest was teeming with activity. For a while he forgot everything as he watched them. Then, pulling himself together, he rose suddenly from the ground and resumed his flight to the right. Soon he emerged from the thistles and sank to his knees. Seeing that his head still showed above the thistles, he crouched on his haunches. He began to rub his bleeding legs with earth. He could feel the sting as it touched them.

The rocks were only a little farther. With all his remaining strength he started to run toward them and soon reached the plane tree below the tallest. At the foot of the tree he found a deep hollow like a well, filled with yellow, golden, and red-veined leaves piled high. The dry leaves rustled as he threw himself down on them. On the tip of one bare branch of the tree a bird was perched but it flew off, scared by the noise. The boy was tired and would have liked to spend the night there. But it occurred to him that this was impossible: the wilds were full of man-eating wolves and birds of prey. Some of the leaves still hanging from the tree floated down to join the others. One at a time they began to fall on his body.

He talked to himself, quite loudly, as if someone were beside him.

"I'll go," he said. "I'll go and find that village. No one knows about my going there. I won't turn back. I'll be a goatherd. I'll plow. Let my mother look for me. Let her search as long as she likes. Old Goat-beard will never see my face again. But if I cannot find that village, I'll die of hunger. I'll die, and that's the end of it."

The autumn sun was warm. It caressed the rocks, the plane tree, the leaves. The soil was fresh in the sunlight. A few autumn flowers were already beginning to appear. The asphodel had a bitter scent and glistened with moisture. In autumn the mountains smell of asphodel.

Had he been there one hour or two? He wasn't sure. But the sun had sunk behind the mountain ridge. Some time later the boy stopped muttering to himself and suddenly remembered that he was being followed. He became frantic. He had forgotten to watch the sun, which had set without his noticing it. Where must he go now, in which direction? A faint goat track meandered among the rocks. He began to follow it. He ran without heeding the rocks, the bushes, and the stones. His weariness had passed. He stopped, looked around for a moment, then ran again.

His feet pounded the soil. As he ran a tiny lizard on a rotten tree stump caught his eye. The boy felt glad for some reason, but, aware of being watched, the lizard disappeared beneath the tree.

The boy stumbled and stopped. He felt dizzy and black spots were dancing before his eyes. The earth seemed to spin around him like a top. His hands and legs were trembling. After looking back a moment he began to run again. Once a flight of partridges rose suddenly nearby and startled him. Any sound scared him and his heart was beating very fast. Hopelessly he glanced back again, drenched in sweat. His knees gave way beneath him and he sank to the ground on a small stony slope. He could smell his own acrid sweat, but mingled with the pleasant scent of flowers. Though he could hardly open his eyes, he raised his head heavily, fearfully, and looked below, where he could barely distinguish a mud roof. His joy was so great that his heart seemed to leap up into his mouth. Smoke curled slowly from the chimney, twisting this way and that, not black but a light purple. Behind him he heard a sound, as of footsteps, and he looked back fearfully. To the left the forest was like a black curtain of rain between sky and earth, threatening to engulf him. He started to talk, no longer muttering now but shouting aloud as he ran away from the forest:

"I'll go and tell him . . . I'll say to him . . . I've come to you to be a goatherd and I'll plow your land and sow your crops. I'll say to him that my name is Kara Mistik, Black Mistik. I'll say I have no mother, no father, no Abdi Agha. I'll look after your beasts, I'll say, and I'll plow your fields and be your child, just that. My name isn't Ince Memed, but Kara Mistik. Let my mother weep. Let that infidel Abdi Agha search for me. I'll be their child."

Then he began to sob. The dark forest was still there. As he sobbed he experienced a morbid pleasure from just lamenting at the top of his voice.

As he went down the slope he suddenly stopped weeping. His nose was running and he wiped it on his right sleeve, which became moist.

By the time he reached the courtyard of the house it was dark. Beyond, the shapes of other houses could be seen. He stopped for a moment to think. Was the village the right one? In front of the door sat a long-bearded man, struggling with a saddle which he was mending. When he raised his head the bearded man saw a shadow in the middle of the courtyard. The shadow moved one or two steps toward him and halted. The man paid no attention but busied himself with his work. When it became really too dark to see he stopped working and rose to his feet, looking to his left, where he had seen the shadow earlier. It was still there. He whistled and said: "What are you doing here?"

"I'll be your goatherd, Uncle," the shadow replied. "I'll plow your fields, too. I'll do every kind of work for you, Uncle."

The bearded man seized the boy by the arm and dragged him into the house. "Come along, we'll talk about all that later."

A piercing northeast wind was blowing. Memed shivered as if it were going to blow him away.

The old man called to his wife, who was inside: "Throw some wood on the fire. The child is shivering."

"Who's that?" asked the woman, surprised.

"One of Allah's guest," replied the old man.

"I've never yet seen a guest of that kind," the woman answered, smiling.

"Well, take a good look at him now."

The woman hastened to fetch an armful of wood, which she threw onto the hearth. Slowly the fire revived.

The boy crouched close to the wall, to the left of the hearth. She noticed that his head was big, his hair black, bleached here and there almost red by the sun and hanging straight over his forehead into his little face, which was thin and dry. He had huge brown eyes and skin tanned by the sun. He looked about eleven years old. His Turkish breeches had been torn by brushwood as far as the knees, leaving his legs bare. He was barefooted, too, with blood clotted on his legs. Though the fire was burning bright, he could not stop shivering.

"Child," the woman said, "you're hungry. Wait, I'll bring you some soup."

"I would like it," he declared.

"It will warm you up."

"It may stop my shivering."

The woman began to fill a tin bowl with broth from a large copper pan that stood on the hearth by the fire. The boy's eyes were set on the steaming soup in the pan. She brought the soup, placed it before him, and put a wooden spoon in his hand. "Lap it up, boy!"

"I will."

But the man added a warning: "Don't drink so fast, your mouth will burn afterward."

"It won't burn," the boy replied, smiling. The old man smiled too, but the woman could make no sense of their smiles.

"The soup has put a stop to your shivering, my young lion."

"It's all over now," the boy said as he smiled. The woman smiled too.

The hearth was lined with fresh clay. The roof of the house was of earth too. The ceiling was made of brushwood which, with years of soot, had become a shiny black. The house was divided into two parts. The room beyond was the stable. Through the door came a warm, damp smell of fresh cow dung, of straw and newly cut branches.

While they were talking the old man's son, daughter, and daughter-in-law came in. The boy stared at them, bewildered.

"Why don't you wish a welcome to our guest?" the old man said to his son.

"Welcome, brother," said the son, very earnestly. "What news have you?"



"I'm glad I'm here," replied the boy with the same seriousness. "This is a good place to be." The daughter and daughter-in-law also wished the boy a welcome.

Suddenly, the log on the hearth caught fire and burst into flame.

The boy sat huddled up, not yet at his ease. The man went and sat beside him. The flames from the hearth cast strange shadows. Watching these, the man could understand what was going on in the boy's mind as he stared at the shadows that shifted constantly with the flickering of the flames. When the man turned his eyes away from the shadows, he was smiling. His face was narrow and thin, his beard white and full. His forehead, tanned by the sun, was the color of copper, and his face shone like red copper in the flickering light of the flames.

As if it had suddenly occurred to him, the man remarked: "Well, guest, what's your name? Didn't they give you one?"

"They call me Ince Memed, Slim Memed," the boy replied. Then he regretted what he had said and bit his lip, lowering his head, ashamed. He had quite forgotten how, on the road he had said to himself: "I'll say my name is Kara Mistik." He murmured to himself: "Well, it doesn't matter. What a strange idea, when I already have a name of my own! Why should I conceal my name? Who'll recognize me in this village?"

"Bring us our food and let's eat," the man told his daughter-in-law. "We're hungry."

The meal was set in the middle of the room, and all the family, including Memed, sat in a circle. As they ate nobody uttered a word. After they had eaten in silence, another armful of wood was thrown on the fire. Right in the center of the hearth the man set a log so that the flames surrounded it. He always enjoyed doing this. The flames soon encircled his log and it thrilled him to watch this. The woman leaned over and whispered in his ear: "Suleyman, where shall I put the boy's bed?"

"In the big horse's feeding trough," joked Suleyman, with his usual warm laugh. "Where should it be? He'll sleep where we sleep, of course! Who knows how far our guest has traveled to be with us?" He turned toward Memed, who was drowsy from the heat and seemed about to fall asleep.

"Well, guest, are you sleepy?" he asked, laughing.

Memed shook himself as he answered: "No, I'm not sleepy at all."

"Now, Slim Memed," said Suleyman, staring attentively into his eyes, "you've told us nothing. Where are you from, where are you going?"

Rubbing his eyes, which smarted from the smoke, Memed replied: "I've come from Deyirmenoluk. I'm going to that village."

"We know Deyirmenoluk, but what other village do you mean," Suleyman inquired, somewhat puzzled.

"Dursun's village," answered Memed, not in the least perturbed.

"Which Dursun?" Suleyman insisted.

"He's with Abdi Agha," Memed said and stopped. His eyes seemed to be set on some distant place.

"Well?" questioned Suleyman.

"That's our Agha. Dursun works for him and plows his fields." His eyes shone. After a pause: "The other day he caught a young hawk! That's Dursun. Do you know him now, Uncle?"

"I know, I know. And what else?"

"Well, I'm going to his village. Dursun said to me: 'In our village,' he said, 'they don't beat children, they don't force them to plow. Thistles don't grow there either,' he said, 'in our village.'

"All right, what's the name of that village? Didn't Dursun tell you?"

Memed remained silent. He pondered for a long while, sucking his thumb, till suddenly he exclaimed: "No, Dursun didn't tell me the name."

"Strange," commented Suleyman.

"Yes, strange", repeated Memed. "We used to plow the fields together, Dursun and I. We would rest every once in a while, seated together on a big stone. 'Ah,' he would say, 'if only you could see our village! The soil is like gold. There's sunshine and pine trees,' he would say. 'A man who sets out from there on the sea can go anywhere.' Dursun ran away from there. He told me not to tell anyone that he had run away. I didn't even tell my mother." Then, leaning toward Suleyman, he added in a whisper: "You won't tell anyone either, will you, Uncle?"

"Don't be afraid," Suleyman replied. "I won't tell anyone."

The daughter-in-law went outside. Soon she came back with a full sack on her back. She put it down on the floor. When she opened it cotton bolls poured out, cleaned and quite white. Each one was like a little white cloud. Immediately the whole house was full of the sharp smell of cotton.

"Let's see if you can tease cotton, Slim Memed," she said pleasantly. "Show us what you can do!"

“What’s that! As if teasing cotton were work,” replied Memed, taking a lapful of the cotton. His skilled hands soon began to work like a machine.

“Slim Memed,” the son asked, “how are you going to set about finding that village?”

Memed pulled a wry face to show that the question didn’t please him at all. “I’ll look around for it,” he said, with a sigh. “The sea is near that village. I’ll search for it.”

“Why, Slim Memed, the sea’s a food fifteen days’ walk from here!”

“I’ll search for it. I’d rather die than go back to Deyirmenoluk. I’ll never go back again. I won’t.”

“What happened, Slim Memed?” interrupted Suleyman. “Tell us your secret. What has set you on the road?”

Memed’s hands stooped. “Uncle Suleyman,” he said, “wait, and I’ll tell you everything. My father’s dead. There’s just my mother. No one else at all. I plowed Abdi Agha’s fields.” At this point his eyes filled with tears and a lump seemed to form in his throat. But he checked himself. Otherwise it would all pour out. “For two years I’ve plowed his fields. The thistles devour me. They bite me. Those thistles tear at your legs like a mad dog. That’s the sort of field I plowed. Every day Abdi Agha beat me, beat me to death. He beat me again yesterday morning until I ached all over. So I ran away from there. I’ll go to that village. He won’t find me there, Abdi Agha. I’ll plow someone’s land there. I’ll be his goatherd. I’ll be his son, if he wishes.” He looked straight into Suleyman’s eyes.

Memed’s heart seemed about to burst. Another word and he would break down. So Suleyman changed the subject.

“Listen to me, Slim Memed, if it’s like that you can stay here in my house.”

Memed’s face flushed. A wave of affection thrilled through him from top to toe.

“The sea is far. You won’t find that village easily,” said the son.

Meanwhile the cotton had all been teased. In the middle of the floor the insects that had fallen out of it, little black cotton beetles, were scurrying hither and thither, unable to escape. By the hearth a bed was prepared for Memed. His eyes were full of sleep and he glanced longingly at the bed. Suleyman had understood Memed’s need long ago.

“Tuck in,” he said, pointing to the bed. Without a word, Memed crouched down and crawled in, pulling his knees up to his chin. His body ached all over, as if he had been pounded in a mortar.

“I’ll be his son. Yes, I will,” said Memed to himself. “Let my mother look for me, and Abdi Agha too. Let them all search till the Day of Resurrection. I won’t go back.”

Two hours before sunrise, the hour when he always went off to the fields, Memed stirred, woke up, rose from his bed, and went outside. Sleepily he relieved himself and was suddenly wide awake. He remembered the previous night and white-bearded Suleyman. “This is Suleyman’s house,” he said to himself. “What would I do if I went to that village? I’ll be Uncle Suleyman’s son. I’ll stay here. I won’t go back.”

The cold frosty air made him shiver. He crawled back into bed and pulled his knees up to his chin again. The bed was warm. Today he knew he could sleep till sunrise. Thinking of this, he fell asleep again.

The sun rose on a frosty morning. The mother took the pan off the fire. The pleasant smell of hot soup filled the whole alcove of the hearth. The son had gone off to the fields long ago. Suleyman had returned to the saddle, resuming his work of the night before.

“Suleyman,” called his wife, “the soup’s getting cold.”

“Is our guest up yet?”

“Leave the child. Poor thing, he must have been very tired yesterday.”

“What made him run away?” she asked.

“They drove him too hard.”

“It’s a pity,” she said. “And what a pretty child! Infidels, what did they want with such a small mite?”

“Let him stay here as long as he wishes.”

Memed stretched himself and woke up. First he rubbed his eyes hard with his two fists, then he looked toward the fire. The soup in the open pot was steaming. He turned his head toward the door. A knife-sharp sunbeam stretched through the doorway. He rose from his bed.

“Don’t be afraid, Memed,” Suleyman reassured him, seeing his fear. “It doesn’t matter. Sleep!”

Memed turned to take the copper jug from the hearth and went outside. He washed his face with plenty of water, then went toward Suleyman and began to watch him working on the saddle.

“Come and drink your soup,” called the woman again. “It’s growing cold.”

Suleyman rose, brushing his clothes with his hands, and winked at Memed. “Let’s go and drink our soup.”

The soup was a broth of milk and crushed wheat. The odors of milk and wheat mingled to produce a pleasant smell. They drank the soup with wooden spoons. Memed like the soup. "I'll be your son," he repeated.

Suleyman was stuffing hay into the saddle, which he had finished. The dry grass slipped easily through his experience fingers. The autumn sun brought out the bright colors of everything. A fine golden dust fell from the hay as Suleyman worked it. The dust, in the sunlight scattered in every direction.

"Did he drive you very hard, this Abdi Agha?" asked Suleyman.

Memed was not expecting such a question. He pulled himself together.

"He used to beat me cruelly and even make me plow the thistle fields barefoot. Then there was the frost. That was killing too. And always he'd beat me. Once for a whole month I was unable to get up and go to work. He beats everyone, but he beat me most. Mother said if it hadn't been for Yellow Hodja's amulet, I would have died."

"So it means you want to stay here?"

"What would I do in that village? It's fifteen days' walk from here. There's the sea, but what of that? There are no thistles there, but there aren't any here either. I'm staying here. Nobody'll find me here, will they? Deyirmenoluk's far away from here, isn't it? They can't find me, can they?"

"You poor thing, Deyirmenoluk is just behind that mountain. Don't you know how you came here?"

Memed was dumfounded, his eyes wide open. He began to perspire, the sweat streaming off him. All his hopes crashed to the ground. He was about to say something but gulped. In the sky the eagles were wheeling around. He stared at them, then nestled closer to Suleyman. "Perhaps I should go to that village and be that other man's son. If Abdi Agha finds me here, he'll kill me."

"Go to that other village, be that other man's son," replied Suleyman reproachfully.

"How wonderful it would be if I were your son," Memed said ingratiatingly, "but . . ."

"But what?"

"He might find me . . . God forbid! He would make mincemeat of me."

"What can we do?" Suleyman said, lifting his head from his work and staring into Memed's face. His own face was all wrinkled, like a leaf. His big eyes were dull. All the light had gone out of them. Seeing that Suleyman was looking at him, Memed crept a little closer and seized his hand. "Please," he murmured, his eyes full of unspoken desires.

"Don't be afraid."

Memed smiled, a smile of contentment tinged with fear. Suleyman had finished his job. He stood up. "Well, Slim Memed, I've got work to do in the house opposite and must go there. Do whatever you like. Go for a walk in the village."

Memed set off for the village alone. It was a cluster of twenty or twenty-five houses, all built of mud and rough stones set at random one on top of the other. The houses scarcely rose to the height of a man above the ground.

He wandered from one end of the village to the other. The children were playing *kokuc*, an Anatolian game, on a manure heap. He saw only one dog, its tail between its legs, creeping fearfully along the foot of a wall. There were dung heaps all over the village. Till nightfall he went from house to house. Nobody asked where he came from, where he was going. In his own village all the children would swarm around a stranger as soon as they saw him. This village was quite different. It puzzled him.

Returning to the house, he found Suleyman outside. "Well, Slim Memed, you haven't been home all day! What's new?"

"Nothing. . . ."

After that Memed roamed about the village for a few more days. He made friends with a few of the boys. He played *kokuc*. No one could beat him at it. But Memed didn't boast of his skill. Another boy would surely have boasted; he just shrugged his shoulders, as if to say it was child's play. That's why the other children didn't mind his winning.

Then the autumn rains of the Taurus began. Just as the autumn leaves fall, so do the Taurus rains, in great drops. It thundered. From the mountain above the village stones rolled down the slopes to the highland plain. The mountain was forested, with huge trees that grew in close and tangled thickets.

One day Memed went to Suleyman and said: "Uncle Suleyman, how long will this last? I'm bored, eating your bread for nothing!"

"Wait awhile, what's the hurry? We'll find work for you, my boy."

A few days later the rain stopped and the sun shone again on the wet stones and rocks, on trees and earth. The earth began to steam, and the steam mixed with the smell of manure and drifted into the village. From time to time silvery clouds concealed the sun.

Memed was seated on a stone by the door of the house while Suleyman tried on him a pair of new sandals he had made of rawhide. The sandals were damp, with a purple down on the leather, so that you could see that they were made of the skin of a young bull. Memed was delighted with them.

Suleyman stood beside Memed and watched him as he tied them. The boy's hands were used to the tying of sandal, that was clear. He knew how to pull the laces tight and to knot them behind the leg.

"Young Memed, you're a master at tying sandals," said Suleyman.

"I can even stitch them, Uncle Suleyman," replied Memed, raising his head and smiling. "But you've stitched these well." He rose to his feet and put all his weight on each foot in turn once or twice, then walked ten or fifteen steps away and returned. He looked again at the sandals in admiration. "They fit my feet perfectly."

They set off along the road together. Memed's eyes were constantly on his new sandals. Sometimes he walked fast, sometimes he stopped and examined his feet carefully, sometimes he stopped and stroked the down on the sandals.

Suleyman fully shared Memed's joy. "It looks as if you like them, Memed."

"They fit me well. I love such sandals," Memed replied.

"If you'd gone to that village," said Suleyman, "no one there would have made such sandals for you."

"Don't they wear sandals in that village?" asked Memed, half serious, half teasing.

It wasn't quite clear whether Suleyman had understood the teasing or not. "Well, they wear shoes, no sandals."

"I see."

Walking steadily, they left the village. All of a sudden Memed brightened up. The fields stretched away to the foot of the other mountain. There were no thistles, but still the fields were not much good, full of stones. Memed stopped a moment and asked: "Where are we going, Uncle Suleyman?"

"Just for a walk."

Memed asked no more questions as they went ahead together. His new sandals became caked with mud, which he cursed under his breath.

The village lay far behind, out of sight except for one or two twists of smoke.

"Listen to me, Memed," said Suleyman. "This is where you will pasture the goats. You can go as far as the other side there, but don't cross the ridge of that red hill. Your village lies on the other side and they'll catch you and take you away if they see you."

"I won't go. It's good you told me."

As they returned, the clouds in the sky were quite white. The threshing floors, each one a deep green circle, were scattered among the stony fields. A few isolated snails could be seen clinging to the long grass.

"Tell me, Ince Memed, did that goat-bearded Abdi treat you very badly?"

Memed stopped. So did Suleyman. Memed glanced again at his new sandals.

"Let's sit here," suggested Suleyman.

"Yes," said Memed as he began to explain. "Listen, Uncle Suleyman. My father was dead and Abdi Agha took what little we had away from us. If my mother complained, he beat her cruelly and would beat me too. Once he tied me to a tree and left me there in the middle of the plain, far from the village. I stayed tied to the tree for two days, till Mother came and freed me. But for her the wolves would have torn me to pieces."

"So that's how it is, Memed?" asked Suleyman with a sigh as he rose to go. Memed also stood up. Suleyman repeated his advice: "Do as I tell you, Memed, and never go beyond that red-brown hill. Somebody might see you and report it to old Goat-beard, and then they would take you away from us."

"God forbid," exclaimed Memed.

Next morning Memed woke up very early and rose from his bed just as dawn was beginning to break. He went to Suleyman's bed. The old man was snoring, fast asleep. Memed poked him.

"What's up? Is that you, Memed?" Suleyman was very drowsy.

"It's Memed," the boy said proudly. "It's time to go. I'll drive the goats."

Suleyman rose immediately. His eyes searched for his wife. She had been up and about for a while and was outside, milking the cow. He called to her: "Be quick and get Memed's food ready."

Washing the milk off her hands in a big pail, the woman replied: "It can wait. I'll milk the rest in the evening."

In no time she had prepared Memed's food bag for the day and set before him a bowl of soup from the caldron that was simmering over the fire. Memed gobbled it down, fastened the bag of food around his waist in the twinkling of an eye, and was off, herding the goats ahead of him. Snatching his old cap off his head, he threw it after the goats. "Get on there! This is fun!"

“Good luck to you,” called Suleyman after him. Memed kept turning around and looking back at him until both he and the goats were out of Suleyman’s sight.

“Well, well! What a child!” murmured Suleyman to himself.

“Troubled again,” said his wife, as she came out to him. “What’s worrying you now?”

“See what goat-bearded Abdi has done to this child,” he said. “Still a babe and his heart broken. I used to know his father. He was a quiet, inoffensive man. But look at the state of the child! Sick of his life, he rushes off into the mountains, among the birds of prey and wolves.”

“Poor Suleyman, you take everything too much to heart. Come in and drink your soup.”



# Fragments of Memory: A Story of a Syrian Family

Hanna Mina

*Hanna Mina, one of Syria's foremost novelists was born in 1924. His family's poverty forced him to leave school after his primary education. FRAGMENTS OF MEMORY, his autobiographical novel from which this excerpt is taken, tells of his family's desperate plight in his youth when the silk worm industry lost out to modern foreign technology. He published his first story in 1924 and helped found the Syrian Writer's Association. For many years he worked in the Ministry of Culture in Damascus. In 1990 he won the Arab world's prestigious Uvais Award for his complete body of work.*

The hot July days followed one another with us in the open, under the blazing sun in the daytime and the dew at night. It being difficult for mother to move like us into the shade, we tried shielding her from the sun by hanging extra sheets from the branches of the fig tree that had become our shelter.

She would gaze at us silently with an expression of wary resignation frozen in the depths of her eyes. The sky was no longer, as in the days of her youth, a band of blue in an enchanted world. It now was a band of dusty somber clouds settling and pressing against her chest. The dusty scorching earth rose from the ground narrowing the empty space around her, enclosing her within two layers like a green leaf pressed between the leaves of a thick book, drying up and slowly dying of suffocation.

Mother withered, became emaciated and sallow, her cheek bones stood out, and her neck grew thin. She lay there a complete human skeleton just like a dry branch thrown to the edge of the field. She no longer spoke. She saw but said nothing. She was silent. Her silence was a protest, an anguish, a sorrow that we could not fathom. The look in her eyes remained veiled, distressed and distracted, for a moment anxiety over us flaring up in them, then becoming diffused with tears that made us cry when we noticed them. In childish fear, we tried to do something by bringing her water. That was all we had at hand. We helped her to drink. My sister would raise her head while I brought the water jar near her lips.

It wasn't very long before Father struck out, leaving us to the mercy of heaven. After borrowing a few piasters for the journey, he entrusted us to the care of some of our *fellahin* neighbors who became like our family. They did not lead us along the path of their hardship but taught us how to live in harmony with life in the center of this wretchedness. They taught us how to do as they did to obtain our bread so we wouldn't die of hunger. They let us share the joys and sorrows of their miserable area in a village owned by a man whom they never saw but they feared nevertheless.

The gifts they brought us did not take on the form of charity, but we received them as such. Mother told us to take the things and thank them. It became customary when the flocks were passing through the square near us for one of the shepherds to call to us. We would hurry out with a vessel into which he would milk some goat's or sheep's milk for us. A *fellaha* would come bearing an earthenware pot with curdled milk in it and some loaves baked in a clay-lined pit oven. Or a *fellah* would come with a small basket of vegetables or figs. Their children would come in the mornings or evenings to play with us while the fathers and mothers visited with Mother in the late evenings comforting and encouraging her by prescribing certain herbs and amulets their *sheikh* wrote. They would charge my sister and me to do this thing or that for her. We would listen carefully . . . do as they said. This gave us a sense of confidence and of belonging just as if we had been born in the village or were not strangers in it.

In Father's absence, the prophecy of the driver that we would perish in this rural world he had brought us to in his cart was fulfilled. Here there was no Mother's uncle nor relatives of any kind, no owner of a field like the *mukhtar*, whom we knew, despite his cruelty, was responsible for us as long as we lived in his field. Mother could go to ask him or entreat him with tears to sell to her on credit against the coming harvest.

Here, there was neither harvest nor field, not even a house whose door we could close to protect us from fear or to give us privacy. Behind it, we had awaited release from suffering in the summer, and amused ourselves by listening to Mother's stories, warmed by the mutual affection of the family that had not yet broken up. Two sisters were now servants for two different families and we were incapable of managing to obtain a house to shelter us, Father had left us under this cursed fig tree on the roadside. Fear had expanded and become so linked with humiliation that as soon as the sun set

we fled to Mother's bed where we slipped in on either side of her, succumbing to feelings of torment expressed by her feeble arms trying to enfold us.

She lay on her back the whole time, her former anxiety in our village, al-Suwaydiya, having now changed to withdrawal. Had her unrest subsided? Had fear vanished? Had indifference taken its place? Perhaps it was the sickness. The mental breakdown that now appeared was total. Let the end come at least. In the meantime, while waiting for the passage to the other side, the gradual disassociation of the one about to leave the shore she lives on becomes an inevitable reality. It was now all the same if Father left or returned, if she ate or remained hungry, if she moved to a house or remained in the open. It seemed from her surrender to her illness that nothing mattered any longer.

Despite our ignorance of the danger threatening Mother, we were afraid for her; we were silent and melancholy too. When the weight of these feelings grew too heavy for us, we would rush to her for protection. Looking at us sadly as if she had recalled herself from her wanderings, she would beckon with her hand and we would come close, sit around her and ask her what the matter was, hoping she would answer and we would hear her voice. She would try to say something reassuring or amusing, but soon growing weary, she would revert to her wanderings and we would revert to our melancholy.

I was terrified one day by some children talking about death. An older girl told us that her mother had died. She had been sick and died. When she had kissed her dead mother, she found her as cold as stone and she never spoke again.

Leaving the children, I ran to Mother, kissed her hand, then her forehead. She looked at me, smiling. She kissed me too, asking me to go back and play with the children, but I refused. I was afraid she would become silent, never to speak again, that her body would become cold as happened to that girl's mother. My chief concern was that Mother's body would not grow cold. In order to make sure, I would kiss her. Taking hold of her hand I would rub it, talk to her, give her a drink or some food and from time to time ask her, "Are you getting cold, mother?"

"No, son."

"Let me touch it."

"Take it."

She would hold out her hand for me to take: it was warm! Thank God she was warm. . . My mother wasn't going to die; she wasn't going to lapse into silence and never speak again. I wasn't going to let her be silent and never speak again. I was going to keep her warm. If she became cold, I would light a fire to make her warm again. For that, I gathered fire wood, thinking that if that girl had gathered fire wood and lit a fire to warm her mother's hand, she would have remained warm and continued speaking. Mother noticed what I was doing and understood. Holding me to her breast, she kissed me saying, "I'm not going to die . . . believe me . . . I couldn't die and leave you. God will help me to get better . . . God loves the little ones, He loves them dearly so He won't allow them to remain orphans in . . ."

She didn't finish her sentence; overwhelmed by her emotions she drew my head towards her, sniffed at my neck, kissed me.

"You will go now and play, won't you," she requested. "Go on . . . I'm all right . . . Let me sleep a little, don't be afraid for me, my darling, my little one, don't be afraid for me . . ."

I went to play for her sake. I was prepared to do anything for her. In the evening her changed behavior sent waves of reassurance through us. Bracing herself, she sat up, asked for water and washed her face. She said she was feeling better, that Father would return, that heaven was looking down upon us, knew about us and would help us. When I lay down beside her in the darkness of the night, I stared up into the heavens to see how they were looking down on us and seeing us. During these summer evenings, the sky was lit up by the stars. It was clear, beautiful, far away, shimmering. I fancied that it had real eyes and that those who dwelt there observed us; that they, like us here on earth, lit their lanterns hung in their windows in front of their doors. I wished I could distinguish the lantern of my uncle who had gone to heaven so I could call upon him, entreating him to come and take us. I started counting the lanterns in the sky. I became absorbed and happy in the counting. then I woke up.

The sun was shining and the dew and red dust lay on our covers. The shepherd who passed by on the road had milked one of his sheep, brought the pot and placed it near the fig tree. A *fellaha* was talking to Mother, pointing in a certain direction, urging Mother to send us with her. I heard Mother saying: "Oh Lord . . . they're still little . . . they aren't accustomed to it . . . how will they act? What will they say?"

"It's nothing . . . nothing," said the *fellaha*. "Let them come with me, that's all . . . This is a blessing . . . It's a fulfillment of a vow. They'll give to them before they give to others . . ."



Strangers take before those of the estate. I'll tell them that you are sick and they will give them more because you are sick. Listen to me."

They discussed it, Mother and the *fellaha*. Our state of poverty forced Mother to agree. She wanted us to eat meat so we could get some proper nourishment. But she also realized what it would mean for us to go with this woman to the shrine asking for the *hareesa*. But she consented to it so we could eat meat after such a long deprivation, hoping we would regain our lost vitality and enjoy ourselves like the children of the estate on such an occasion.

It was difficult for us to do that. I realize now that it was difficult. It was beggary. And for her to send us, she who had suffered so long that this might not come to beggary, the price was tears that she shed in our absence. She cried the whole time we were away. She may have wanted us to be absent so she could cry alone. She confessed as much to us, saying that she had refused to let us go to *al-khayriya* many times. Then discovering that it would be better that we do so, she convinced herself that it was not begging: it took place in the city too, and the things were consecrated and distributed. She herself had taken vows and distributed what she had pledged, and advised us to do as she had done.

Outside the estate in a small wooded area, there was a large white tomb. Our neighbor told us it was the shrine of the saint. She enumerated his miracles. We didn't question her even if we didn't understand her. Had she left us alone, we would have preferred to stay with Mother. It was truly embarrassing to carry two dishes and walk barefoot at the heels of the woman to that shrine where the *khayriya* was held. Contrary to how we accepted people's charity under our fig tree, here our feelings were hurt. We were strangers, barefoot, each holding a dish in the hand. It was a long way, the sun was hot and my sister walked in front. I intended her to be in front with me behind so I could hide behind her to avoid the eyes that stared at us and the questions that were rained down upon the woman because of us.

There was a large crowd, men and some women. The fire was lit under a black cauldron huge enough to hold a camel. The woman told us they had slaughtered an ox, cut it up and put it in this pot. They were now waiting for it to be well-cooked so they could distribute the meat. The *hareesa* that we would eat would be stewed on what was left of it, and we would take some to our sick mother.

We stood side by side in the shadow of a tree, each holding a dish, with our eyes fixed on the cauldron and the fire under it. We tried keeping our heads bowed to avoid the eyes directed at us in curiosity and sought to distract ourselves by looking in other directions. We withdrew within ourselves, clinging to each other. I don't know why but we refused to talk to or play with the children. We were embarrassed by this unaccustomed humiliating situation that we would learn to become accustomed to with the passing days. We began furtively watching what was taking place around us, wishing we would be given something, anything, so we could take it and go to Mother.

The woman who had accompanied us left us for the crows. We could see her from where we were, talking about us in a whisper. She was answering questions about us, telling our story to those present. She may have been doing that voluntarily, prompted by a desire that we be among the first to be fed; that we should get our share of the meat that was on the fire and be given a portion for our sick mother under the fig tree. Thereupon, she came back to us, urging us to go play with the children. She told us that the food would be delayed until noon, so there wouldn't be any objection to us putting our dishes on the wall of the shrine where there were dozens of earthenware dishes in which the *hareesa* was to be distributed. They were called *ghadarat* and, as we learned afterward, the single form was the word *ghadara*.

But we chose to stay where we were. We stuck tenaciously to our place close to the wall, hanging on to our dishes. Had there been a way of escape I'd have done so. I loathed the thought of eating the *hareesa* and I no longer had any appetite for the meat despite my hunger and deprivation. To return to Mother, to seek refuge in her bosom became more desirable than all the gustatory delights. I suppose that the distance and the fear of bandits when alone restrained my movements, so I put myself under my sister's protection. We squatted at the base of the wall, and it wasn't long before I fell asleep. Sleep was a merciful relief from the grimness of the situation that had filled my eyes with tears many times.

My sister woke me up around the middle of the afternoon. The crowd had thickened now. Some *shuyukh* had arrived and those present had formed a circle around the cauldron, preventing us from seeing what was going on. However, the woman asked us to get up and step forward. She requested that those in front of us make way for us a little but no one listened to her . . . Therefore, she pushed us before her and I caught the sight of a large copper cooking pot with flies flying above the boiled meat in it. A man had commenced dishing meat into the open hands greedily held out, one over the other, accompanied by prayer's and pleas for God's mercy. Whenever a piece of meat landed in a hand,

the owner hastened to hide it in the pocket of cloak, then withdrew carrying his earthenware dish to take his portion of the hareesa with a gleam of triumph and joy in his eyes.

I drew my sister's attention to a man putting the meat in the waistband of his underdrawers. The man stretched out the edge of his drawers and shoved the piece of meat into it, then pushed his drawers back in. My sister scolded me about this action of mine as he had seen her and was staring at us, so that I bowed my head in fear of him . . . The woman had succeeded in getting close to the cooking pot. Pointing at us, she said to the one responsible for the distributing: "The children the *sheik* recommended to you."

"The *sheikh* ordered me to distribute the charity to everyone."

"But they are strangers . . . from another village."

"From what village?"

"I told you from another village."

"Another village could be anywhere."

"From the direction of the sea," said a man.

"You mean from the city."

"I don't know," said the woman. "Their mother is sick."

"I swear to it on my honor and religion," protested another man.

"On my honor I'm more ritually clean than you are."

His hand was on the meat remaining in the pot. He appeared to be snatching what he considered was his right and was prepared to fight for the sake of it. Others followed his example. They thrust their hands into the pot searching for pieces of meat among the bones. Those in the rear started pushing and shoving.

The one responsible for distribution yelled, "Oh, *sheikh*, they're plundering."

I heard a maniacal laugh from the edge of the shrine, "Oh beloved Khidr!"

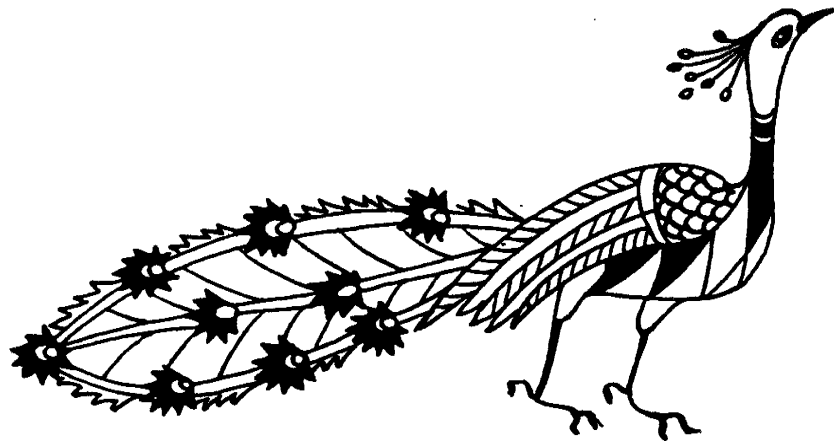
Those with him started running together. They understood that the turn of the notables was over and that the meat left in the pot with the bones had run out and that there was going to be a fight. On such occasions, this was bound to take place in the final stages. One of them got ahead and, lifting the pot up in his hands, ran off with it among the trees while the others, those who had not received anything, the idiots, and the young boys, chased him, cursing or calling upon God for aid. Those who had eaten and received their share of the meat laughed as if they had been expecting this and wanted it.

A middle-aged man of good intentions placed his hands on my shoulder, then taking hold of my sister's hand led us out of the crowd. He calmed our fears, telling the woman that our portion had been laid aside and we should give him our dishes so he could fill them with *hareesa* for us to eat. Then he would give us Mother's portion and some of the meat. We did as he asked, but we did not eat what he dished out for us. The sight of the people eating, holding onto bones and tearing off the meat with their teeth, or hiding it in their cloaks and pockets, and scooping out the *hareesa* with their hands with long dirty fingernails, or with wooden spoons, was repugnant as far as we were concerned.

The wrangling and snarling around us, the actions of the idiots, the insane and all manner of tramps and beggars who had heard of the charity and rushed to it, was upsetting and frightening as much as it was disgusting since we weren't used to that sort of thing. We were indeed strangers. When we told Mother all about it, she called upon God to protect us from ever getting into this situation again. However, we went back into the same situation . . . We got into the fray like the rest, for the sake of a piece of meat and a ladleful of *hareesa*. It became a natural part of our life here in this poverty-stricken village.

# Twists and Turns

## Stories





# Miracles for Sale

by Tewfik Al-Hakim

*Tewfik al-Hakim was born in Egypt in 1898 and studied law and literature in Cairo. While publishing his short stories and becoming one of the Arab world's leading playwrights, he worked as an attorney, as the UAR representative to UNESCO and as director of Egypt's leading newspaper. His works have been translated into French, Italian and Russian, as well as English and adapted for radio in the west.*

The priest woke early as was his wont, preceded only by the birds in their nests, and began his prayers, his devotions, and his work for his diocese in that eastern land whose spiritual light he was and where he was held in such high esteem by men of religion and in such reverence by the people.

Before his door there grew a small palm tree planted by his own hands; he always watered it before sunrise, contemplating the sun as its rim, red as a date, burst forth from the horizon to shed its rays on the dewy leaves, wrapping their falling drops of silver in skeins of gold. As the priest finished watering the palm tree that morning and was about to return inside, he found himself faced by a crowd of sad and worried-looking people, one of whom plucked up the courage to address him in beseeching tones:

'Father! Save us! No one but you can save us! My wife is on her death-bed and she is asking for your blessing before she breathes her last.'

'Where is she?'

'In a village near by. The mounts are ready,' replied the man, pointing to two saddled donkeys standing there waiting for them.

'I am willing to go, my sons,' said the priest. 'Wait a while so that I may arrange my affairs and tell my brethren and then return to you.'

'There's no time!' they all said as one voice. 'The woman is dying. We may well reach her too late. Come with us right away if you would be a true benefactor to us and a merciful saviour to the dying woman. It is not far and we shall be there and back before the sun reaches its zenith at noon.'

'Well, then, let us go at once!' the priest agreed with enthusiastic fervour. He went up to the two donkeys, followed by the crowd. Mounting him on one of them while the husband of the dying woman mounted the other, they raced off.

For hours on end they pounded the ground with the priest asking where they were bound for and the men goading on the donkey, saying, 'We're almost there!' It wasn't till noon that the village came into sight. They entered it to the accompaniment of barking dogs and the welcome of its inhabitants, and they all made their way to the village hall. They led the priest to a large room where he found a woman stretched out on a bed, her eyes staring up at the ceiling.

He called to her, but no reply came from her, for she was at death's door. So he began to call down blessings upon her, and scarcely had he finished when she heaved a great sigh and fell into a deep fit of sobbing, so that the priest thought she was about to give up the ghost.

Instead her eyelids fluttered open, her gaze cleared and she turned and murmured:

'Where am I?'

'You are in your house,' answered the astonished priest.

'Get me a drink of water.'

'Bring the pitcher!' shouted her relatives around her. 'Bring the water jug!'

They raced off and brought back a jug of water from which the woman took a long drink. Then she belched heartily and said:

'Isn't there any food? I'm hungry!'

Everyone in the house set about bringing her food. Under the astonished gaze of those around her the woman began devouring the food; then she got up from her bed and proceeded to walk about the house completely fit and well again. At this the people prostrated themselves before the priest, covering his hands and feet in kisses and shouting, 'O Saint of God! Your blessing has alighted on the house and brought the dead woman back to life! What can we possibly give you as a token of the thanks we owe you, as an acknowledgement of our gratitude?'

'I have done nothing that deserves reward or thanks,' replied the priest, still bewildered by the incident. 'It is God's power that has done it.'

'Call it what you will,' said the master of the house, 'it is at all events a miracle which God wished to be accomplished through your hands, O Saint of God. You have alighted at our lowly abode, and this brings both great honour and good fortune to us. You must let us undertake the obligations of hospitality in such manner as our circumstances allow.'

He ordered a quiet room to be made ready for his guest and there he lodged him. Whenever the priest asked leave to depart the master of the house swore by all that was most holy to him that he would not allow his auspicious guest to go before three days were up - the very least hospitality which should be accorded to someone who had saved his wife's life. During this time he showed him much attention and honour.

When the period of hospitality came to an end he saddled a mount and loaded it up with presents of home-made bread, lentils, and chickens; in addition he pressed five pounds for the church funds in the priest's hand. Hardly had he escorted him to the door and helped him on to the donkey than a man appeared, puffing and out of breath, who threw himself down beside the priest.

'Father,' he pleaded, 'the story of your miracle has reached all the villages around. I have an uncle who is like a father to me and who is at death's door. He is hoping to have your blessing, so let not his soul depart from him before his hope is fulfilled!'

'But my son, I am all ready to return home,' the priest replied uncertainly.

'This is something that won't take any time -- I shall not let you go till you've been with me to see my uncle!' The man seized the donkey's reins and led him off.

'And where is this uncle of yours?' asked the priest.

'Very near here -- a few minutes' distance.'

The priest saw nothing for it but to comply. They journeyed for an hour before they reached the next village. There he saw a house like the first one with a dying man on a bed, his family around him veering between hope and despair. No sooner had the priest approached and called down his blessing on the patient than the miracle occurred: the dying man rose to his feet calling for food and water. The people, astounded at what had occurred, swore by everything most dear that they must discharge the duties of hospitality towards this holy man -- a stay of three full days.

The period of hospitality passed with the priest enjoying every honour and attention. Then, as they were escorting him to the gates of the village loaded down with gifts, a man from a third village came along and asked him to come and visit it, even if only for a little while, and give it the blessing of one whose fame had spread throughout all the district. The priest was quite unable to escape from the man, who led the donkey off by its bit and brought the priest to a house in his village. There they found a young man who was a cripple; hardly had the priest touched him than he was up and about on his two feet, among the cheers and jubilation of young and old.

All the people swore that the duties of hospitality must be accorded to the miracle-maker, which they duly did in fine style; three nights no less, just as the others had done. When this time was up they went to their guest and added yet more presents to those he already had, until his donkey was almost collapsing under them. They also presented him with a more generous gift of money than he had received in the former villages so that he had by now collected close on twenty pounds. He put them in a purse which he hid under his clothes. He then mounted the donkey and asked his hosts to act as an escort for him to his village, so they all set off with him, walking behind his donkey.

'Our hearts shall be your protection, our lives your ransom,' they said. 'We shall not leave you till we have handed you over to your own people: you are as precious to us as gold.'

'I am causing you some inconvenience,' said the priest; 'however, the way is not safe and, as you know, gangs are rife in the provinces.'

'Truly,' they replied, 'hereabouts they kidnap men in broad daylight.'

'Even the government is powerless to remove this widespread evil,' said the priest. 'I was told that gangs of kidnappers waylay buses on country roads, run their eyes over the passengers, and carry off with them anyone at all prosperous-looking so that they can afterwards demand a large ransom from his relatives. Sometimes it happens with security men actually in the buses. I heard that once two policemen were among the passengers on one of these buses when it was stopped by the gang; when the selected passenger appealed for help to the two policemen they were so scared of the robbers that all they said to the kidnapped man was: 'Away with you -- and let's get going!' The people laughed and said to the priest, 'Do not be afraid! So long as you are with us you will dismount only when you arrive safely back in your village.'

'I know how gallant you are! You have overwhelmed me with honour and generosity!'

'Don't say such a thing -- you are very precious to us!' They went on walking behind the priest, extolling his virtues and describing in detail his miracles. He listened to their words, and thought about all that had occurred. Finally he exclaimed, 'Truly, it is remarkable the things that have happened to me in these last few days! Is it possible that these miracles are due solely to my blessing?'

'And do you doubt it?'

'I am not a prophet that I should accomplish all that in nine days. Rather is it you who have made me do these miracles!'

'We?' they all said in one voice. 'What do you mean?'

'Yes, you are the prime source.'

'Who told you this?' they murmured, exchanging glances.

'It is your faith,' continued the priest with conviction. 'Faith has made you achieve all this. You do not know the power that lies in the soul of the believer. Faith is a power, my sons! Faith is a power! Miracles are buried deep within your hearts, like water inside rock, and only faith can cause them to burst forth!' He continued talking in this vein while the people behind him shook their heads. He became more and more impassioned and did not notice that they had begun to slink off, one after the other. It was only when he reached the boundaries of his village that he came back to earth, turned round to thank his escort, and was rendered speechless with astonishment at finding himself alone.

His surprise did not last long, for he immediately found his family, his brother priests and superiors rushing towards him, hugging him and kissing his hand, as tears of joy and emotion flowed down their cheeks. One of them embraced him, saying, 'You have returned safely to us at last! They kept their promise. Let them have the money so long as they have given you back, father! To us, father, you are more priceless than any money!'

The priest, catching the word 'money,' exclaimed: 'What money?'

'The money we paid to the gang.'

'What gang?'

'The one that kidnapped you. At first they wouldn't be satisfied with less than a thousand pounds, saying that you were worth your weight in gold. We pleaded with them to take half and eventually they accepted, and so we paid them a ransom of five hundred pounds from the Church funds.'

'Five hundred pounds!' shouted the priest. 'You paid that for me! -- They told you I'd been kidnapped?'

'Yes, three days after you disappeared some people came to us and said that a gang kidnapped you one morning as you were watering the palm tree by your door. They swore you were doomed unless your ransom was paid to them -- if we paid you'd be handed over safe and sound.' The priest considered these words, recalling to himself all that had occurred.

'Indeed, that explains it' he said, as though talking to himself. 'Those dead people, the sick, and the cripples who jumped up at my blessing! What mastery!'

His relatives again came forward, examining his body and clothes as they said joyfully, 'Nothing is of any consequence, father, except your safety. We hope they didn't treat you badly during your captivity. What did they do to you?' In bewilderment he answered: 'They made me work miracles -- miracles that have cost the Church dear!'





# Don't You Have Any Donkeys In Your Country?

by Mehmed Nusret Nesin (Aziz Nesin)

*Aziz Nesin is a popular literary voice in modern Turkey. Born in 1915 into a poor family, he made his name as a writer of wry folklore much of it mocking the establishment's exploitation of the lower classes. His work has survived censure and even imprisonment and gives voice to the inequalities and injustices he sees around him.*

He came in shaking his head from side to side, holding his hand to his face as though he had the toothache. He kept alternately slapping his hand to his face and saying, "Damn it, I've been disgraced. I've been disgraced."

Notwithstanding, he was a very well bred man. I was quite surprised that he would start flagellating himself, saying, "Damn it, I've been disgraced," the minute he walked in the door, before he even greeted me.

"Please come in," I said. "Make yourself at home, please sit down."

"I'm disgraced. I'm disgraced."

"How are you?"

"How do you think I am? Is there anything else I can be? I'm disgraced, that's all there is to it, damn it all."

I thought he had suffered a disaster, maybe a misfortune concerning his family.

"I feel like crawling into a hole. I'm not worth two paras, two paras."

"Why? What happened to you?"

"I don't know what more could happen. They sold a man a broken down, mangy donkey for two thousand five hundred liras."

I drew back and peered into his face. Was he crazy perhaps?

Frankly, I was scared. I said, as an excuse for calling my wife, "Would you like a coffee?"

"Forget the coffee," he said. "Is an unshod, broken down donkey worth two thousand five hundred liras?"

"Not having dealt in donkeys, I wouldn't know."

"My friend, I'm not a donkey trader myself either but I know that a donkey isn't worth two thousand five hundred liras."

"Are you upset?"

"You bet I am. If I'm not upset, who will be? Did you ever see a donkey that was worth two thousand five hundred liras?"

"It's been a little over twenty years since I've seen a donkey."

"What I asked you was if a donkey was worth two thousand five hundred liras."

"I don't know what to say. Maybe if he is a donkey that does tricks, he might be worth that much."

"What tricks, my dear sir? This is just a plain donkey. Look, it can't get up and make a speech; it's just a plain old donkey. And it's mangy and worn out, on top of everything else. They sold him to the man for two thousand five hundred liras and the worst of it all, do you know, was that I got him to buy it."

"No! How did all this happen?"

"That's what I came to tell you about. Istanbul University sent me with my wife to America. You know I stayed in America one year."

"I know."

"I met a professor in America and we became friends. He was a lot of help to me. He was very kind. When I got back to Turkey, we continued corresponding. He is a friend of the Turks, a man who likes the Turks very much. In one of his letters he wrote me that a friend of his was coming to Turkey and this friend was an expert in antique rugs, that he was coming to Turkey to research a book on rugs and asked whether I would assist his friend."

"I wrote back that if his friend the Rug Expert came to Turkey during the university vacation, I would be glad to help him as much as I could. Because the Rug Expert was going to India and Iran to research and coming on to Turkey later, it would be a suitable time for me."

"The Rug Expert came in July. He had my address and phone number from my American professor friend. One day he phoned me from his hotel and I went to the hotel. He was a shrewd fellow. He was an American of German extraction and he probably had some Jewish background too. Perhaps he had been a German Jew and become an American later on."

“He had brought four big trunks and showed off his antiques. They were very ancient rugs, flat weaves and pieces of saddle bags. He seemed very happy with the pieces he had collected. He told me that they were an enormous treasure. In fact, there was a piece of an old carpet only three inches wide and five or ten inches long that he told me was worth at least thirty thousand dollars but he bragged that he had bought it from an Iranian peasant for one dollar. On top of that, when the poor Iranian peasant took the dinar equivalent of a dollar in his hand he was dumbfounded and uttered prayers of thanksgiving.”

“I asked why that old piece of carpet was worth so much money. ‘Because,’ he said, ‘there are eighty knots per cubic centimeter in this rug. It’s a masterpiece.’ He went on explaining about carpets with a truly sensual longing. Up till now there was only one carpet in the world with as much as one hundred knots per cubic centimeter and it was in I-don’t-know which museum and was a wall carpet.”

“He showed me a felt piece. ‘I got this for fifty cents,’ he said and chuckled slyly in his delight. ‘This felt rug will be worth at least five thousand dollars,’ he said.”

“How do you buy these valuable objects so cheap?” I asked him.

“I’ve been in this business for forty years,” he said. “I have my own methods.”

Then he told me tactics that made my mouth fall open in amazement. He had published three books on rugs, in addition, he owned one of the finest rug collections in the world.

We started out on a tour of Anatolia. We traveled from province to province and from district to district. He took colored photographs and continually made notes of the rugs in the mosques that he thought were valuable. He bought old saddlebags, rugs, felt weaves and flat weaves from a few people. According to what he told me, what he was buying was worthless compared to what he had bought in India, Afghanistan and Chinese Turkestan. “There *are* some very valuable Turkish rugs but you don’t run across them,” he said.

We came to a place where they had an archaeological dig. One American and one German archaeological team had each pitched a camp about five or ten kilometers distant from one another and were excavating. They were turning the earth up and had scattered the hills and mountains this way and that like a sheep’s wool. They had made flour of the hills and had ground the soil up into powder.

The area they were excavating was about the size of a small town. They had pitched a number of tents. Here lie several civilizations, dating from the tenth century BC to the present day, one on top of another, beneath the soil. Not one, but several cities, palaces, tombs and so on, emerged from beneath the earth.

Because it was such an interesting place, cars full of tourists interested in history and archeology were continually coming and going. You ran into five to ten tourists every couple of kilometers.

Peasants had gathered around the excavation and were selling the tourists the historical and archaeological valuable pieces of pottery that they had dug up. The tourists were just scrambling to buy them. Even the village children had lined up alongside the road and were selling rings, stones with inscriptions and pieces of broken vases that they had dug up for the tourists. Tiny bare footed boys and girls were running after the tourists, all screaming, “*Van dalir, tuu dalir.*”

I thought that since I had come all the way here, I might as well buy myself a souvenir. There was a blond girl who looked only ten years old who had the handle of a vase in her hand and a boy with a blue stone in the shape of a man’s head. I thought that the blue stone might be the stone belonging to a ring.

“How much do you want for those, my child?” I said.

The little girl wanted forty liras for the vase handle and the boy wanted fifteen liras for the blue stone in the shape of a head. Now not because I didn’t know what they were but just to buy them cheap, I said, “They are too expensive.”

The boy and girl started to argue like grownups. They certainly weren’t expensive. Their father had dug for days and found them five meters under the ground.

I was about to buy them but my American Rug Expert friend, after telling me that they had neither historical nor archaeological value, said that the situation was the same in every place he had traveled in the East. “It is exactly the same there. The peasants, men, women and children, stop the tourists in the road every place where there are digs that attract tourists. They pass off anything they can get their hands on for an antique.”

These sly peasants faked the ancient artifacts so cleverly they even fooled famous archaeologists and swindled them by selling them stuff at high prices. They even sold the shaven carcass of a sheepdog to an American tourist as the mummy of a king. But the imitations that these peasant counterfeiters made were not things to be sneezed at. They were works of great skill and accomplishment, for example the tiny blue stone in the shape of a man’s head that I saw in the hand of the child a little while earlier. It’s not easy to make things like that.

We were riding in the jeep we had rented. The weather was very hot. We saw a couple of poplars and a well beside the road. We were going to eat our lunch in the shade. An elderly peasant was stretched out, dozing in the shade of the poplars and a donkey was grazing a little beyond the peasant.

We greeted the peasant and started talking. I was translating into English for the American what the peasant said.

"What do you grow the most of in these villages around here?" I asked.

"Not a thing," he said. "We used to farm. We grew grain but since they started this digging, it's been twenty years I reckon, the peasants have gotten lazy and now they don't sow anything."

The American said, "It's the same in the other places."

I asked the old man, "Well, how do the peasants get by?"

"Since it's been the style to dig up broken pottery and pieces of stones and such like, the peasants have left their work and they sell whatever they find by digging up the excavation to all those foreigners that pour in."

The American said, "It's the same as in other places."

"Our people here are real lowdown types," the peasant said. "They have sold all our country's treasures to the foreigners. They found such stone columns and tombs that if they could learn their value and sell them, they could found ten more Turkeys . . . and who are these foreigners we're talking about? They're all of them thieves. They have continually pilfered these antiques that are dug up and smuggled them out. They have built enormous cities in their own countries with the stuff they've stolen. Some of them dug them up and stole them themselves and some of them swindled the peasants out of what they had dug up."

The American said, "It's the same other places."

"Now," he said, "there's not a piece of filth left under the ground to dig up and if there is, it's of no account. The government has woken up now and doesn't let anybody get their hands on anything. If these foreigners steal anything, they steal it from the government because the government is supposed to be selling these things at their right price."

The American said, "Yes, that's the way it is other places."

"So how do the peasants get by now?"

"Well, there's six villages hereabouts. If you go in their houses you won't see so much as a piece of cloth or a glass or a pitcher or a jug. Everybody's house is as empty as last year's bird nest."

"Why?"

"Why do you think? They've sold them to the tourists. There's not a splinter of wood left in their houses. Anything they had, they made into antiques and sold. They buried them in the ground, made them rust and turned them into crumbly antiques. Our people's morals have really gone bad, mister. Yesterday, I caught a little boy trying to steal the beads from my donkey's harness. Once he got his hands on them he would bury them in the ground, you see, and then he was going to dig them up and pass them off for antiques. The girls of an age to get married and living at home have all turned into antique makers. If they get their hands on a piece of stone the size of your finger, they carve and chip it and turn out a piece of art you wouldn't believe. They make medals and ancient money out of donkey shoes."

The American said, "I told you so. It's exactly the same in other places."

I asked the old peasant, "How do you get by? What do you do?"

"I trade in donkeys," he said.

When he said this he drew some water from the well and gave it to his donkey to drink in the trough attached to the well. While the donkey was drinking, the American jumped up and went over to the donkey. The peasant and I were talking.

"Can you make a living in this donkey business?"

"Praise Allah, I have made a living for five years in this business, thank God."

"What do you earn, for example?"

"It all depends on the donkey."

"How long does it take you to sell a donkey?"

"It depends. Sometimes a donkey doesn't sell for three to five months. Sometimes you sell five donkeys in one day."

The American walked over to me. He was very excited.

"Good grief," he said, "do you see that piece of carpet on that donkey?"

The peasant didn't understand because we were talking English.

There was an old, ragged, muddy saddlecloth on the donkey's back.

"You mean that dirty cloth?" I said.

“Oh my goodness,” he said, “it’s a wonder, a masterpiece. I’ve been studying that carpet ever since you two started to talk. The colors, the design are amazing and the workmanship is fabulous. It has exactly one hundred and twenty knots per cubic centimeter. Nothing like that has been seen in the world before, it’s priceless.”

“Do you want to buy it?” I said.

“Yes,” he said, “but I don’t want the peasant to know that I’m buying the carpet. I know these people here. If you try to buy their old, worn sandals they want a world of money because they think that they are valuable and antiques. What they plan to make off the deal isn’t the issue. They are never satisfied however much money you offer them. They keep on raising the price. That’s why we don’t want to let on to the peasant.”

About then the old peasant said, “What is that heathen jabbering about? You two are going ‘gobble, gobble, gobble.’”

“Nothing,” I said, “he just likes it a lot here.”

“What is there to like here? There’s nothing but naked chalk cliffs.”

The American said, “I told you that I had methods for buying cheap, didn’t I? Well now I’m going to use one of those methods.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to act as though I’m interested in the carpet. I’m going to buy the donkey. Naturally, since the peasant doesn’t know the value of the carpet, he is going to leave the old cloth on the donkey’s back when we buy it. Then we’ll take the carpet and let the donkey loose a little way down the road. Now, will you tell the peasant that I want to buy the donkey?”

I said to the peasant, “Didn’t you want to sell the donkey?”

“Yep, I was going to sell the donkey,” he said.

“For instance, how much would you sell this donkey for?”

“Depends on who the buyer is.”

“Suppose we were to buy it?”

He laughed.

“Are you having fun with me? What would gentlemen the likes of you do with a donkey?”

“What do you care, man? We want to buy this donkey. What will you sell it for?”

“I told you, didn’t I. It depends on the buyer. Is it you that’s going to buy it or this heathen?”

“He is.”

“What nationality is that guy?”

“American.”

“Humh, he’s not a foreigner, we can reckon he’s one of us. Look here, this donkey is really old and broken down. Tell him this donkey is no good to him.”

I told the American.

“Oh good, that means he’s going to sell it cheap,” he said.

“He doesn’t care whether it’s old or not.”

“It would be a shame to do an American like that. He’ll go home and say the Turks swindled him.”

I told the American this.

“The Turkish peasants are a very innocent, very honest people,” he said. “Anywhere else they would have sold it to me right away. Since he’s such a good hearted fellow, I will pay him a lot of money.”

I said to the peasant, “The American agrees.”

“Yes, but sir,” he said, “this donkey will die on the road before it gets to America and anyway this donkey has terrible mange. He’s nasty with mange from head to tail.”

“What do you care, my friend? The man wants him.”

“Allah, Allah. Look, this isn’t a female even to be of any use. What is he going to do with this old, mangy donkey?”

“What business is it of yours? Just think about the money. What do you want for this donkey?”

“I’m really curious,” the peasant said. “Just ask this American efendi: ‘don’t they have any donkeys at all in his country?’”

“He’s asking, ‘Don’t you have any donkeys in your country?’”

The American answered after thinking a little, “Tell him we do but we don’t have any like this.”

I told the peasant.

“Hummh, so he doesn’t like American donkeys but he does Turkish donkeys. Well, what can I do? It’s not my fault. I told him everything that was wrong with the donkey. I am not about to hurt the feelings of somebody who’s come all the way from abroad because of a mangy donkey. I’ll sell it.”

“How much?”

"For you, ten thousand."

"What? Are you crazy? The finest Arab thoroughbred only brings two or three thousand liras."

"So then what do you want with the donkey? Let him buy the finest thoroughbred."

When I told the American that the man wanted ten thousand liras, he said, "Didn't I tell you? That's the way these people are. They want lots of money because they think it's valuable. What if we had tried to buy the carpet? He'd have wanted a hundred thousand liras then. I could offer him ten thousand liras for the donkey but then he would want fifty thousand when I started to pay him. That's why you have to bargain firmly with them."

I said to the peasant, "Tell the truth. What did you pay for this donkey?"

"I don't tell lies, he said. "Look, I've just washed myself to pray and I'm not about to tell a lie. I bought this donkey for five liras to skin to make sandals with. He's going to die any day not and I'll skin him then. He's not good for anything else."

"Come on, play fair! How can you try to sell a donkey that you paid five liras for for ten thousand liras?"

"Son, I'm not trying to sell it, it's you who are trying to buy. I said it was old and the man said that was all right. I said that it had the mange, he accepted that. I said that it wasn't a female and he still wanted it. I said it wouldn't live another day and he still said 'good.' Oh, I almost forgot . . . the donkey is lame. Its right leg limps."

"It doesn't matter."

"You see, there's something valuable, something marvelous about this donkey that I don't understand. Otherwise why would this American infidel try to buy a mangy, old jackass and lame too? Isn't that right? Ten thousand, I won't take any less for it!"

I said to the American, "He won't go down any farther. Shall we give him the ten thousand?"

We haggled for two hours. Several times we acted as though we had given up and walked away. He paid no attention. We walked back to him

"I knew you'd come back," he said.

"Who wouldn't know it, my boy? You've come across such a bargain of a donkey that you are certainly not going to walk away from it."

I told the driver of the jeep to take the jeep and wait for us a little distance down the road. We were going to let the donkey loose and climb into the jeep.

Anyway, sir, after bickering and bargaining we settled on two thousand five hundred liras. We counted the money out into his hand and the peasant took the saddle cloth and put it on his shoulder and put the donkey's reins in our hands.

"Well, then, use it in good health," he said.

Then he added, "I probably sold my broken down, mangy donkey too cheap but never mind. Use it in good health."

The American was staring at the piece of carpet in the peasant's hand. What were we going to do now?

"My God," he said, "don't let on anything. We'll lead the donkey off a little ways and then come back here. We'll say, 'Oh my goodness, the donkey's back will get cold. Give us the cloth and we'll cover it up.' Be careful that the man doesn't understand that what we are really after is the piece of carpet."

We took the donkey's lead and walked off. I say we walked off just as a manner of speaking because we had a hard time walking. The American pushed from behind and I pulled from in front but the donkey wouldn't budge. The old donkey didn't have the strength to move. If we could only get the carpet away from the peasant, we could have left the donkey and taken off.

We had gone about twenty or thirty paces, pushing and shoving the donkey, when we heard the voice of the peasant calling after us, "Stop, stop, you forgot the donkey's thing."

Oh, if you had only seen how happy the man was that the cloth was following us on its own. The man came running over the hilltop.

"Hey there," he said. "What are you going to tie this donkey to when you get it to America? You didn't even think. You don't buy a donkey without a stake. I can see you're greenhorns."

And we took the iron donkey stake with the ring on the end from his hand.

The American said to me, "Come on, now's the moment to ask for the carpet. But for goodness sake don't give us away. Say, 'Just give that dirty saddle cloth here, will you?'"

I said to the peasant, "This donkey is very sickly. It would be a shame if he caught cold. You had an old cloth on the donkey. Give us the dirty cloth and we'll put it on its back."

"Oh, no," he said. "I can't give the cloth to you. You bought the donkey from me, not the cloth."

“Yes, we bought the donkey. Now let’s put the cloth on it. Anyway, it’s old and dirty and it’s not worth a *para*.”

“Yes, it’s old and dirty and it’s not worth one *para* but I can’t give it to you.”

“Why?”

“I can’t give it to you, Mister. It’s an heirloom from my father, that cloth. It’s an heirloom handed down from my ancestors and forefathers. I can’t give it to you.”

I said to the American, “He says that it’s an heirloom handed down from his forefathers.”

“Ask him what it’s good for,” he said.

“What good is this dirty piece of cloth to you?” I asked him.

The peasant suddenly became serious, “What do you mean, ‘What good is it to me’? I’m going to buy another mangy donkey and put it on his back. If it is my *kismet*, I’ll find somebody else interested and, with Allah’s assistance, I’ll sell it to him too. This cloth has brought me luck, I’m telling you. I gave you the stake for free too. Did I say anything about that?”

“Oh, come on now, let us buy the cloth for a few piasters and cover the animal.”

“Now you’ve done it! Then how will I sell my donkeys? I’ve been selling worn out, mangy donkeys for five years now thanks to this cloth. Goodby to you now. Use it in good health.”

I was afraid the American was going to have a heart attack. I took him by the arm.

After a few steps, the peasant shouted from a distance,

“If you are going to let that donkey loose, please don’t take him a far ways off, so you won’t wear yourselves out.”

We let the donkey loose there, on the spot and walked back to the jeep.

The American Rug Expert said, “Now *this* is something that doesn’t go on anywhere else. It’s never happened to me before. Everything is the same as elsewhere here, but this is a different sort of a ploy.”

We got into the jeep. He still had the stake in his hand. He couldn’t throw it away.

“What are you going to do with that iron stake?” I said.

“I am going to add this stake to my rug collection as a souvenir,” he said. “This stake is valuable. We got it cheap at two thousand five hundred.”

“You see? I’m disgraced before the world. Shame on me.”

He kept on repeating, “I’m disgraced” over and over again and kept slapping his forehead with his hand.

# Midaq Alley

by Naguib Mahfouz

## Chapter Two

*Naguib Mahfouz, hailed as the Arab World's greatest fiction-writer, was born in Cairo in 1911, the son of a merchant in one of the city's old quarters. He studied philosophy at Cairo University and started his writing career with a succession of historical novels while working as a civil-servant. After the Second World War he began writing novels about contemporary Egyptian life. He has published some twenty volumes of novels and short stories many of which have been made into films. MIDAQ ALLEY is probably Naguib Mahfouz's most popular work; it was published in Cairo in 1947 and has often been reprinted. In 1988 Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. MIDAQ ALLEY portrays life in one of Cairo's old quarters during World War II. It is a kaleidoscopic novel, with a multitude of characters, which evokes a society in the midst of change and renewal. In this excerpt from MIDAQ ALLEY Mahfouz portrays a meeting between Mrs. Afify, a middle-aged widow, and Umm Hamida, the alley's match-maker, and one of Mrs. Afify's tenants. Mrs. Afify's secret desire is to get married again and this is what prompts her visit to Umm Hamida.*

She gazed into the mirror with uncritical eyes, or rather with eyes gleaming with delight. The mirror reflected a long, thin face; cosmetics had indeed done wonders with her eyelashes, eyebrows, eyes and lips. She turned her face to the right and to the left while her fingers stroked the plaits of her hair. She muttered almost inaudibly, "Not bad. Very nice. Yes, by God, very nice!" The fact was, her face had gazed upon the world for close to fifty years and nature never leaves a face unharmed for over a half a century. The body was slim, even thin, as the women of the alley described it and her bust meager, although her nice dress hid it from sight.

This lady was Mrs. Saniya Afify, the owner of the alley's second house, on the first floor of which lived Dr. Bosshy. She had got herself ready on this particular day to visit the middle flat of her house, where Umm Hamida lived. She was not accustomed to visiting tenants and, indeed, probably the only times she had been in the flat were at the beginning of each month to collect the rent. Now, however, a new and deep impulse made visiting Hamida's mother an absolute necessity.

She walked out of the flat and down the stairs, mumbling hopefully to herself, "Oh God, please fulfill my wishes."

She knocked on the door with a perspiring hand and Hamida opened it. The girl gave her an insincere smile of welcome, led her into the sitting room and then left to call her mother.

The room was small, with two old fashioned sofas facing one another and a battered table on which rested an ashtray. On the floor was a straw mat. The visitor did not wait long; soon Hamida's mother rushed in, having just changed from her housecoat. The two women greeted one another warmly, exchanged kisses and sat down. Umm Hamida said:

"Welcome, welcome. Why, it's as though the Prophet himself had come to visit us, Mrs. Afify!"

Umm Hamida was a well-built woman of medium stature, in her mid-sixties. Still fit and healthy, with protruding eyes and pock-marked cheeks, she had a rough and resonant voice. When she talked she almost screamed. Indeed her voice was her most effective weapon in the frequent quarrels between her and her neighbors. She was, of course, not at all pleased with the visit, as any visit from the landlady could have unfortunate consequences and might even spell real trouble. However, she had accustomed herself to be ready at all times for any eventuality, whether good or bad, and she was able to deal with both with complete equanimity.

By profession she was a bath-attendant and a marriage broker, and was both shrewd and talkative. To be sure, her tongue was hardly ever still and she scarcely missed a single report or scandal concerning anyone or any house in the neighborhood. She was both a herald and historian of bad news of all kinds and a veritable encyclopaedia of woes.

As usual, she went to great pains to make her visitor feel welcome, praising her extravagantly. She gave her a resume of the news of the alley and the surroundings. Had she heard of Kirsha's new scandal? It was just like the previous ones and the news got back to his wife who had a fight with him and tore his cloak. Husniya, the bakeress, the day before, struck her husband so hard that blood had flowed from his forehead. Radwan Hussainy, that good and pious man, had rebuked his wife most strongly and why should he treat her in this way, the good man that he was, if she were not a vile and wicked hussy! Dr.

Booshy had interfered with a little girl in the shelter in the last air-raid and some upright citizen had struck him for it. The wife of Mawardy the wood merchant had run off with her servant and her father had informed the police. Tabuna Kafawy was secretly selling bread made of pure flour—and so on.

Mrs. Afify listened with disinterest to all this, her mind busy with the matter about which she had come. She was determined, no matter what the effort cost her, to broach the subject which had been simmering within her for so long. She let the woman talk on until the right opportunity came, as it did when Umm Hamida asked:

“And how are you, Mrs. Afify?”

She frowned a little and replied:

“The truth is that I am tired out, Umm Hamida!”

The older woman arched her eyebrows as though really troubled:

“Tired? May God lighten your load!”

Mrs. Afify made no reply while Hamida, her tenant’s daughter, who had just come into the room, placed a tray with coffee on the table and left again. Then she said indignantly:

“Yes, I am tired, Umm Hamida. Don’t you think it’s exhausting, collecting the rent from the shops? Imagine a woman like me standing in front of strange men asking for rent ...”

Umm Hamida’s heart had missed a beat at the mention of the rents, but she said sympathetically:

“Yes, you are quite right. May God come to your aid.”

Umm Hamida wondered to herself why Mrs. Afify should keep making these complaints. This was the second or third time her landlady had visited her recently and it was still not the beginning of the month. All at once an astonishing idea struck her. Could the visits be connected with her own profession? In such matters her powers of deduction were unparalleled and she determined to quietly plumb by degrees the depths of her visitor. Maliciously, she said:

“This is one of the evils of being alone. You are a woman all by yourself, Mrs. Afify. In your house you are alone, in the street alone, and in your bed you are alone. Isn’t loneliness terrible?”

Mrs. Afify was pleased with the woman’s comments, which corresponded exactly with her own thoughts. Hiding her delight, she replied:

“What can I do? My relatives all have families and I am only happy in my own home. Yet thanks be to God for making me quite independent.”

Umm Hamida watched her cunningly and then said, coming to the point:

“Thanks be to God a thousand times; but tell me honestly, why have you remained single for so long?”

Mrs. Afify’s heart beat faster and she found herself just where she wanted to be. Nevertheless, she sighed and murmured in feigned disgust:

“No more of the bitterness of marriage for me!”

In her youth, Mrs. Afify had married the owner of a perfume shop, but it was an unsuccessful marriage. Her husband treated her badly, made her life miserable and spent all her savings. He left her a widow ten years ago and she had remained single all this time because, as she said, she had no taste for married life.

In saying this, she was not merely trying to hide the indifference of the other sex towards her. She had genuinely disliked married life and was delighted when she regained her peace and freedom. For a long time now, she had remained averse to marriage and happy in her freedom. Gradually, however, she forgot this prejudice and would not have hesitated had anyone asked for her hand in marriage. From time to time she lived in hope, but as the years passed, she had begun to despair. She refused to allow herself to entertain further false hopes, and she had accustomed herself to satisfaction with her life just as it was.

Her pastimes were not, fortunately, those that would lead to criticism of a widowed lady like herself. Her only passions were a fondness for coffee, cigarettes and hoarding bank notes. She kept her bank notes in a small ivory casket hidden in the depths of her clothes closet and arranged them in packages of fives and tens delighting herself by looking at them, counting and rearranging them. Because the bank notes, unlike metal coins, made no noise, the money was safe, and none of the alley’s clever people, despite their great sensitivity, knew of its existence. She had always inclined towards avarice and was one of the earliest contributors to the savings bank.

Mrs. Afify found great consolation in her financial activities, seeing in them a compensation for her unmarried state. She would tell herself that any husband would be likely to plunder her funds, just as her dead husband had done, and that he would squander in the twinkle of an eye the fruits of long years of savings. Despite all this, the idea of marriage had gradually taken root and all her excuses and fears had been wiped out.



It was really Umm Hamida who was responsible for this strange change in her, whether intentionally or not. She had told her how she had arranged a marriage for an elderly widow and she had begun thinking the same might be possible for her. Very soon the idea had quite taken possession of her and she now felt compelled to follow it through. She had once thought that she had forgotten marriage and, all of a sudden, marriage was her ambition and hope and no amount of money, coffee, cigarettes or new bank notes could dissuade her from the idea. Mrs. Afify had begun wondering despondently how she had wasted her life in vain and how she had spent ten years, until she was now approaching fifty, quite alone. She decided that it had been simple madness, laid the responsibility on her dead husband and determined that she would be unfaithful to his memory as soon as possible.

The match-maker listened with shrewd contempt to her fake disgust at the idea of marriage and told herself: "I can see through your cunning, Mrs. Afify." She reproached her visitor:

"Don't exaggerate, Mrs. Afify. Even if your luck was bad the first time, there are very many happy marriages indeed."

Replacing her coffee cup on the tray and thanking her hostess, Mrs. Afify replied:

"No sensible person would persist in trying her luck if it looked bad."

Umm Hamida disagreed:

"What talk is this for a sensible woman like yourself? You have had enough, quite enough, of being alone."

The widow struck her meager breast with the palm of her left hand and said in mock disbelief:

"What? Do you want people to think that I am mad?"

"What people do you mean? Women older than yourself get married every day."

Mrs. Afify was annoyed at this phrase "older than yourself" and she said quietly:

"I am not as old as you may think, God curse the idea!"

"I didn't mean that, Mrs. Afify and I am sure you are still within the bounds of youth. I thought it might be some excuse behind which you were hiding yourself."

The lady was pleased at this, but she was still determined to act the part of someone who might be ready to accept marriage, but who had no clear intention or desire for marriage. After a little hesitation, she asked:

"Wouldn't it be wrong for me to get married now, after this long period of being unmarried?"

Umm Hamida said to herself: "Then why, woman, did you come to talk to me?" But out loud she said:

"Why should it be wrong to do something both lawful and right? You are a respectable and sensible person, as everyone knows. Why, my dear, 'Marriage is one half of religion.' Our Lord in his wisdom made it lawful and it was prescribed by the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him!"

Mrs. Afify echoed piously:

"Peace and blessings upon him?"

"Why not, my dear? Both God and the Arab Prophet love the faithful!"

Mrs. Afify's face had grown red beneath its covering of rouge and her heart was filled with delight. She took out two cigarettes from her case and said:

"Whoever would want to marry me?"

Umm Hamida bent her forefinger and drew it to her forehead in a gesture of disbelief, saying:

"A thousand and one men!"

The lady laughed heartily and said:

"One man will suffice!"

Umm Hamida now declared with conviction:

"Deep down all men like marriage and it's only married men who complain about marriage. What a lot of bachelors there are who want to get married. I have only to say to one of them: 'I have a bride for you' and a look of interest comes into their eyes as they smile and ask in unconcealable passion: 'Really—who is it—who?' Men, even though they might be completely senile, always want women and this is part of the wisdom of our Lord."

Mrs. Afify nodded her head happily in agreement and commented:

"Glory be to His wisdom!"

"Yes, Mrs. Afify, it was for that God created the world. It was within His power to fill it with men alone or women alone but He created male and female and gave us the intelligence to understand His wish. There is no avoiding marriage."

Mrs. Saniya Afify smiled again:

"Your words are as sweet as sugar, Umm Hamida."

"May God sweeten your whole life and delight your heart with a perfect marriage."

Now thoroughly encouraged, the visitor agreed:

“If God wishes and with your help.”

“I am, and thanks be to God, a very fortunate woman. Marriages I arrange never break up. How many of my couples have gone off and set up homes, produced children and been very happy. Put your trust in God, and in me!”

I will never be able to reward you enough with money.”

At this, however, Umm Hamida said to herself; “Oh no you don’t, my woman. You will have to reward me well enough with money and a great deal of it. We will go to the savings bank together, and you won’t be stingy.” She then said out loud and in the serious, determined tone of a businessman who, having finished the preliminaries, was about to get down to the really important matters:

“I take it you would prefer a man well advanced in years?”

The widow did not know how to reply. She did not want to marry a youth who would be an unsuitable husband for her and yet she was not pleased at the expression “well advanced in years.” The way the conversation had developed had made her feel a little more at ease with Umm Hamida and she was able to say, laughing to hide her embarrassment:

“What, ‘break a fast by eating an onion’?”

Umm Hamida let out a raucous, throaty laugh, increasing in confidence that the deal she was about to make would be lucrative indeed. She went on dryly:

“You are quite right, Mrs. Afify. The truth is that experience has shown me that the happiest marriages are those in which the wife is older than the husband. A man of thirty or just a little older would suit you well.”

Her visitor asked anxiously:

“Would one agree?”

“Certainly one would agree. You are good-looking and wealthy.”

“May you be safe from all evil!”

Her pock-marked face having taken on a serious and conscientious look, Umm Hamida then said:

“I will tell him you are a lady of middle age, with no children, no mother-in-law, well-mannered and wholesome and have two shops in Hamzawy and a two-story house in Midaq Alley.”

The lady smiled and said, to correct what she considered an error:

“No, the house has three stories.”

Umm Hamida, However, could not agree to this and said:

“Only two, because you are not going to take any rent for the third floor where I am for as long as I am alive!”

Mrs. Afify agreed happily:

“All right, I give my word, Umm Hamida.”

“Your word is taken then. May our Lord work things out for the best!”

Her visitor shook her head as though amazed and said:

“What an astonishing thing! I just came to visit you and look where our talk has got us. How has it happened that I am leaving you as good as married?”

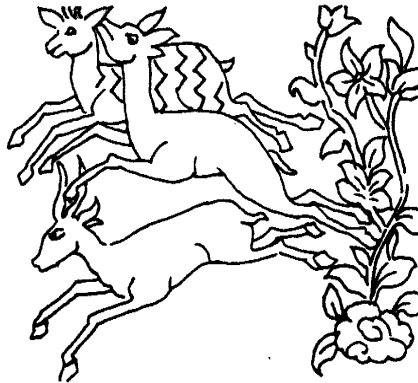
Umm Hamida joined in her laughter as though she too was surprised, although she said under her breath: “Shame on you, woman. Do you think your cunning has fooled me?” Out loud she commented:

“The will of our Lord, don’t you think? Is not everything in His hands?”

And so Mrs. Saniya Afify returned to her own flat well pleased, although she thought to herself: “Rent of the flat for the rest of her life! What a greedy woman she is!”

# Varieties of Love

## Stories





## The Worst of Two Choices or The Forsaken Olive Trees

by Najwa Qa'war Farah

*Born in Nazareth, Najwa Farah studied at the Women's Training College in Jerusalem and worked as a teacher. She married a religious minister in 1950 and lived with him and their four children in several cities in Palestine, as well as in Beirut. She now lives in London. Her life has been dedicated to serving the cause of her people through her short stories and her many articles and talks. Her work is known not only in the Arab world, but also in such countries as Australia, Sweden, and the United States where she and her husband were invited for the purpose of acquainting audiences with the Palestinian issue. She published her first collection, A PASSER-BY, in 1954, and has published at least five other collections since. The following story was chosen from the collection FOR WHOM DOES SPRING COME (1963).*

Recently, Salim abu-Ibrahim had withdrawn from other people. The villagers only saw him at dawn, when he went to his olive trees. Women got a glimpse of him when they opened their shutters to let in the morning air, or when they went to the chicken coops to feed their hungry broods. "We've seen Abu Ibrahim going to his olive trees," they would tell their husbands as they brought them their early morning cups of coffee. The men would shake their heads knowingly: "There is no strength or power except in Thee, O God! . . . He was a lion, a pillar of strength in the village . . . A man of few words and much dignity . . . Tall in stature, with strong features that commanded respect . . . A worthy man..."

The withdrawal of his wife, Imm Ibrahim, was another matter. She dreaded most those moments when he would break his silence and give vent to his pent-up feelings: "Your constant grumbling and nagging has wrecked our peace! . . . You want to see our children, and your heart is torn apart. Is it easy for me to leave, to become a refugee in a strange land, at my age? How can I abandon everything here? You don't care, because you haven't worked on the land as I have, and you forget the long years of toil it's taken to build it up, by my father and his father before him . . . You just want to see the children. Of course, you're their mother, but are you the only mother here whose children are across the border? The man who listens to a whining woman is a fool -- and I more than anyone else!"

"Please, listen to me, Abu Ibrahim," she implored. "I haven't asked you to move . . . If you think it's a mistake, well, don't go! . . ."

He let out a sigh that was almost a groan. Rising to his feet, he began to stride up and down the room, while his wife murmured faintly, "It's true, I do long for the children. Aren't they *our* children, a part of *us*? Ibrahim, 'Abla, Jamil, and Sami . . . Little Sami, who left when he was four years old . . . It's as though they were dead! One year passed, then two, and now seven, but we're still saying, 'This year we'll see the end of it. Peace will come and we'll see them again . . .' But it's no good. Will life begin again for us? Isn't it truer to say that the end of our life is getting nearer all the time? Have you forgotten how ill you were last winter? Won't death catch up with us before we see them?"

"That's enough!" shouted Abu Ibrahim. "I told you to stop!" To escape his wife's voice, he wound his *kaffiyyeh* around his head and left the house . . . The olive trees were still there, waiting for him. Imm Ibrahim breathed more quietly. She had begun to look forward to Abu Ibrahim's visits to his olive trees. She wanted to cry for her lost motherhood, but she didn't dare cry when he was there, watching her every thought and action, listening to what she said to the neighbours. She wanted to dream about the children and the carefree past. She longed to talk about Ibrahim and his young wife. They said she was pretty. She wanted to talk about 'Abla, who was still looking after her unmarried brothers. 'Abla was a motherly child, and truly devoted to Jamil and Sami. She had refused offers of marriage so she could care for them. But Jamil -- poor Jamil! . . . He had lost a hand, sliced off by a paper-cutting machine at the printing press. The thought was too painful to Imm Ibrahim. And little Sami . . . She remembered how he'd used to sit on her lap after the noon meal: soon he'd be unable to keep his eyes open, they were heavy with sleep, and he would doze off with his eyelids half open. In the village they called this "deer-sleep." He'd had a habit of drawing in his lips when he slept, making a strange little noise like the ticking of a clock. His small body would grow warm as he lay curled on her lap. Later she would carry him to his cot and lay him

down. Imm Ibrahim held out her arms . . . No, he wasn't here! they were empty . . . The breeze that was coming through the open door felt cold.

It was summertime. The trees in the garden were heavy with fruit, but the children were not here to see them. Summers used to be so happy . . . She would prepare for their return from school, and the house would ring with their laughter. It had seemed that Imm Ibrahim was always making coffee, and cooking, and their house had been bright and cheerful. But now that joy was gone. Night provided no welcome rest. She spent its long hours dreaming of the past, and when she came back to reality she sobbed out loud.

"What?" shouted Abu Ibrahim angrily. "Crying again? . . . Crying during the day is bad enough. Must you also cry at night? You'll be the death of me! . . . What in the world are you weeping about? Your children? -- Why? Are they sick? Are they dead? Are they in trouble? What do you think the refugees feel like, who have to live in caves and in shacks?"

"Don't say that! God forbid! . . ."

"Then what are you crying for?"

"Oh, please, Abu Ibrahim! . . . I didn't know you were awake. I've stopped. I've stopped crying . . ."

"You've only stopped because I'm awake . . . Just like a woman -- so unreasonable!"

But he couldn't go back to sleep. He got up, sat on the couch, lit the lamp, and began to roll cigarettes, smoking one after the other. Imm Ibrahim also lay awake, though she did not get out of bed until morning.

The dawn was gloriously unaware of their pain. It broke suddenly through a bank of rose-tinted clouds. The stars withdrew bashfully behind their veils. The moon, pale but serene, dutifully awaited the arrival of her lord the sun, then slipped away unseen.

Abu Ibrahim put out the lamp and hurried to the kitchen. Imm Ibrahim was already preparing his coffee. The comforting smell of the newly-ground coffee beans quieted him. This was a moment he had always looked forward to, even long ago, when he was a child and his grandfather sat cross-legged on his mattress on the floor, murmuring through his long beard as his fingers moved slowly from one bead to the next on his yellow *misbaha*. The house would fill with relatives and friends. The village elders would sit on couches along the walls, sipping hot coffee with loud slurping gulps, piously reciting their beads, and discussing the crops and the condition of the olive trees. Coffee was a gentle friend, that took him back to other days and made him feel at one with his people and their traditions. Its warm odor held deep, old, and very dear memories.

Did he really, in his inner heart, blame Imm Ibrahim? Wasn't he annoyed because she was putting into words his own pain, which he dared not face? Of course he longed to see his children; he could hardly bear to mention them, or to look at the photographs that hung high on the wall in the sitting room, or to set eyes on their clothing, which still hung in the wardrobe. Even Sami's slingshot was there, that he'd tried to hit birds with in the summer, when they were all at home together and the house was full of their chatter. Sometimes at night Abu Ibrahim dreamed about them, and woke up choking down his sobs. He remembered the day his neighbor's wife had stopped by to say, "I've got good news for you! Ibrahim is married!" He and his wife had been stunned. Ibrahim, married! . . . He had only been eighteen when he left, a fine young lad . . . And now, he was married! Although his mouth felt dry, he had asked the woman, "How do you know?"

"Sa'id's son, who works in Cyprus, wrote to his parents and asked them to pass the news on to you and Imm Ibrahim . . . Well? Aren't you happy about it, Abu Ibrahim? You can give them your blessing, even though they are far away . . ."

But instead they had wept, because the house was silent and empty. They didn't even slaughter a sheep to celebrate the wedding. The shuttered windows of the sitting room had remained closed, and no bride came for Imm Ibrahim to welcome with an earthenware water jug, a piece of freshly-kneaded dough, and a sprig of fragrant basil -- tokens that she might bear children and that there might always be enough to eat and drink in her home. Instead of singing wedding songs, Imm Ibrahim had sobbed and felt faint, and the women had gathered around to help turn her mind to happier thoughts, coaxing her to give them the sweetmeats that are offered at weddings.

The house became so full of women that Abu Ibrahim had felt compelled to go out. He had gone to his olive trees. They consoled him, but they also gave him pain. He felt personally related to each of them. He loved their graceful beauty and faithful generosity. The grove was a holy place for him. He was intimately acquainted with each breeze that rustled the shimmering leaves. Weren't they the children of last summer's winds? . . . These olive trees had witnessed the era of the Turkish sultans. They had survived the British Mandate. They remained now unperturbed and strong,

combating time itself with their silent endurance and devotion. Why couldn't he be like them? Why must he desert them? Why could he not endure steadfastly, as they endured? Why did he have to be a leaf driven before the wind? Life had placed him here. Why should he leave? . . .

He'd been bowed beneath the weight of his inner conflict. Here, was the message of the trees . . . but at home the voice of Imm Ibrahim would depict their children across the border, reminding him that they were part of their parents' bodies, that life without them was desolate, endless deprivation, and that death, which surely lay ahead, might overtake him at any time. Hadn't he had heart trouble last winter? The olive trees spoke to him about the land, his beloved earth that belonged to his ancestors who had plowed it, worked on it, gathered its generous yield of fruit, and died content. It was his heritage to guard and cherish. He must be loyal to their loyalty to it. How could he leave it for an unknown, unloved town, where he would be a stranger, a burden on his own children? He thought of his married son whose new wife might not like him. He could imagine her saying, "why have you burdened me with this old peasant, your father?" He also shrank from the thought of an unfamiliar house and an unaccustomed climate, a strange bed and an unfriendly pillow, a window that opened out onto an unexplained world . . . He would not be able to hurry to his kitchen every morning as he had done for so many years. The familiar jars of oil and grain, which filled up much of the room, would not be there; nor would the copper trays and pans his mother had used. Even the coffee cups would be of a different size and shape. He pictured himself going into a small, cramped kitchen with complicated electrical appliances. It might be modern and clean, but to him it would be cold and bare . . .

He had become aware once again of the trees surrounding him. Glancing about to make sure no one saw him, he had flung his arms around one of the trunks, letting the leaves caress his face, and given way to tears. Some spirit within him went out of him and entered the trees. Their voices converged upon him, telling him they belonged to him forever. Lifting his head, through the leaves he'd seen the sun setting behind the violet hills. Its fiery glow warmed his heart. Night had come, hiding the world from view, and the stars had lined up into protective ranks. At their head had risen a full moon.

Abu Ibrahim allowed the tedious travel arrangements to proceed, and the day of departure finally came. It was a sad day for the entire village. The neighbours gathered outside the house to share in the grief of parting. They had always known Abu Ibrahim. They had often gone to him with their problems. The fact that he had not left the village had given them courage to remain. Their disputes had been settled in his house, and they felt it belonged to them too. The place would now seem silent and empty. Was not a home made by those who lived in it? As they bade his wife farewell, the women wept.

"May God bring you success, but your departure leaves us desolate!" cried one.

"Take us with you, Imm Ibrahim!" implored another.

Old Imm Bakr stepped forward: "Give this *mandeel*' to Bakr," she pleaded. "Tell him that his mother embroidered it with the last sight of her eyes . . . Tell him that I have kept his land safe, but, if God should take me before I see him, may he think well of me. And, if my body should turn over in its grave when the oil and the olive are being enjoyed by others, it will be because they were not enjoyed by Bakr and his descendants."

The women glanced at each other. "Bakr!" they cried, "Where is he? No one has heard of him since '48. Can he still be alive?" Everyone doubted it but Imm Bakr, for she believed that every person who went away was bound to meet her son. For her, he lived in all the lands beyond the border. The women shook their heads in resignation. This faith alone gave meaning to Imm Bakr's life.

Abu Ibrahim and his wife got into the car, while a truck moved off ahead carrying their belongings. As the car started forward, the villagers clung to it, and their farewell blessings echoed around the couple long after they had departed. Abu Ibrahim felt that life had gone out of him, and that his friends were mourning his death. It seemed as if he were attending his own funeral. Surely, his funeral procession would have been like this -- the black car his hearse, the weeping and calls of farewell, the slow moving line . . . These were the friends who would have come to his funeral . . . Pain numbed his senses, so that he scarcely felt any physical reaction.

When the car passed the olive grove, he felt like his heart was about to leave its cage. Before the car moved off, he turned towards the grove. The trees seemed to be bowing their heads and drawing him to them(selves). Was this really his funeral? Was he at one with them at last?

Alone. Even after he crossed the border and saw his children, who had been waiting so long to embrace him, he was alone. It was not that the reunion had been cold -- even the police who

guarded both borders had been moved by it. But he remained a stranger, unknown even to himself. His daughter-in-law proved to be kindly, and made every effort to make him feel at home. But nothing lessened his inner pain . . . It was unbearably strange. He yearned constantly for the land, the olive trees, the village, his daily life. He had hoped to make a new beginning, but he lacked the vigor or desire to do so. Slowly he began to die, as each day bore him further away from what he had loved. His fears had come true. Around him were high, steep hills, like minarets with *muezzins* that craned forward to make sure he was hearing their call -- so different from the gentle, friendly hills at home. The new kitchen, also, was as he had feared it would be: white, small, all-electric, and sterile. His mattress was hard and unyielding, even though he used a bolster from home. When he first woke up he would often feel he was back there, with returning consciousness he would numbly try to remember how he'd come to be *here*. He lived in dread that the jars of oil and olives he'd brought with him should all be consumed, for it was only when he tasted them that his misery would leave him briefly.

One night he sprang up in terror. He had dreamt that he was dead and was being carried in a coffin to his funeral, with all his friends following. Even during the day, the memory of the dream would not leave him. "This is the second time I have known death," he mused. "I was right about what would happen if I left home."

Soon his family realized he would not see many more days. One morning, they found him still and cold. The doctor said his heart had failed him while he slept. But his daughter said she had seen the shadow of death on his face the day he crossed the border. He alone, could have known that now he had died for the third time.



# The Whistle

by Abdul Hakim Kassem

*Abdel Hakim Kassem was born in 1935. After secondary school in Tanta, in Egypt's Nile Delta, he attended Alexandria University. In 1967 he was sentenced to prison by a military court for five years, during which time he wrote "The Whistle". On his release he published his novel The Seven Days of Man. He now lives in Berlin.*

A long, long line of children slips between the maize stalks putting under them small handfuls of chemical fertilizer; behind them is an overseer with a long cane and a whistle.

The boy Hasan and the girl Hanim are at the end of the line, each of them holding a pot full of fertilizer in one hand; their hands, brown and thin, move like the pendulum of a clock between the pot and the roots of the maize.

The weather is heavy, overcast; spiders' webs hang between the stalks and stick to forehead and temple; the maize leaves, like pliant knives, scratch at neck and cheek, while the sweat breaks out festeringly on back and under arms.

The boy Hasan is tense: he strikes at the earth, kicks at the stems of weeds that become entangled with the hem of his *galabia* and implant themselves in the sole of his foot.

He is glancing at the girl Hanim all the time. She is slightly withdrawn, looking warily at him. He leans towards her and she moves away sideways, and ever so gradually they put a great distance between themselves and the other children.

The boy Hasan began to breathe more quickly, glancing more often furtively towards her, while her coquettishness deepened in significance and the small handfuls of fertilizer began to fall not exactly on the roots.

The weather became heavier, more overcast. Hasan knocked against a maize stalk; its ear shook, raising a small cloud of pollen whose motes sparkled in the sunlight above the tufts of stalks. Then it sent down a fine rain that stuck to his already wet face and neck, the runnels of sweat bearing the minute beads to his chest and back, while the solution of chemical salt ran from the palm of his hand down his arm and, both hands being soiled, he was unable to scratch his skin that was ablaze with fire.

He moaned. Lowering his head, he rubbed, with the top of his shoulder, at a drop of sweat slowly making its way along the inflamed skin behind his ear. He gazed long at Hanim, breathing heavily, audibly, through his nose, the girl small under his gaze, her face lowered, and the fertilizer falling very far from the roots.

'Hey, Hanim!'

The girl squatted down on her haunches directly she heard the harsh sound of his breathing, planting the palms of her hands in the ground behind her, the pot of fertilizer thrown down at a slant beside her. Her lower jaw hung down and her lips were parted; a lock of dusty hair clung to her moist forehead; her dress was drawn up, revealing her long red underclothes.

Supporting his weight on his knees and hands, the boy Hasan began moving towards the girl Hanim. Her small breasts rose and fell.

Suddenly they heard the overseer's whistle. Quickly they took up the pots and went on placing the small handfuls of fertilizer under the roots.

The weather grew heavier and more overcast. Violently he pulled away a maize leaf that had almost passed through his eyelid and pierced his eye.

He was slightly ahead of Hanim. He looked around him. They were so far from the rest of the children they heard no sound from them.

He turned and found that he had overlooked several plants. He returned to them and gave them fertilizer. Had the overseer seen it he'd have given him a beating.

There were very many plants to be done before they reached the canal and he could cleanse his hands of the chemical salt solution which bit into them like fire, and scoop up water and splash it on to his face and be able to scratch his festering skin.

A grasshopper landed on the back of his neck; its saw-like leg clung to his skin. He placed the pot on the ground and, hunching up his shoulders, moved his neck frenziedly from right to left, his teeth clenched, unable to bring his soiled hand up to his neck lest he set it ablaze. The grasshopper flew off, landing on a stalk, then to another and yet another, heedless of the overseer's whistle.

The only sound to be heard was that of the monotonous repeated movements of their hands between the pot and the maize stalks. Suddenly the boy Hasan froze where he was; the girl Hanim froze too, as though part of him. He leaned forward, inclining his head to one side, listening. There was nothing except for the movement of cicadas; they were completely alone.

Hasan looked round furtively, having forgotten about the pot of fertilizer he was holding up in the air. He stretched out his free hand little by little till he had clasped the girl's hand violently, his eyes exploring between the stalks of maize. Very slowly the girl Hanim flexed her knees, and Hasan too. A long, staccato whispering noise escaped from his lips, and then the two of them were squatting on the ground, their knees joined, their foreheads almost touching. He wanted to stretch out his hand to her, but it was soiled with that chemical salt, and he began to rub it, with quick, violent movements on the ground, to wipe it clean.

Suddenly they heard the overseer's whistle and Hasan rose to his feet. A broken piece of glass must have cut his finger because it was pouring with blood.

The repeated movements of their hands between pot and roots was taken up again. The salt solution trickled down into the wound. Hasan's hand tightened on the pot as he clenched and unclenched his wounded hand.

Hanim was gazing at him apprehensively, her eyes fixed on his back, while her hand moved between the pot and the maize roots.

Blood poured from his finger, his eyes watered, yet he continued to scoop up the fertilizer and place it under the stalks.

After a while there was a gleam of light between the maize stalks, then he found a splotch of sun on the ground and rose to his feet and ran towards the canal to plunge his face into the water.

# My Father Writes to My Mother

by Assia Djebar

*Assia Djebar was born in Algeria in 1936 and educated in Algeria and France. She has used the French language to explore issues of female emancipation and the oppression of women in North Africa. In addition to being a novelist she is also a film-maker. "Three Cloistered Girls" is one chapter from her novel Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade which tells the history of Algeria from the capture of Algiers in 1830 by the French, through to the war of liberation in the 1950's. This national history is interposed with episodes from the childhood of a young Algerian girl.*

Whenever my mother spoke of my father, she, in common with all the women in her town, simply used the personal pronoun in Arabic corresponding to 'him'. Thus, every time she used a verb in the third person singular which didn't have a noun subject, she was naturally referring to her husband. This form of speech was characteristic of every married woman, from fifteen to sixty, with the proviso that in later years, if the husband had undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca, he could be given the title of 'Hajj'.

Everybody, children and adults, especially girls and women, since all important conversations took place among the womenfolk, learnt very quickly to adapt to this rule whereby a husband and wife must never be referred to by name.

After she had been married for a few years, my mother gradually learnt a little French. She was able to exchange a few halting words with the wives of my father's colleagues who had, for the most part, come from France and, like us, lived with their families in the little block of flats set aside for the village teachers.

I don't know exactly when my mother began to say, '*My husband* has come, *my husband* has gone out . . . I'll ask *my husband*,' etc. Although my mother did make rapid progress in the language, in spite of taking it up fairly late in life, I can still hear the evident awkwardness in her voice betrayed by her laboured phraseology, her slow and deliberate enunciation at that time. Nevertheless, I can sense how much it cost her modesty to refer to my father directly in this way.

It was as if a floodgate had opened within her, perhaps in her relationship with her husband. Years later, during the summers we spent in her native town, when chatting in Arabic with her sisters or cousins, my mother would refer to him quite naturally by his first name, even with a touch of superiority. What a daring innovation! Yes, quite unhesitatingly -- I was going to say, unequivocally -- in any case, without any of the usual euphemisms and verbal circumlocutions. When her aunts and elderly female relations were present, she would once more use the traditional formalities, out of respect for them; such freedom of language would have appeared insolent and incongruous to the ears of the pious old ladies.

Years went by. As my mother's ability to speak French improved, while I was still a child of no more than twelve, I came to realize an irrefutable fact: namely that, in the face of all these womenfolk, my parents formed a couple. One thing was an even greater source of pride in me: when my mother referred to any of the day-to-day incidents of our village life -- which in our city relatives' eyes was very backward -- the tall figure of my father -- my childhood hero -- seemed to pop up in the midst of all these women engaged in idle chit-chat on the age-old patios to which they were confined.

My father, no one except my father; none of the other women ever saw fit to refer to their menfolk, their masters who spent the day outside the house and returned home in the evening, taciturn, with eyes on the ground. These nameless uncles, cousins, relatives by marriage, were for us an unidentifiable collection of individuals to all of whom their spouses alluded impartially in the masculine gender.

With the exception of my father . . . My mother, with lowered eyes, would calmly pronounce his name 'Tahar' -- which, I learned very early, meant 'The Pure' -- and even when a suspicion of a smile flickered across the other women's faces or they looked half ill at ease, half indulgent, I thought that a rare distinction lit up my mother's face. These harem conversations ran their imperceptible course: my ears only caught those phrases which singled my mother out above the rest. Because she always made a point of bringing my father's name into these exchanges, he became for me still purer than his given name betokened.

One day something occurred which was a portent that their relationship would never be the same again -- a commonplace enough event in any other society, but which was unusual to say the least with us: in the course of an exceptionally long journey away from home (to a neighbouring

province, I think), my father wrote to my mother -- yes, to my mother! He sent her a postcard, with a short greeting written diagonally across it in his large, legible handwriting, something like 'Best wishes from this distant region' or possibly, 'I am having a good journey and getting to know an unfamiliar region' etc. and he signed it simply with his first name. I am sure that, at the time, he himself would not have dared add any more intimate formula above his signature, such as 'I am thinking of you', or even less, 'Yours affectionately'. But, on the half of the card reserved for the address of the recipient, he had written 'Madame' followed by his own surname, with the possible addition -- but here I'm not sure -- of 'and children', that is to say we three, of whom I, then about ten years old, was the eldest . . . The radical change in customs was apparent for all to see: my father had quite brazenly written his wife's name, in his own handwriting, on a postcard which was going to travel from one town to another, which was going to be exposed to so many masculine eyes, including eventually our village postman -- a Muslim postman to boot -- and, what is more, he had dared to refer to her in the western manner as 'Madame So-and-So . . .', whereas, no local man, poor or rich, ever referred to his wife and children in any other way than by the vague periphrasis: 'the household'.

So, my father had 'written' to my mother. When she visited her family she mentioned this postcard, in the simplest possible words and tone of voice, to be sure. She was about to describe her husband's four or five days' absence from the village, explaining the practical problems this had posed: my father having to order the provisions just before he left, so that the shopkeepers could deliver them every morning; she was going to explain how hard it was for a city woman to be isolated in a village with very young children and cut off in this way . . . But the other women had interrupted, exclaiming, in the face of this new reality, this almost incredible detail:

'He wrote to you, *to you*?'

'He wrote his wife's name and the postman must have read it? Shame! . . .'

'He could at least have addressed the card to his son, for the principle of the thing, even if his son is only seven or eight!'

My mother did not reply. She was probably pleased, flattered even, but she said nothing. Perhaps she was suddenly ill at ease, or blushing from embarrassment; yes, her husband had written to her, in person! . . . The eldest child, the only one who might have been able to read the card, was her daughter: so, daughter or wife, where was the difference as far as the addressee was concerned?

'I must remind you that I've learned to read French now!'

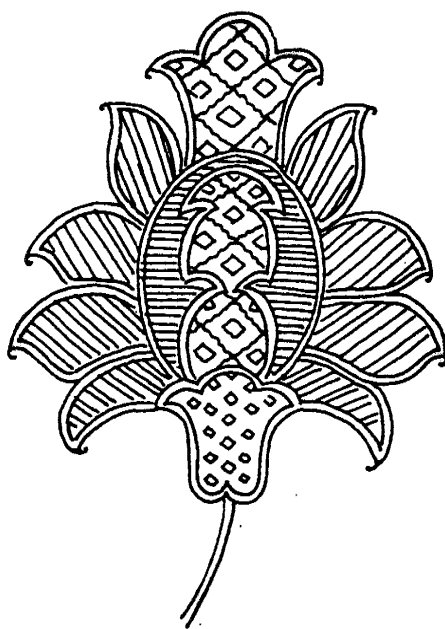
This postcard was, in fact, a most daring manifestation of affection. Her modesty suffered at that very moment that she spoke of it. Yet, it came second to her pride as a wife, which was secretly flattered.

The murmured exchanges of these segregated women struck a faint chord with me, as a little girl with observing eyes. And so, for the first time, I seem to have some intuition of the possible happiness, the mystery in the union of a man and a woman.

My father had dared 'to write' to my mother. Both of them referred to each other by name, which was tantamount to declaring openly their love for each other, my father by writing to her, my mother by quoting my father henceforward without false shame in all her conversations.

# **ARE YOU LISTENING? VOICES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST**

## **Student Activities**





# The Assassination of Light at the River's Flow

by Khariyah Ibrahim as-Saqqaf

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. The opening lines of this story appear very poetic. After reading the story, interpret these lines as a reflection of the story:  
*The distance between moves was the bridge between my heart and theirs, between my soul and theirs. As I saw the bridge destroyed, movement collided with empty space.*
- b. Is there a villain in this story? Justify your answer.
- c. Explain the title of the story as it applies to the events, the plot and the character of Raha.
- d. Had Raha's parents misled her? What were Raha's expectations? What were her parents' expectations?
- e. Why does the author use hyperbole in writing this story? Is this style effective? Why or why not? Give examples from the text.
- f. Reflecting on her childhood, Raha pleasantly remembers her mother brushing her hair, "calling it the waves and ripples of a beautiful deep black river." After being beaten by her mother, however, Raha declares, "I don't know in what wave I drowned". Based on these quotes from the story, discuss the changing relationship between mother and daughter.
- g. Contrast the mother and daughter's perspective on the marriage using sentences from the story.
- h. Raha's family is demanding that she conform to traditional expectations. Do you think that Raha is obliged to fulfill family expectations or is too much asked of her? What does your family expect you to do as part of a family?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Research marriage customs and practices in Saudi Arabia? Does Raha's situation compare to established traditions? Write a brief report with your personal reactions to such marriages.
- b. Describe a situation (factual or fictitious) in which your dreams or expectations were different from your parents. Write it in the form of an essay, a script for a one act play, a song or a poem.
- c. Research higher education for girls in Saudi Arabia and summarize your findings.
- e. What is the legal definition of child abuse in the United States? Try to find legal definitions of child abuse in Middle Eastern countries. Compare the two definitions and discuss the cultural traditions that might be responsible for any differences.

## 3. For more information on:

- a. Education of women in Saudi Arabia  
see *Patriarchy*
- b. Arranged marriages      see *Marriage, arranged*





# Don't You Have Any Donkeys in Your Country?

by Aziz Nessim

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. What is a stereotype? In what ways do the characters in this story represent stereotypes?
- b. What phrase does the American repeat several times? What is the importance of this repetition as a literary device?
- c. Discuss the three characters in the story:

The American: In what way does he change in the story? How does he respond to being outwitted; does this surprise you?

The Guide: Why does he feel so ashamed at the opening and closing of the story? What is the nature of his relationship with the American rug dealer?

The Peasant: In what ways was he innocent or not so innocent in his dealings? Would you call him an honest man; justify your reason?

- d. This story employs a plot formulation known as 'the deceiver is deceived'. What does it mean and how does it fit the plot? Do you know any folktales or fairy tales that use this type of plot?
- e. What is the situation of the rug dealer compared to that of the donkey owner? In a global economy how do you think Turkey rates by comparison with the US? Discuss this 'global inequity' and how it might impact individual transactions between people from different countries.

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Turkey is rich in ancient ruins and antiquities, many of which now exist in museums in Europe and the United States. Countries like Turkey and Greece are trying to retrieve them. In pairs, read up on recent demands made to the British Museum in London or the Metropolitan Museum in New York City and prepare a paper representing both sides of the argument that a country's antiquities should be returned to the country from which they were taken, whether they were purchased or stolen. Give your report in the form of a debate and afterwards, vote on which side the class stands.
- b. Report on the advantages and disadvantages of tourism for a nation. Choose a country with a high tourism rate but economically underdeveloped. Consider its effect on the economics, politics and life of the average person.
- c. Prepare this story as a skit for the classroom using the original dialogue from the story. Perform it as a shadow puppet show, writing the script, making the puppets and drawing the background scenery.
- d. Imagine yourself as the American telling the story of your 2,500 lira stake to your friends at home, or as the peasant regaling his story to friends in the coffee house later that night.
- e. Using bar graphs, compare the economic disparities between Turkey, the U.S. and three other Middle East countries in the following areas:
  - per capita income
  - Gross national products
  - populationDiscuss possible connections between these factors.

- f. On graph paper, design and color a rug using geometrical or floral patterns. There are many books on the subject for inspiration. As a class visit an oriental rug store, they are usually very interested in talking to students about the origin of a rug, its design and pattern.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. How to put on a puppet show  
see *Shadow plays*
- b. Return of antiquities  
see *Museum web sites*
- c. Global economic statistics  
see *Country web sites*

# Egyptian Childhood

by Taha Hussein

These first three chapters, excerpted from the author's autobiography, tell about a child's realization that he is different from his brothers and sisters.

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. The childhood memory of the fence is still "clear and distinct" to the author. What does he recollect about the fence and how might this be interpreted symbolically?
- b. What are some examples from the text of how the boy uses his senses to realize his surroundings?
- c. Often at sunset when the boy went outside he would hear the voice of a poet reciting. How do the villagers react to the poetry? Do we have any similar communal activities? Describe the similarities and differences between this form of popular entertainment in the Middle East and communal entertainment with which you are familiar?
- d. What is the pre-bedtime ritual that causes so much grief to the boy and why does it?
- e. What are the boy's night times like? Do you have similar memories from your early childhood? How does the boy handle his fears? How did you?
- f. As you read about the boy's family what kind of picture is built up in your mind of their home and the way they relate as a family?
- g. What are some of the incidents in the story that seem universal to childhood? Are there any that you can relate to from your own experiences?
- h. How does the author come to realize that he is blind?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Illustrate in a drawing or collage the boy's night fears.
- b. Research the causes of and treatment for blindness in the last one hundred years. Try to find material that deals with the subject in less technologically developed countries such as Egypt.
- c. Develop a program in which students may use any **one** of the senses, except sight (hearing, smelling, touch, taste) to identify five selected objects. Present the program to the class and have each student describe the objects through the use of their particular sense. Discuss the idea of how different perceptions are formed.
- d. Research and report on the importance of poetry in the Arab world.
- e. One of the poems recited was about Abu Zaid. Read the background notes on this literary character. Select several verses (at least 4 lines) and write your interpretation of them and your reaction to them. You might choose to recite them to the class for their reactions.
- f. Choose one scene from the memoir and illustrate in a medium of your choice; art, poetry, dialogue, music etc.
- g. The boy's father begins each day with ablutions, prayer and reading the Quran. Write a brief report on the religion of Islam explaining the importance of the Quran and the rituals of prayer.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. Poetry and oral recitation  
See *Oral Tradition of Literature in the Middle East*  
*Abu Zaid*
- b. First and second wives  
See *Polygamy*
- c. Prayer and ablutions  
See *Islam*
- d. The Quran  
see *Quran*

# The Errand

by Youssef Idris

## 1. Questions to Think About:

- a. What responsibilities must El Shabrawi assume in accompanying Zebeida? What rewards does he receive? In what ways is Zebeida the means to an end for El Shabrawi?
- b. El Shabrawi's emotions run the gamut from pity to hatred. Trace the changing emotions of El Shabrawi over the course of his journey from the village to the asylum. How do the other passengers on the train react when they realize that Zebeida is insane?
- c. The events in this story depict a typical attitude toward mental illness. How would you characterize this attitude? Has the perception and treatment of mental illness changed since the time of the story? What erroneous concepts about mental illness have existed throughout history?
- d. What image does Idris give us of the Sayyeda Zeinab Mosque? How does he describe the atmosphere and people at the shrine? What surprising effect does all this eventually have on El Shabrawi?
- e. Which of Zebeida's behaviors resemble those of the title character in the film "Rain Man?" What lessons can we learn about dealing with the mentally ill from both these stories?
- f. How would you have acted in El Shabrawi's place? What could he have done to make Zebeida's journey less traumatic for both of them?
- g. The trip to Cairo was a great disappointment for El Shabrawi because he was unable to carry out any of his pleasurable plans. Describe a situation in which you had great expectations but were disappointed or disillusioned. What did you learn from this experience?

## 2. Student Activities:

- a. Oliver Sacks, a psychologist, has written several books on various forms of mental illness. Read The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat And Other Clinical Tales and choose three of the cases to write a report on. In your report include: a summary of the case; the author's treatment of the patient; and your reaction to the story, relating it to "The Errand."
- b. Call your local community health agency and compile a list of resources available for people suffering from mental illness.
- c. The theme of Cairo as "the big city" appears frequently in Egyptian literature. Research Cairo as the Hollywood of the Arab World and make a list of Cairo's major tourist attractions.

## 3. For more information on:

- a. King see *Farouk, king of Egypt*



# Fragments of Memory: A Story of a Syrian Family

by Hanna Mina

## 1. Questions for Discussion:

- a. What are the effects of poverty upon the children, the mother and the father in this story?
- b. Compare the charity given by the *fellahin* and that provided by the people at the Saint's Tomb. Which would you be more comfortable with?
- c. What do you think might be the cause of the mother's sickness? What evidence do you have for your idea? Why does the mother seem to recover?
- d. Why do you think the women whom the neighbor talks to at the Shrine are called "crows"?
- e. What do you think should be the role of a community in caring for the homeless among them? Should authorities be responsible or should help come from volunteers?
- f. What is the cost of begging for the children. How has begging affected the other beggars at the Shrine?
- g. How is the definition of family expanded by this story?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Charity or *zakat* is an important precept of Islam. Research what one is expected to give, according to the Quran, and how this is managed in modern Arabic countries.
- b. Based on your reading of the story, what Islamic codes seem to guide community members and, at the same time, provide support for the mother's faith? How do these codes and beliefs compare with those of other faiths? Research Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist religious texts, and write a report on the similarities/differences between Islamic beliefs on charity and those of one other religion. Discuss in your report how cultural traditions may influence codes of charity.
- c. Investigate the veneration of Islamic 'saints' in the Middle East. How does a person become a saint or holy person in Islam? How is this different or similar from the way saints are selected in Catholicism? Write a report including examples from the lives of a Muslim holy person and a Roman Catholic saint.
- d. Illustrate a meaningful scene from the story such as the family living under the fig tree.
- e. Choosing one character from the story, write a soliloquy interpreting how your character feels about his/her situation. Try to have a soliloquy for each of the characters in the story. Perform these in the classroom and ask your classmates if they agree with the interpretations, and if not, why not?
- f. Design a community or school service project or find an existing one in which you assist someone with a definite need. (It might be a one time project or an ongoing one). For example, work in a "soup kitchen," help an elderly or disabled person with a physical task, join the literacy project through your local public library or school and help others to learn to read and learn English as a second language, participate in a local Habitat for Humanity project, and so forth. Keep a journal describing your feelings about the project and what you learned about yourself and what you learned about those you helped.

- g. In many American towns, companies employing the majority of working people in that town are moving to other states or countries where goods can be produced less expensively. Working in pairs, or small groups, research the effect this has on a town's economy and on the employees involved. Compare the situation of a laid off worker in the United States with the Syrian father in this story. Using this information, prepare a debate on the subject with one or more students representing the employer's viewpoint, and an equal number speaking for the town management and the employees who lost their livelihood.
- h. Following the same instructions as above, choose a town or city whose economy was affected by the 19th century Industrial Revolution in the United States or in England. Compare this event with the decline of the silk industry in Syria.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. People dependent on one economy such as silk farming in Syria  
*see Silk industry*
- b. Charity to the poor in Islam  
*see Islam: five pillars*
- c. Saints and shrines in the Islamic Middle East  
*see Islam: saints*



# Gowhartaj's Father

by Mahmud Kiyanush

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. What are the concerns of Gowhar and her mother as they prepare for Mrs. Razavi's visit? Did they have cause to worry? Why?
- b. The story is entitled *Gowhartaj's Father*, why? Describe the father's relationship with Gowhar. What is your opinion of him as a father. Give evidence from the text to support your opinion.
- c. Quote passages from the story indicating how Gowhar's parents feel about each other. Would you call this a good or a bad marriage? Explain your answer.
- d. What do we learn from the story about Mrs. Razavi and her son Manuchehr Khan? In what ways do they differ from Gowhar's family. Do you think a marriage between Gowhar and Mrs. Razavi's son would be successful?
- e. How is the conflict between tradition and change reflected in the story?
- f. Gowhar's father says at the end of the story: "I knew from the first this was no use. Let them say what they want. Honesty is the best policy." How does this quote capture the essence of the story?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Dramatize in two scenes the actions of the family before the meeting, and during the visit of Mrs. Razavi. Present your skit to the class.
- b. Proverbs are common in all cultures. Explain the meaning of "tie the donkey where the owner wants" and write a report on the history of proverbs. Choose five proverbs from any culture that express something you believe to be true. In an oral report ask the class to give the meaning of the proverbs you have chosen.
- c. Research the importance of the Iraqi town of Karbala in Shia Islam.
- d. Write two different endings for the story that remain true to the author's characterization of the individuals.

## 3. For more information on:

- a. Marriage in Islam  
see *Marriage, between kin*  
see *Marriage, arranged*  
see *Women and family*
- b. Pilgrimages in Islam  
see *Islam, Pilgrimages*
- c. Islamic dress for women  
see *Veil*



# Me and My Sister

by Alifa Rifa'a

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. What is troubling the mother in the story and how does this affect the family?
- b. What does Dalal's behavior toward her sister over the copy book reveal about Egypt's legacy of colonialism?
- c. In this family with no authority figure, what and whose rules are the daughters guided by? What evidence do you find in the story of family structure or role models that influenced the behavior of the girls?
- d. What are the sources of conflict, both explicit and implicit that make for dramatic tension in the story?
- f. In what way is this an urban story? Would it be different if it took place in a country village?
- g. How do you think the younger sister is changed by her experiences?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Describe Mahmoud using the clues in the story and compare him to someone you know.
- b. Retell the story from another character's point of view.
- c. Write a dialogue in which the narrator confides in her sister Nagwa.
- d. Give examples of sibling rivalry in the story. Are they similar to the behavior of siblings in your family or in the family of someone you know personally? If not, how do they differ? Discuss how different cultures influence behavior within a family.
- e. Polygamy in Islam is legal but no longer a common practice. Compare the consequences of polygamy with those of divorce and subsequent marriages.
- f. Research Queen Hatshepsut and her achievements. In her formal portrait, why is Queen Hatshepsut shown with a beard? Discuss relationship between image and power; consider how men and women "dress for success" in America today.

## 3. For more information on:

- a. Dating customs  
See *Courtship and premarital sexual relations*
- b. Marriage to more than one wife  
See *Polygamy*
- c. Education and language under colonialism, and as an independent country  
see *Education and language, Egypt*  
see *Dual language System*



# Memed My Hawk

by Mustafa Kemal

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. What leads Memed to flee from his home and the community to which he belonged?
- b. Describe the obstacles, both real and imaginary, that he meets during his flight. What consolations does he find along the way?
- c. What does the old man mean when he describes Memed as “Allah’s guest”?
- d. What significance does Dursun’s village have in Memed plans for the future?
- e. Memed looks forward to being a goatherd for Suleyman, but what shadow lies over this life?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Sketch a scene from the story based on details given by the author.
- b. Abdi Agha is the village landowner in this story. Research the position of the headman in a Turkish village of the Ottoman Empire.
- c. Using a comic strip format illustrate the story of Memed’s flight and his arrival at Suleyman’s home.
- d. Write two different endings to the story; one in which Memed stays with Suleyman’s family, and one in which he decides to move on.
- e. Newspaper and magazine articles have been written about places in the world where young people are kept in forms of slavery and can not free themselves. Research this subject and make a report to your class. Use a periodical or newspaper index, or search the internet. (suggestions: *child slavery* or *human rights children*).
- f. Memed feels like an outsider when he first wanders the village streets. Using a book you have read that tells the story of a newcomer to town, write a paragraph comparing the two experiences. (You may tell your own story if you have been a ‘newcomer’).

## 3. For more information on:

- a. Turkey during the time of this story  
see *Ottoman Anatolia*.  
see *Turkey, history*
- b. The geography of the region  
see *Taurus mountains in Turkey*
- c. Folklore  
see *Turkey, folklore*



# Midaq Alley

by Naguib Mahfouz

## 1. Questions to Think About:

- a. Compare the appearance and personalities of Mrs. Afify and Umm Hamida. In what ways are they well matched? Give evidence from the text for your judgments.
- b. Describe ways in which Mrs. Afify and Umm Hamida work the system to their advantage while managing to save face.
- c. How does Umm Hamida use religion to increase her successful matchmaking business?
- d. What is the "implied warranty" offered by Umm Hamida to Mrs. Afify? What other traits of a successful business person can you find in Umm Hamida?
- e. The French have an expression for the type of literary resolution found in this story, 'le trompeur trompé' or 'the deceiver deceived'. Explain how this expression applies to the outcome of the story.
- f. Describe Mrs. Afify's and Umm Hamida's bargaining tactics. How do they compare with the basic principles and techniques of successful negotiating and mediation or conflict resolution? How would you rate Mrs. Afify? Umm Hamida?
- g. Find examples of Naguib Mahfouz's use of humor and satire in this story.
- h. How can Umm Hamida be considered the official chronicler of Midaq Alley? How does Midaq Alley function as a small, self-sufficient community within the macrocosm of Cairo?
- i. The traditional character of the Matchmaker appears frequently in literature. Based on other matchmakers you know from books or movies, compare them to Umm Hamida. How are matches made in the United States?
- j. Is Mrs. Afify at a disadvantage in the community in not having a husband's or another male relative's support? Give examples of your reasoning from the text.

## 2. Student Activities:

- a. Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Research his accomplishments that merited this award.
- b. Draw a sketch of one of the women based on Mahfouz's precise description.
- c. Write a physical and psychological profile of the young husband chosen by Umm Hamida for Mrs. Afify, then write a 'personal' advertisement for a newspaper.
- d. Both women say one thing while thinking the opposite, so in reality there are four characters in this story. Write lists of each character's statements and corresponding ironic thoughts. Based on these four lists of statements and thoughts, compose a skit for four actors, two to speak what Mrs. Afify and Umm Hamida actually say, and two to speak what they are thinking.

- e. Explain the proverb, "You don't break a fast by eating an onion." Is there an English equivalent? Look up five additional proverbs and try to find their English equivalents.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. Inheritance laws in Islam  
see *Inheritance laws*
- b. Women's dress  
see Veil.
- c. Widowhood.  
see *Women and family*.  
see *Patriarchy*



# Miracles for Sale

by Tewfik Al-Hakim

## 1. Questions to Think About:

- a. Several images and themes in this story appear to be inspired by Bible stories. Find at least three images or statements from the story and explain the biblical origin of each.
- b. Once we are aware that the priest is a victim of a hoax, it becomes clear that almost everything the criminals had said to him was exaggerated and obsequious. Does this show a lack of humility or extreme gullibility on the part of the priest? Give evidence from the text to support your opinion.
- c. What inferences can we make about the life of the priest before the kidnapping? Does the author imply any criticism of this priest or of the clergy in general?
- f. Was there any point in the story when the priest should have questioned the integrity of his captors? Why do you think the episode you choose is so crucial? Describe a practical joke in which you were the victim. At what point did you become aware of the hoax?
- g. In every culture there are individuals and groups who become the subject of apocryphal stories. Choose one such individual or group from your readings and retell an outlandish story associated with him or them.
- h. What people skills can we learn from the wily criminals who duped the priest for nine days? Are these skills effective in the business world? Make a list of "rules for success" derived from the story which could be applied to business or school.

## 2. Student Activities:

- a. Research a location such as Fatima, Lourdes, Medjugorje, etc. where miracles have been documented, and report on the origin of the site. Check your local library to see the most recent miracles or cures associated with the shrine.
- b. Read Dr. Bernie Siegal's Love, Medicine, and Miracles. Summarize for the class what Dr. Siegal has to say about healing and the mind-body connection.
- c. Interview someone who works in a hospital or hospice to find out that person's interpretation and experiences with healing and the limits of science.
- d. The priest must have been a good man to be so beloved by his congregation. Think of two people you respect most (either real or fictional) and make a list of the qualities you admire in each person. Write a brief report about each person explaining your choice. List on the blackboard the qualities that students have selected and discuss the choices.

## 3. For more information on:

- a. Christians in Egypt  
see *Copts of Egypt*
- b. Miracles and Islam  
see *Islam, Saints*



## **My Father Writes to my Mother** by Assia Djebar

### **1. Questions to think about:**

- a. Explain the significance of this simple title? Think of some other titles the author might have used?
- b. Describe what led the mother to adopt a familiar way of speaking to her husband?
- c. Are there, or were there ever, differences between the way one addresses/addressed People in the United States?
- d. Why do you think tradition discourages men and women from referring to their spouses by their first names? What was the reaction of the village women to the narrator's mother breaking this tradition?
- e. Based on the text list rules of traditional etiquette for someone visiting in a traditional Algerian village.
- f. Find passages in the story that are indications of this society being 'male oriented'?
- g. Why is this a powerful love story for the daughter?

### **2. Student activities:**

- a. Assuming the personality of the narrator's mother, write a letter to your husband Tahar expressing your feelings about your visit with relatives in the village.
- b. Research the segregation customs between men and women in the Middle East. Discuss positive and negative aspects of the tradition and justify your answers.
- c. Research the woman's movement in Algeria. Report your findings with suggestions for improvements based on what you know about Algerian society from the story and your research. Include information on how the prolonged internal strife is affecting the women's movement in Algeria?
- d. Choose a language with which you are familiar and list any differences between the way one addresses family, friends, work mates or strangers? Between people of different ages? (If you do not know another language, interview a friend or neighbor who does.) Discuss this issue and what it indicates about these cultures or traditions?

### **3. For more information on:**

- a. Restrictions on women  
see *Women and family*  
see *Patriarchy*
- b. Title of respect  
see *Names*
- c. Women's movements in the Middle East  
see *Women's activism*



**My Mother**  
**My Life Story: The Autobiography of a Berber Woman**  
**by Fadhma Amrouche**

**1. Questions to Think About:**

- a. The narrator's mother believed that her husband had been cursed. What was the reason for her belief? What does this say about the society in which Fadhma was raised?
- b. What can you learn about the cultural setting of the story from this statement: "He was not to see the figs ripen, nor the grapes." How might this be phrased in your culture?
- c. Describe your reaction to the uncle's repudiation of his sister Aini. Would you have acted differently if you had been in Aini's place? What justification can you see for the uncle's deed?
- d. Fadhma showed some of her mother's personality traits at a very early age? Give several examples from the text of Aini's character and personality. How did you feel about the way she was treated by her relatives and the community? Talk about this in the context of the culture of the people.
- e. After fighting for three years for a recognition of paternity, Aini attempts to drown her daughter. Why?
- f. What does the White Sisters' punishment of Fadhma tell you about their tactics for motivating children to learn? Contrast this with the way you have been motivated to learn.
- g. How do Aini and her mother manage to circumvent the brother's denial of Aini? This gender division reflects two parallel societies. Identify and describe any ways in which we maintain two parallel societies based on gender in the United States?
- h. "The tattooing on my chin is worth more than a man's beard." Explain how this quote epitomizes Aini's personality.
- i. What do Fadhma and Aini teach us about ways to survive ?

**2. Student Activities:**

- a. What are the effects of French Imperialism on the lives of these two women? Based on this information, list positive and negative aspects of Imperialism.
- b. This excerpt presents Aini, the mother of Fadhma, as frequently alone in a man's world. Yet she has a strong will to succeed and protect her children. Write a profile of Aini for an article in a feminist magazine, comparing her with one or more American women who have faced great adversities.
- c. Research the crops produced in the Maghreb (North Africa) for export to the United States. Visit a market to find samples of these products. Using these foods, prepare a simple meal for your class or your family to sample.
- d. Research funeral traditions in North Africa. Explain ways in which these customs serve

grieving members of the family and the community. How do they compare with funeral customs with which you are familiar?

- e. Write a report on the history of tattooing? Compare the uses of tattooing in North Africa with the recent interest in this activity in our culture.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. Women and marriage  
see *Arranged marriages*  
see *Polygamy*  
see *Inheritance laws*  
see *Widowhood.*  
see *Women and family.*
- b. Berbers  
see *Berbers in Algeria*
- c. Sexual mores  
see *Courtship and premarital sex*  
see *Extramarital sex relations*
- d. Family relationships  
see *Extended family*
- e. Education  
see *White Sisters of Africa.*
- f. European Imperialism  
see *Colonialism*

# The Name

by Aharon Megged

## 1. Questions for discussion:

- a. This is a story about continuity between generations. Name the members of each generation of Grandfather Zisskind's family represented in the story. What is the position of each person on the role of memory? Does anyone's position change? Why? What is the role of Mendele?
- b. How did Raya attempt to bridge the generation gap between her and her grandfather? What qualities does she admire? Why do Raya and her grandfather never achieve an understanding? Do you have a relationship with your own grandparents? Do your grandparents or other elderly relatives try to connect with you? Were these connections a success or a failure?
- c. In discussing the child's name,  
  
Yehuda responds, *Crazy. The child would be unhappy all his life.*  
  
and Raya says, *Do you want me to hate my child? I am not ready to sacrifice my child's happiness.*  
  
Why do Yehuda and Raya say what they do? How important do you think a name is to the life of a person? What names do you think might help insure success in life? Which names could be a handicap? Would you change your name if you could; if so, to what?
- d. Do you agree with Raya and Yehuda's decision on a name for the child? Why or why not? Can you think of a possible compromise and would it have been acceptable to all? Is the popularity of a name more significant than family tradition? Do you have a family name; if so, what is the importance of that name to your family and to you? Explain whether you plan to use the name for your children
- e. What is the relationship between memory and hope for Grandfather Zisskind? Do you know any older people who have "seemingly lost their memories"? If so, are you aware of any apparent connections that help restore memories?
- f. Grandfather Zisskind can be considered to be eccentric. Give examples of his bizarre behaviour. What clues in the story explain the reasons for his rituals?
- g. This story is a personalization of the tragedy of the Holocaust. What do you know of the Holocaust? Rachel says: "I don't know . . . at times it seems to me that it's not Grandfather who's suffering from loss of memory, but ourselves. All of us." What does she mean? Should memories of the Holocaust be kept alive? Why or why not?
- h. Grandfather Zisskind, born in the Diaspora, and Raya born in Israel, have different philosophies about dealing with the past which are symbolized in the conflict over the name of the baby. What is the conflict really about?
- i. Everyone in this family loses at the end of this story. Explain how the tragedy of Mendele reaches through the generations to Raya's son, Ehud.

**2. Student activities:**

- a. Research the customs of naming children among Jews in the Diaspora and in Israel. Are they different or similar? What influences act upon the choice of names? Compare these traditions of naming to those in the Arab world, your own family, or other cultures or religions.
- b. In a book of names try to find Israeli, Arabic and American names which commemorate an historical event or period, or which seem to reflect the religious beliefs or the hopes of the parents. Make a list of these and print them in a booklet with notes on the event or explanations of the religious meaning. Ask students in your class about their names and if they are derived from an historical event or religious base. With the student's permission, add these to the booklet. If they wish, let them include the names of anyone in the family which fit these categories. This booklet can be prepared on a word processor and with illustrations included, can become an attractive class project (as well as a fascinating lesson on world cultures).
- c. Hebrew was a language which, by the 20th century, had practically ceased as a spoken tongue and was used almost exclusively for religious liturgy. Research and report on the rebirth of modern Hebrew.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. Emigration to Israel  
*see Israel, History*
- b. The Holocaust  
*See Israel, history*
- c. Jewish customs of naming  
*See Names*



# The Night of the Festival

by Fawzi el Milady

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. How does the story portray the difference between individually based decisions and family or community based ones? Which style of decision making is more common in the United States?
- b. What literary devices does the author use to build suspense: for example forecasting, anticipation of joy etc. Give illustrations from the text.
- c. What are the conflicts that might result from rural to urban migration?
- d. What are Mounir's responsibilities to his family as the eldest son? What are they in the United States? Does it vary according to one's culture or religious traditions?
- e. What do you think has caused the misperceptions between Mounir and his family? Discuss what the possible future relationships might be between Mounir and his wife and the two families.
- f. How does the anticipation of the feast day contribute to the irony and/or tragedy of the outcome of the story?
- g. What is the significance of the girls' final act? Does this ending affect the story in any way?
- h. This story deals with people who practice the Islamic faith. Are there any similarities to your religious tradition? A *muezzin* beckons Muslims to prayer, are there other ways that you are familiar with that call people to worship? Does your religious practice include ablutions? The woman in the story *ululates*; how do you express your emotions? Are there short prayers in your religion that are repeated frequently like the *fatiha* ?

## 2. Student Activities

- a. Choose a character in the story and, imagining that you are this character, write in your diary an account of the evening's events. Express your true feelings about what happened.
- b. Write a profile of one of the characters describing his or her personality. Justify what you have written with evidence from the text of the story.
- c. Write and act out a scenario between two or more of the people in the book. Perhaps you can show Mounir returning home on a visit with his new bride, or the father telling his brother Mounir is married.
- d. Research marriage customs within your own family, asking parents or grandparents, or people you know who come from a different society than yours.
- e. Give a report on one of the following religious festivals or holy days discussing what the holiday is celebrating and if there are similarities to the celebration at the end of Ramadan?

Holi (Hindu)	Yom Kippur (Jewish)
Divali (Hindu)	Vesak (Buddhist)
Lailat al-Qadr (Muslim)	Epiphany (Christian)
Magha Puja (Buddhist)	Sukkot (Jewish)
Ashura (Muslim)	Shrove Tuesday (Christian)

- f. Choose five holidays from different traditions and look up the dates of these holidays for the last three years on a Gregorian calendar. Are they determined by a lunar or solar calendar?
- g. Naming a child gives the child a sense of identity, a belonging to someone. From the story you have learned something about Arab names. Consider your names and, if you don't already know what they mean, ask your parents about them or look them up in the library. Make a list of the last names on both sides of your family and try to find out their meanings, and the country in which they originated.
- h. For an art project, design a "family tree". Your public library has many books with a variety of ways this can be done.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. Calendars of the Muslim, Jewish and Christian religions  
see *Calendar*
- b. Ramadan and other Muslim holidays  
see *Islam, Festivals*
- c. The Islamic religion  
see *Islam*
- d. Family traditions in Egypt  
see *Women and family*  
see *Extended family*  
see *Patriarchy*
- e. Arranged marriages  
see *Marriage, arranged*  
see *Marriage, between kin*

# The Shame

by Youssef Idris

## 1. Questions to Think About:

- a. In many ways Fatma and Gharib are celebrities on the farm. Explain what is so appealing about each of these characters, which physical and psychological traits give them universal appeal as hero and heroine.
- b. According to tradition, it is incumbent on Farag to protect his family's honor. List ways in which Farag is able to do so. Explain why Farag doesn't accept Gharib's proposal of marriage to Fatma. Would you find it difficult having Fatma for a sister or Gharib for a brother? Explain why.
- c. Explain the Egyptian villagers' concept of honor and shame. What is hypocritical in their attitude? What social codes about shame and honor are predominant in your community?
- d. In your opinion, in what ways can Fatma and Gharib be held accountable for their reputations? How would they both have had an easier life in Cairo than on the farm?
- e. To some extent the concept of "innocent until proven guilty" is not observed by the villagers or by Farag or Abdoun (Gharib's father). Find evidence in the story that assumptions are made and that both young people are punished even after they had been vindicated. How do you react to these punishments?
- f. What are the roles of Fatma's brother? of Gharib's father? of Um George? of the community? How well do they fulfill these roles?
- g. How does the title "The Shame" influence the way the reader interprets the events in the story?
- h. Is the author positive or negative about life on the farm? Give evidence from the text to support your opinion.
- i. In describing Gharib, the author writes,

*He couldn't help it if his look unsettled them. A woman knew when he looked at her that way that he divined her thoughts, and if her thoughts were dwelling on The Shame, which more often than not was the case, she would realize that he was stripping her with his eyes and she would get so confused trying to cover herself up that her defenses would weaken and she could not help but succumb.*

Based on this quotation, state ways in which Idris implicitly criticizes or agrees with stereotypes of male or female sexuality. Find other passages in the text to support your opinion.

- j. At the conclusion of the story, to whom does Fatma turn for friendship? What are her reasons for doing so?

**2. Student Activities:**

- a. Work with a partner compiling a list of ways your life would have been different had you been born the opposite sex. Discuss with your partner the advantages and disadvantages of being male/female.
- b. Based on the descriptions and details in the text, draw a sketch of Farag or Gharib. Or write a poem expressing Fatma's or Gharib's feelings.
- c. The examination by Um George is just a little more advanced than the ancient concept of "trial by ordeal." Research the concept of "trial by ordeal" or the Spanish Inquisition's "Auto da Fe". Report to the class on your findings.
- d. Compare this story with the Nathaniel Hawthorne novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Write an essay drawing parallels between the heroines of both stories.
- e. Interview two adults from your parents' or grandparents' generation about the ethical code that guided their social behavior. Compare their responses with today's standards.
- f. Dramatize an interview in which Fatma states her opinion of her community and her perceptions of life after her loss of innocence.
- g. You are an advocate appointed to investigate accusations against Farag for beating his sister. Write a list of accusations and deposition questions to Gharib's wife in order to gather evidence for your case.
- h. Find the guidelines for modesty in the Quran, and research varying interpretations of these guidelines in the Middle East today. Prepare a defense for Fatma based on your readings.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. Egyptian Christians  
see *Copts of Egypt*
- b. Sexual mores  
see *Courtship and premarital sex*.
- c. Male responsibilities  
see *Patriarchy*
- d. The woman's role in Egyptian society  
see *Women and family*

# Three Cloistered Girls

By Assia Djebar

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. What does being cloistered mean in the story? Can you be cloistered without being physically confined? Are any women cloistered in the U.S.?
- b. What are the roles of the women in this extended household? How do they compare to the roles of women in your family?
- c. What is the symbolism of the old crone squatting all day in a dark room?
- d. Why do you think the narrator feels “ambiguous unease” about the eldest sister’s teasing her?
- e. American girls often have pen pals. Why is this such a secret and dangerous activity for these sisters to be doing?
- f. Is there a double standard in the lives of males and females in this story? Justify your answer with incidents from the story.
- g. By concealing their pen pal activity the sisters are being deceptive. What are some other deceptions in this story?
- h. What is the importance of language in the story? In what way is it used by the girls as a means of either empowerment or escape. Comment on written and verbal use of language by other characters.
- i. What does the narrator mean when she says that while lying in the same bed in which the senile crone had slept before her death, she imagined written words “...about to twine invisible snares around our adolescent bodies.” ?
- j. In the story there is threatened violence, “...we were in daily terror” of the brother’s unpredictable temper. Confronting stereotypes of women in the Middle East, how are women protected as well as threatened by proscribed community standards?
- k. In what ways is this a coming of age story for the narrator?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Write two diary entries; first, as the narrator describing opening the brother’s cupboard, and second, as the brother when he realizes what the girls discovered.
- b. Have the girls in the class compose a brief letter to a pen pal for each of the two sisters; have the boys answer them. Be careful to stay in the time of the story and in harmony with its accepted values.
- c. These cloistered girls will be expected to marry strangers selected by their family and then to love and obey them. In small groups discuss your ideas on love, marital expectations and arranged marriages. Prepare a debate on the issue of arranged marriages vs marriage by choice without family input.

- d. Develop a portrait of one of the characters in the story using biographical details, motives for action, understanding of events etc. Imagine the future life of the character and have another student interview him/her.
- e. Look for pictures and descriptions of Arab homes, past and modern. In what way might some of them accommodate the extended family and the segregation of women? Illustrate your response by drawing a floor plan of a “traditional” home.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. Many family members living together  
See: *Extended family in the Middle East*
- b. Male dominance in Arab society  
See: *Patriarchy*
- c. Male and female relationships before marriage  
See: *Courtship and premarital sexual relations*
- d. Algeria’s historical relationship with France  
See: *Algeria and women’s rights*

# The Two Pennies

By Albert Memmi

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. Why is language a complication for the narrator? How are students in America faced with similar problems?
- b. Is there a “spell of language”, a power in the written or spoken word? Use examples from the story and from personal experiences.
- c. Where in the story do you see a Western influence and what is its effect?
- d. Have you ever entered a contest similar to the Nestle’s? With what results?
- e. In what way does the family show the effect of poverty on family relations?
- f. How did the loan of the two pennies contribute to the narrator’s awareness of the relationship between rich and poor?
- g. What is ironic about Saul’s actions over the chocolate and cards?
- h. Compare the narrator’s worries about the first day in a new school with your experience.

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Write a monologue in which Birdie trains his son to carry on with his job.
- b. Discuss what it means to be a member of a minority group? Consider all the possibilities: racial; religious; ethnic; intellectual; physical. How do you think the author accepts his minority status?
- c. Food is an important part of a nation’s culture. What food does the narrator mention here and why? List ten of your favorite foods and identify where they are from.
- d. Imagine that Graziani the gateman witnessed the transaction between the boys and have him describe it to his wife that night.
- e. Interview fellow students or friends whose first language is not English. What problems did they face in learning English as a second language?

## 3. For more information on:

- a. Western products sold overseas  
See *Economics, global marketing*
- b. Jews in North Africa  
See *Jews of North Africa* North Africa
- c. Languages in North Africa  
See *Dual language system*





# The Whistle

by Abdul Kassem

**1. Questions to think about:**

- a. Hasan and Hanim must overcome both natural and man-made obstacles in order to survive. Describe these obstacles and the ways the resourceful children find to adapt in their everyday life.
- b. "Hey, Hanim!" is the only verbal communication in the story; yet the children are able to get messages across in other ways. Find examples from the text of the eloquent communication between Hasan and Hanim.
- c. Do you think the title of the story is well chosen? If yes, why? If no, what would you change it to and why?
- d. This short story gives a strong sense of atmosphere. What effect does the story have on you? How does the author manage to make the reader feel what it is like in the field of maize?
- e. How does this story illustrate the universal theme "love conquers all?"

**2. Student activities:**

- a. Is child labor common in the Middle East? the United States? Other regions of the world? Using current magazine and newspaper articles, compare child labor practices in the Middle East with another region of the world. With students choosing different countries (including the United States), write a series of "spotlight investigative" reports for the newspaper revealing the need for improvements and reform of the child labor situation throughout the world.
- b. Work with two other classmates to dramatize the action of this story in pantomime with no sounds or props except the whistle.
- c. Write a poem from Hasan to Hanim expressing his love.
- d. You are a representative from Amnesty International sent to observe the conditions in this story. Write a list of human rights violations and charges against this agricultural company. Contact Amnesty International (or a library) for a sample report and use their report as a model.
- e. Find music that evokes the atmosphere and tension of the story; bring your selection to class and explain your choice.
- f. Using water colors, colored pastels or chalk, draw a picture that conveys the mood of this story. Be prepared to explain to the class why you chose the colors you used.
- g. Hasan puts his face in the canal water for relief. However, this water is not likely to be clean. List the ingredients of a chemical fertilizer and what effects they would have upon one's skin, eyes, or an open wound. What might you assume about the date and setting of this story from the fact that the fertilizer is applied by hand? Have things changed? Using agricultural/farming sites (such as the US Department of Agriculture) found on the internet, write a report on the use of fertilizers, including the relationship of fertilizer and water pollution.

- 3. For more information on:**
- a. Children working  
see *Children and family*
  - b. Relations between male and female  
see *Courtship and premarital sex*

# A Wife for my Son

by Ali Ghalem

## 1. Questions for discussion:

- a. In the opening paragraphs of this story, Faith's hands are bound or tied both literally and figuratively. Explain both the literal and figurative meanings of "Her hands were tied." Have you experienced any situations in which you felt this way?
- b. We sense Faith's mood and reaction to her marriage through the small details and choice of words used to describe her. Skim the story and make a list of these words and phrases. What is the effect of this cumulating of details?
- c. Houria and the other women appear to be conspiring to bring about Fatiha's happiness within a traditional Algerian woman's role. Is this in fact conspiracy or is it protection? Which characters are most active in this and what are their concerns?
- d. What is your reaction to these statements by Fatiha's parents?

Kaddour says: *I know about life . . . We want our daughter to be happy.*

Houria says: *These kids! . . . Their sadness ... like a cloud . . .like a very small cloud...that's youth . . .*

- e. Describe the 'ideal traditional Muslim wife' from the point of view of Houria. How do you react to this description? What is your idea of a good wife and a good husband?
- f. Contrast the opening and closing of the story. Has Fatiha changed? Explain your answer.
- g. Madame Soussi tried to prevent this wedding, but has begun to try to accept it. What is her rationale?
- h. What correlation is there between the addition of women to the work force and the increase of unemployment? Does this support Kaddour's argument against continuing Fatiha's education?
- i. What role does music and dance play in this story? Is this similar to or different from the role music plays in your life?
- j. Why does the fact that the new husband has been to France provide some hope for Fatiha?
- k. In general, what are the goals of this large, extended family and how do individuals fit into those goals?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Rewrite this story from the point-of-view of the missing husband-to-be. If possible, find this book and read the next chapter that describes the feelings of the husband-to-be. Compare the two versions.
- b. Research the use of henna in the Middle East and write a one page summary of your findings. If possible find someone who can come to class to demonstrate the use of henna.
- c. The story contains references to the richly woven cloth the women are wearing. Check your local library for photographs of the fabrics produced by the people of North Africa. Write a report that describes the fabrics and patterns that are used to decorate them.

- d. Research the role and importance of jewelry in the Middle East, particularly for women.
- e. Several rituals of traditional Muslim weddings are described in this story. List them and then try to create a comparable list of rituals from traditional weddings of one or two other cultures. Write a conclusion about the similarities or differences you notice and what purpose the rituals seem to fulfill.

**3. For more information on:**

- a. Role of women in North Africa  
see *Marriage, arranged*  
see *Women and family*
- b. Male responsibilities  
see *Patriarchy*
- c. People from North Africa working in Europe  
see *Working and studying overseas*

# The Women's Baths

Ulfat al-Idlibi

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. How is the mother's relationship with her mother-in-law stereotypical? What factors make their relationship different from that between mothers and mothers-in-law in America?
- b. What does the grandmother mean when she says that in her trunk are "years which have been folded up and stored away" ?
- c. The bath house is a potpourri of sounds and images. Describe contrasting images and/or sounds found in the story.
- d. What literary devices invoke a magical atmosphere?
- e. How does the story reflect the cycle of women's lives in Syria?
- f. Based on the description of women workers and bathers at the baths, what sort of portrait emerges of the social and economic state of modern Syrian women and children? How does the granddaughter react to this?
- g. How is the bath a metaphor for community and traditions; what are the functions of the baths?
- h. What sort of "initiation" or "rite of passage" occur in the baths? Identify initiation rites that young people experience in America?
- i. What modern equivalents to public bathing exist in the United States today? In what ways are they similar or different from the public bath in this story?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Draw and label a floor plan of the baths described by the narrator.
- b. Imagine that you are the narrator returning after the bath experience. Write a dialogue between you and your mother in which you explain to your mother why your grandmother insists on attending the public bath.
- c. Analyze the poem on page \_\_. Discuss how it reflects the cycles of women's lives in Syria and universally.
- d. Find recipes for the food mentioned in this story. Prepare a typical Syrian dish, such as *mujaddarah* for the class.
- e. Interview classmates who have a grandparent or other relative living with them and ask them to describe the pros and cons of this arrangement.
- f. Find images of women's baths in European Orientalist paintings such as Delacroix. How do they compare with the images portrayed in the story?

**3. For more information on:**

- a. Many family members living together  
See: *Extended family in the Middle East*
- b. The importance in society of song and poetry  
See: *Oral Tradition of Literature in the Middle East*
- c. Public baths in the Middle East  
See: *Public Baths*

# The Worst of Two Choices or The Forsaken Olive Trees

by Najwa Qa'war Farah

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. What does the author mean when she says of Abu Ibrahim,

*He had gone to his olive trees. They consoled him,  
but they also gave him pain.*

What do the olive trees mean to Abu Ibrahim?

- b. Based on the details of the story, what do you feel is driving the parents to make a choice? How does each parent respond to the dilemma? With which parent do you empathize the most? and why?
- c. In describing the relationship of Abu Ibrahim and his olive trees, the author creates lyrical images. Quote several lines from the story which are notable for their imagery and explain the effects of this imagery on Abu Ibrahim. How does this help you to understand Abu Ibrahim's tenacity?
- d. Explain why the author includes the story of Bakr. What generalizations about the Palestinians in Occupied Territories can we draw from Imm Bakr's behavior?
- e. Abu Ibrahim in his anger says "just like a woman - so unreasonable." What is your reaction to this remark? Compare the ways Abu Ibrahim and Imm Ibrahim express their unhappiness.
- f. The author writes:

*Alone. Even after he crossed the border and saw his children, who had  
been waiting so long to embrace him, he was alone...*

Why are these lines ironic? What could Abu Ibrahim have done to avoid this feeling of being alone?

- g. How did Abu Ibrahim and Imm Ibrahim learn of their son's marriage? Why was the news upsetting?
- h. Abu Ibrahim perceived his leaving as a funeral and then dreamt of his death before he died. Could he have survived this move given his premonitions? What might have given him the will to live?
- i. "The Worst of Two Choices, or The Forsaken Olive Trees" is the story of a man who must choose between the two loves of his life. Describe these two loves and the consequences of Abu Ibrahim's decision. How would you have acted in his position?

## 2. Student activities:

- a. Certain dates are important in the history of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Dividing the following years among the class, report on the significance of each date to Israeli Jews and/or Palestinian or Israeli Arabs living in the Middle East:

1888	1973	1917	1979
1948	1982	1956	1987
1967	1993		

- b. Diaspora is a term often used to indicate the dispersal of Jewish people throughout the world. It is now used to describe other ethnic or religious groups, as well, who are living outside their homeland, either because of violence or economic conditions. Explain why the term diaspora may be applied to the Palestinian people.
  - c. Assume that you are one of the children (Ibrahim, Abla, Jamil or Sami) who has left; write a two page letter to your parents describing your life, your expectations, why you want your parents to join you, etc.
  - d. Olives and olive oil have been a staple of the Middle East since ancient times. Research the uses and benefits of olive oil and report to the class on your findings.
  - e. Interview a member of your community who has come from another country, to determine the causes and effects of their decision to emigrate.
  - f. Trees are often symbols of strength and steadfastness. Find other examples from literature or mythology about trees used to represent the qualities Abu Ibrahim gives them.
  - g. Find the oldest tree you can in your neighborhood or near your school. Estimate its age and then report on the events the tree could have been a witness to. These events can be personal or international.
  - h. What is the Israeli law of 'no return' referred to in the story. When and why was it created. Has the law been amended or changed, or is it still in effect today?
3. For more information on:
- a. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict  
*see Israel, history*
  - b. History of the Palestinian people  
*see Palestinians, history*



# Year of the Elephant

by Leila Abouzeid

## 1. Questions to think about:

- a. The narrator says in the first paragraph:

*I have lived without ever clearly seeing the man I married,  
the man I didn't know until yesterday...*

Why does she say this? Describe a situation in which you were disillusioned or disappointed in someone you thought you knew. How does your emotional reaction to this person compare to the narrator's?

- b. What does the following quotation, and what you have read in the excerpt from the story, say about traditional family relationships in Morocco?

*It is the worst possible time in my life for such a disaster to strike.  
My family all lie in their graves in the town cemetery...*

- c. What does Zahra's depression reveal about her relationship with her native town? What are your ties to the town you live in? Have you ever had to leave a place where you felt you belonged? If so, how did/does it affect you?
- d. The narrator moves back and forth in the narrative between her feelings as she returns home and the words that set her on that road. How does this writing technique add to the drama of her story?
- e. The tenant understands Zahra's situation immediately when Zahra tells her she has been divorced. What are the implications of this situation?
- f. What is the sheikh's answer to Zahra's question about injustice? How does this answer reflect the culture they live in? What would your advice be for Zahra if you were a Moroccan woman? What would it be if you both lived in the United States? Discuss why
- g. List the details of the Sheikh's hospitality for Zahra. She sees him as truly exceptional:

*The sheikh is a fountain of goodness in an age when even preachers  
are adulterers and drunkards.*

Should a religious leader be judged by the same standards as other people in secular jobs? Are there some people we hold to higher standards? Who are these people and why would you expect more from them? How does the Sheikh act as a role model for Zahra?

- h. Based on what you know about Zahra and the conditions under which she is living, what future can you imagine for her?

## 2. Student Activities:

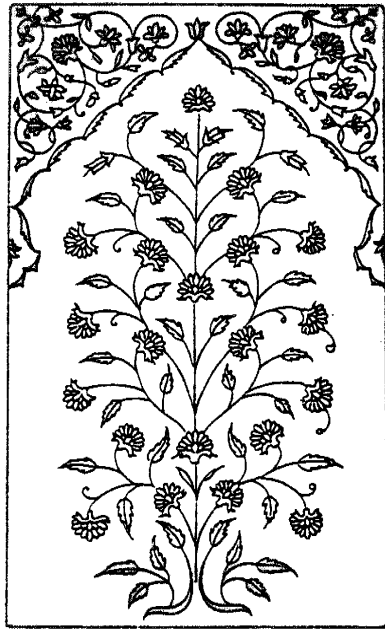
- a. Compare Zahra's situation to another female character, either real or literary, who must rely on her own resources in order to survive. Write an essay comparing the actions taken by the two women.
- b. Research what the Quran says about divorce. What protection does it give divorced women? Two issues in Zahra's divorce were:
  - the ease with which her husband could divorce her
  - Zahra's husband's responsibilities for her future.How does his treatment of his wife compare with your Quranic readings? From television, magazine or news articles, or the internet, look up recent legal developments in Morocco on these two issues. In an oral report compare your findings with divorce laws in your state, and give your opinion pro or con each country's laws.
- c. If she didn't have her childhood room, Zahra would have been homeless. In small groups discuss the problem of homelessness in the U.S. and how it is handled in your town or state. Present a group multimedia report on your findings to the class. (i.e. drama, artwork, video, poetry etc.)
- d. Research and write a report on one of the following topics relating to the story:
  - Architecture in North Africa,
  - The Berbers
  - Holy Men and women, and "Saints" in Islam.
- e. Explain the author's meaning and the literary allusion in the last sentence of the story:

*In my room, in my father's house, I spend the second of my hundred nights, counting them as Scheherazade once counted her own.*

## 3. For more information on:

- a. Women's marital rights  
see *Inheritance laws*  
see *Women and family*  
see *Patriarchy*
- b. Islamic traditions  
see *Islam*
- c. Jewish community in Morocco  
see *Jews of North Africa.*
- d. Muslim places of worship  
see *Mosque*
- e. Holy Book for Muslims  
see *Quran*

# Background Notes





## ABU ZAID

Even before the religion of Islam came to the Arab world, rhymed prose had religious associations. Its later use in the Quran consecrated it for all Muslims. By the tenth century it was being used in sermons and became a distinctive feature of rhetorical prose. A new and remarkable form of prose in this style was written by al-Hamadhani (c.1007 BCE) who travelled through Persia improvising his verses. Al-Hamadhani was

Al-Hamadhani's *Maqamat* is a romance with a dramatic style in which the hero is a witty vagabond who travels from place to place reciting his poetry and living on what his audience gives him. The narrator of the poem, the author himself, relates the adventures of the hero as told to him. Each *maqama* forms an independent whole and when the series is complete it may be looked upon as a kind of novel consisting of episodes in the life of the hero.

Some years after Al-Hamadhani, Abu Muhammad al-Qasim al-Hariri produced a *Maqamat* which ever since has been considered as "next to the Quran, the chief treasure of the Arabic tongue." Though humorous, Hariri's stories are not frivolous; they serve a moral purpose as instructive as the popular fables of birds and beasts. According to tradition, Hariri who is the narrator of the adventures, was seated with friends in a mosque when a weary and travel sore old man came in. When asked who he was he said that his name was Abu Zaid and that his village had been plundered by the Greeks, his daughter captured and that he had been driven forth to exile and poverty. The stories of his journeying so excited Hariri that the poet began to improvise his *maqamet* that very day. Abu Zaid has the fascination of many crafty, unprincipled scamps and it is this very knavery that makes him the popular character he is.

*Adapted from A Literary History of the Arabs by R.A. Nicholson,  
Cambridge University Press, 1977. Pages 328-336.*

## ALGERIAN WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The Algerian war of independence lasted from 1954 to 1962. During this time, when many men were in exile or in prisons, women took their places by serving as couriers, liaison agents and bomb carriers. They also helped to nurse wounded resistance fighters, and tried to help the men in camps and in prisons as much as possible. Many of these women were arrested, imprisoned and tortured. Finally in 1962 the Algerians gained their freedom from France. However, the position of women in the new Algerian state was left in an ambiguous state. Although opportunities for women had been modified over the years by portions of the French Civil Code i.e., the right to vote and to work, traditional Algerian society was a world ruled by traditional Arab values and by Islam, at once law and religion, which regulated social and personal life in all its details. A woman was the ward of her father or next male kin until marriage when she became the ward of her husband; divorce was almost totally a male prerogative (as in the excerpt from the book The Year of the Elephant); and women received half as much as a man would in any property inheritance. And even while the rhetoric of national liberation appeared to imply the liberation of all Algerians from colonial oppression, and the heroic roles played by many women during the war added substance to that interpretation, at the war's end, the position of women reverted back to the traditional. Though the Algerian constitution of 1963 indicated that the state would be a socialist one and guaranteed equality between the sexes, the patriarchal culture persisted; women were subservient to the male of the family.

Many urban women, who had believed that emancipation was what socialism meant, devoted themselves to securing passage of a liberalized family code that would project the constitutional guarantees into law. The family code consists of a body of legislation on individual rights and responsibilities in the family. From 1963 to 1980, these women were unable to advance legislation. The government repeatedly capitulated to the wishes of conservatives where women's issues were concerned. For conservatives, like Fatiha's father in A Wife for my Son, by Ali Ghalem, any change in the customary role was a threat to the accepted social order. Moreover, Algerian presidents during the twenty-year period, whose rhetoric supported socialists ideals, were themselves traditional in their attitude towards women. They believed that women should remain at home and continue to serve as custodians of family, Arab and Islamic values. In 1981

feminists defeated the conservative's version of a family code. But in 1984 a new Algerian Family Code was passed by parliament and adopted by the government. In the new code, which was written by conservative males, a woman was still a ward of her family or husband. As in the past, a woman did not have to consent to marriage at the marriage ceremony because her guardian's consent was sufficient. Also noted in the code was that divorce had to occur in court, but the husband's will to terminate the marriage is still a sufficient and legitimate reason for divorce. Polygamy continued to be legal. One innovation was that if the father dies, the mother now becomes automatically the children's guardian rather than a male relative. Unequal inheritance between women and men remained essentially unchanged, with women receiving less than men. A woman's right to work outside the home was by implication subject to the approval of her guardian.

Why were Algerian feminists defeated in their struggle for passage of their version of a family code in 1984? Perhaps the most important reason is that the political landscape had changed. The influence of fundamentalists, those who believed that the government had failed in delivering a better life and who wanted the installation of an Islamic government, and, especially, the government's fear of them were much greater than they had been three years earlier. The government, in an attempt to outflank the fundamentalist, presented new legislation that in most respects was more repressive than the 1981 bill for a family code. The bill was passed with little feminist opposition, since many women were languishing in jail while others were intimidated by the fate of their colleagues.

At the present time, there is little chance for passage of a new feminist-supported family code. The struggle between the government and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and other militant Islamic groups has made life even more difficult for women. Although only five to six percent of women, usually between the ages of twenty and thirty, work outside the home, they must endure insults and abuse by militants on the streets. Many of these women, most of whom work in government offices or in schools or factories, now wear a veil outside of work for their own safety. In areas where FIS members control local government, women who do not work outside the home must wear a veil when leaving home and be accompanied by a brother, sister or mother and must have a legitimate place as their destination, i.e., family visits or a doctor's office.

## **BERBERS OF ALGERIA**

The Berbers of Algeria are an ancient people who were conquered by the Arabs in the seventh and eighth centuries. The Arab armies intermarried with the sedentary Berbers, transmitting over time, Arabic culture and language, and the Islamic religion, to the townspeople, farmers, and the nomadic tribes of the hinterland. As a result, present-day Berbers, who represent twenty percent of Algeria's estimated 1991 population of 26 million people, and the overwhelming majority of the Arabs share common ancestors. Physical distinction carries little or no social connotations and identification with the Berber or Arab community is largely a matter of personal choice.

There are four major Berber groups, the Kabyles, Chaouias, M'zab and the Tuareg. They share a similar language, though many also speak French and Arabic, especially the Kabyles. Group members live both in their particular regions of the country and in the general society. However, within their respective regions, these four major Berber groups are quite different in lifestyle and in their economic situation.

The Kabyles are the largest of the Berber-speaking groups and inhabit the Kabyle Mountains located east of Algiers, although many Kabyles also live elsewhere. Set apart by their habitat, language and well-organized village and social life, Kabyles have a highly developed sense of independence and group solidarity. But the land is poor and the pressure of a dense and rapidly growing population has forced many to migrate to France or to the coastal cities. During the colonial period, the French, in keeping with its policy of "divide and rule" deliberately favored Kabyles in education and employment in the colonial system. As a result, in the years after independence Kabyles moved into all levels of state administration across Algeria, where they remain a large and influential group and enjoy a higher living standard than Arabs. As a group, the Kabyles also occupy better paid private jobs, though there are many poor Kabyles.

Perhaps half as numerous as the Kabyles, the Chaouias occupy the rugged and less densely settled Aures Mountains of Eastern Algeria. In the north they are settled agriculturists, growing cereals in the uplands and fruit trees in the valleys. In the arid south, with its date-palm oases, they are seminomadic, shepherding flocks to the high plains during the summer, but many also maintain plots of land. During the war for independence the region was a stronghold of anti-French sentiment and more than half the population was removed to concentration camps. Although functioning within the confines of tradition in most respects, Chaouias women have the privilege of selecting their husbands.

Far less numerous than the Kabyles and Chaouias, the M'zab, who numbered about 80,000 in the 1970's, inhabit seven walled cities on the northern edge of the desert. They are *Ibadite* Muslims who practice a puritanical form of Islam that emphasizes asceticism, literacy for men and women, and social egalitarianism. They live somewhat apart from the rest of the world. Women live by very strict rules and are not permitted to leave the *Ibadite* realm. The poor economic base of the region has driven the M'zab to seek employment as long-distance traders. In the mid-1980s, the M'zab dominated retail trade in groceries and textiles throughout Algeria.

Lastly, the Tuareg, who have been greatly affected by the outside world, inhabit the Sahara from southwest Libya to Mali. They are known as the "bluemen" because of their indigo-dyed cotton robes and as the "People of the Veil" because men but not women are always veiled. In southern Algeria they are concentrated in the highlands of Tassili-n-Ajjer and Ahaggar and in the 1970's numbered perhaps about 5,000 to 10,000. They are organized into tribes and, at least among the Ahaggar Tuareg, into a three-tiered class system of nobles, vassals, and slaves and servants, the last often being of negroid origin. Tuareg women enjoy high status and many privileges. They do not live in seclusion, and their social responsibilities equal those of men. Although once famed as camel and cattle herders and as guides and protectors of caravans that ran between West and North Africa, many of the Tuareg have been forced to live sedentary lives because of government policies and economics.

## **CALENDAR**

### **Gregorian**

Almost every country uses the Gregorian calendar for business and government, but many world traditions retain their own calendars which differ from the Gregorian. They may have fewer or more days in the year or months that vary in length from year to year. Traditionally, people have kept track of time either by the sun or the moon. Because the sun regulates the seasons, agricultural civilizations have used solar calendars like the Gregorian. But the monthly full moon, with its beautiful light, has long been a favored time for religious ceremonies, and many religions have developed lunar calendars. Since the lunar year is only 354 days and the solar year is 365, most calendars make up the difference with extra days or months, so that festivals will remain in their customary seasons and will not "drift back" to other months.

### **Islamic**

The Islamic calendar is completely lunar and has only 354 days. It has no extra days or months to make up for the 365 days in the solar year, so the calendar moves back 11 days each solar year. This means that all the holidays will, sooner or later, fall in every month of the Gregorian year. The months alternate between 29 and 30 days, and a leap day is added to the last month because the moon's orbit is just over 29 1/2 days long. The day begins at sunset, so holidays begin on the eve of the date on which they are celebrated. Thus the month of Ramadan, which is devoted to fasting, can come in any month. Since not even water is allowed, this can be a very difficult experience when Ramadan occurs in the hot season.

### **Jewish**

The Jewish calendar calculates its years by the sun and its months by the moon. The 12 months alternate between 29 and 30 days, with two of them varying in length. A 13th leap month, Adar II, is added seven times to the lunar calendar in a fixed 19 year cycle. Like the Islamic calendar the day begins on its eve, so religious observances start at sunset of the preceding day. Because of the extra leap month, the holidays, though varying by day of the month, always fall within the same season of the year.

## **CHILDREN AND FAMILY**

Children are very much welcomed in the Middle East, where families play an important role in community life. As in many parts of the world, boys are, as a rule, received into the world with more celebration in both Muslim and Jewish families than a girl is. Several reasons are given for this: a boy will grow up to be a financial support to his family, a boy will carry on the family name, a boy child is a reflection on his father's virility, and a boy's honor does not have to be so carefully guarded. Boys often receive preferential treatment in the home for these same reasons. When boys and girls receive equal opportunities for education, this attitude tends to change.

Child labor of both boys and girls is more common in Arab lands than in the United States, though it still occurs here among migrant workers and poor families. In some Arab countries, girls as young as seven or eight are often sent to live as helpers in the homes of better off families, and many become carpet weavers, or farm workers, at a very young age. Boys of the same age work as general helpers in shops and fields. In poorer countries, children are often found at tourist spots offering to be 'guides' or to assist foreigners. Many families depend on the small earnings of their children.

## **COLONIALISM**

Colonialism can be defined as 'the settlement of a new area by individuals from a parent country.' In the modern Middle East, while the French actively colonized Algeria and the Italians sent settlers to Libya, on the whole, Europeans did not attempt to colonize. In common usage, however, the term *colonialism* has come to signify the entire process of European imperialism, and thus it is common to speak of European colonialism in the Middle East when referring to the economic and political domination that Europe exercised over most of the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is worth remembering that only Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya experienced de jure direct rule by a European nation, while Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon each experienced a measure of de facto rule under the mandate system between the two world wars.

*Zachary Karabell Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East, Simon and Schuster, 1996*

## **COPTS OF EGYPT**

The Christian Copts are members of the Coptic Orthodox Church in modern Egypt. They are the descendants of Egyptians who converted to Christianity in the second century. When the Muslim Arabs conquered Egypt in 642, many Copts converted to Islam and Arabic gradually replaced the Coptic language as the language of Egypt. As a result the Copts became a minority and the use of the Coptic language was confined to church liturgy. Throughout the following centuries the Copts experienced the familiar difficulties of a minority: discrimination, periodic persecution, and suspicion. In modern times the state has on several occasions proclaimed the official equality of all Egyptians regardless of religion or ethnic origin.

The Coptic population in Egypt numbers between four to ten million people, depending upon the source. About one-quarter of the Coptic population lives in Cairo, with less than a fourth living in Alexandria. The majority of Copts live in southern Egypt where they are mainly concentrated in the Coptic heartland of Minya, Asyut, Sohag and Qena. Most live in small villages like the characters from Tewfiq al-Hakim's short story, "Miracles for Sale." Although intermarriage between Christian Copts and Muslims is discouraged, they live along side each other in these villages and share village life, customs and festivals. Recently, however, Copts living in Asyut, have suffered attacks by Islamic militants who want to create what they believe is a true Islamic state and regard non-Muslims as infidels who cannot be a part of it.

Copts may be found in various occupations and at all income levels. They are especially numerous in the private sector, with many working as lawyers, doctors, engineers and businessmen. In villages, many work as clerks and other occupations but most are peasant farmers. Today, one of the mostly widely known Egyptian Coptic Christians is Boutros Boutros-Ghali, former Secretary-General of the United Nations (1992-1997).



## **COUNTRY WEB SITES**

It is very convenient and easy to find information on the economics, politics, statistics, etc., of countries on the web. One of the best sites providing facts about all countries of the world is the annual World Factbook of the CIA. <<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publication/factbook>>. Another excellent resource for the Middle East is at the University of Texas at Austin. <<http://menic.utexas.edu/menic/profiles>>

## **COURTSHIP AND PREMARITAL SEX**

Like marriage, courtship is among the most important events in the lives of Middle Easterners. As the nature of courtship varies substantially from locale to locale, as well as between social classes, the subject does not lend itself well to generalizations. This is especially so since the type of courtship permitted a young couple has also undergone change, sometimes substantial, within the context of recent historical phenomena such as national wars of liberation. In Algeria, for example, where the war of liberation (1954-62) engendered a liberalization of courtship practices, a recent backlash among conservative religious groupings has encouraged some families to resort to the stricter pre-revolutionary customs. Nevertheless, one particular trait, regulating courtship rituals in nearly all Arab communities, merits further discussion: virginity before and upon marriage.

Arab women are generally expected to be virgins at marriage. A woman's purity is seen as a direct reflection upon her family and its status, and a display of blood on the wedding night is the customary way of proving her virtue and ensuring that the paternity of her children is certain. In some rural communities (including Arab Muslim communities in Israel) women are still victims of "honor killings" or assault because of the lack of proof of virginal blood. In the traditional Arab conception, as in many other traditional ideologies, women are considered to be unable to restrain their sexual desires; left alone with a man, they would almost surely engage in sexual relations. Thus, it is the responsibility of a woman and her family to guard her virginity and the honor of her lineage.

A family and their community's view on the question of honor, virginity, and a woman's inherent susceptibility to temptation is inextricably linked to the type of courtship she will be permitted to experience. In some Arab communities, once the couple is 'engaged' and has signed a legally binding marriage contract, they may visit each other at home and may date. The wedding and consummation may occur months or even years later. However in other societies, for example Saudi Arabia, where even visual contact between prospective marriage partners has long been forbidden, it has only recently become acceptable in certain urban milieus for bride and groom to see one another and sometimes talk to each other before agreeing to the marriage. Within many urban communities, however, new forms of association, such as coeducation and women's entry into the professional sphere, are creating opportunities for romantic and sexual involvement, thus heightening the tension between traditional and modern morals and behavior.

## **DUAL LANGUAGE SYSTEM IN ALGERIA**

After the French conquered Algeria in 1830, it took control of education, government, business, and intellectual life for the next 132 years. At the same time it attempted to destroy Algerian cultural identity and to remold the society along French lines. The effects of this policy, which continue to be felt throughout Algeria even after its independence in 1962, have perhaps been most evident in the legacy of a dual language system--French and Arabic. The continued use of this system has contributed to class division and job discrimination and is reflected in the present conflict among Algerian political forces. The majority of the population of Algeria speak Arabic and/or Berber while an influential minority speak mainly French. The people who use French daily include 95% of the country's political leaders. They are members of the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN), a political party, and are usually army officers, technocrats, and civil servants, associated with urban society. French is used as the language of government, except in the ministries of religion and justice, and in administrative areas and state industries; it is needed for upward mobility.

A small percentage of this French speaking minority are Muslim Algerians who attended school before 1962. They are products of a colonial educational system in which all school instruction was in French and which prohibited the teaching of Arabic until 1936, when it became permissible to teach it as a second

language. The system also offered a wide exposure to European values and ideologies, including secularism. Many members of this class became participants in the Algerian nationalist movement for independence and later assumed leadership and important positions in independent Algeria. After independence, many sent their children to privately French-run educational institutions. Upon completion of their higher education, the children assumed important positions in the government and in its state industries.

The continued use of this dual language system contributed to job discrimination because most industries and government ministries still functioned in French. Though the government partially Arabized the educational system it failed to open many positions to monolingual Arabic speakers. In an effort to restore a national identity the government, after independence in 1962, required Arabic literacy to be taught at every grade level and Arabic to be the language of instruction at various grade levels. By the 1970s a two track system emerged at the secondary level: an Arabic track and a bilingual track. In the former, all subjects were taught in Arabic and French was taught as a foreign language; in the latter, scientific subjects were taught in French and other subjects in Arabic. Arabic was used as the language of instruction during the first two years of university. However, classes in science and technology continued to be in French, largely because most of the university books and other materials in these fields were in French. Many students who spoke only Arabic, avoided science and technology majors because they were unable to find jobs in these areas. As students graduated from secondary school and from the university, it became obvious that students who had followed the bilingual track and who were fluent in French were able to qualify for better jobs with the government and in the growing industrial sector. They also tended to be Berbers from the Kabyle area or children of the middle class. In contrast, students who followed the Arabic track at the secondary level, or the Arabic only track at university, had difficulty finding a job since fewer employers accepted Arabic only. These students tended to be from rural areas or were recent urban residents. As a result of this job discrimination the monolingual Arabic-speaking students at the University of Algiers, who represented twenty-five percent of the student body, launched a two-month protest strike in 1979-80. In response, the Algerian president, Chadli Bendjedid, Arabized the justice system, a step that immediately provided job openings for several hundred monolingual law graduates. He also made a series of rapid curricular, organizational, and personnel changes at the secondary and university levels in order to accelerate the process of Arabization at all educational levels.

The legacy of Algeria's dual language system continues to be felt in the 1990s. It is reflected in the conflict between the Algerian government and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and its related militant groups. Many of the French speaking Algerians, i.e., leaders and workers in government ministries and industries, along with many other urbanites who were educated on the French model, have become the object of deep resentment to legions of young, poorly educated Islamic militants. As part of their battle with the government, militants have ordered an end to all French and foreign language education and scores of schools have been burned down for violations since 1994. One of the goals of the Islamic militants is to eventually eliminate all traces of the French language and influence.

## **EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE, EGYPT**

In the nineteenth century a secular state system of education was created in Egypt, along side the existing traditional Islamic education system. In addition to private Egyptian schools, numerous foreign community and missionary schools, which admitted Egyptian students, were also established. In the twentieth century Egyptian governments sought to unite the systems.

Traditionally, education was the responsibility of the Islamic religious establishment. *Al-Azhar*, a mosque and university established in the ninth century, not only trained scholars in Islamic law but also maintained an educational system which met the needs of a vast majority of Egyptians. The Azharite system included elementary education, which involved the teaching of math, literacy skills and the Quran to boys in village schools (*kuttab*s) and the training of teachers for these schools.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Egypt's leader, Muhammad Ali, an Albanian and former soldier in the Ottoman army, could not recruit enough foreign experts to increase and up-grade his armed

forces, so he sent young Egyptians to France, Britain and Italy to be educated in needed military professions and state administration. He also established a modern secular school system, including colleges of engineering, administration, languages and medicine. The system was fashioned on the French model of instruction by his French advisors. The foreign teachers who were recruited to teach in the schools and colleges used primarily French. However, Muhammad Ali's state secular educational system, which existed only in larger cities, affected only a minority of people and was never intended to educate the masses. Although his grandson, Khedive Ismail, reformed and expanded the school system during his reign, 1863-1879, and permitted the establishment of secular private Egyptian schools, the traditional religious education system continued to meet the education needs of a vast majority of Egyptians.

The French and Italians, and later British, professionals who came to work for Muhammad Ali in his, and later Khedive Ismail's, education and modernization projects, established their own community schools. After the 1850s, numerous French, German, British and American missionary schools were also established along with schools for the Greek, Syrian, Jewish and Armenian minorities. Each group had its own educational system and students were taught in the language of that group, although French was included in the curriculum of most schools. French, as English is today, was the international language of governments and commerce and of the educated elite. However, Arabic and Egyptian history and culture were not part of the curricula in these schools. They all admitted Egyptians but only the wealthy elite could afford the enrollment fee. Coptic Christian schools admitted only Egyptians. Graduates from these schools usually attended higher institutions in the home countries of their respective schools.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the school systems had produced two distinct cultures and value systems among Egyptians. Many Egyptians held the traditional cultural values represented by *Al-Azhar*, which was relatively untouched by foreign influence. These Egyptians were proficient in the Arabic language. Other Egyptians adopted a secular European and modernist orientation. They spoke and thought in terms of European-inspired models of life and society and often stood in direct opposition to traditional Islamic and Egyptian cultural norms. While fluent in a foreign language, these Egyptians were usually weak in Arabic literacy.

In 1882, the British took control of Egypt. After the British proclaimed Egypt's independence in 1922, the new Egyptian government tried to reduce the cultural gap between the religious traditionalists and the secular modernists through the establishment of a nationalized school curriculum. It tried to make the independent Azharite religious education system add modern secular subjects to its curricula. It required foreign community and missionary schools to teach Arabic literacy, Islamic history and the Islamic religion to Muslim students. Egyptian schools had to follow the state's curriculum in order to receive government funding. These efforts met with limited success. While no significant change took place in the government's dealings with *Al-Azhar*, it was successful in adding curriculum requirements to the foreign schools. However, the government was hampered in its educational revisions by several factors: a lack of funds, the political strength of *Al-Azhar*, the Egyptian parliament's power struggle with the monarchy and British interference.

In 1952 Egyptian military officers, led by Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser, overthrew the government. King Farouk was exiled, parliament was dissolved, and the British agreed to withdraw its military forces from Egypt. Nasser became the president of Egypt and the first native Egyptian ruler in 2,000. As Egypt's new president, he inherited a nation that was still split between modernist and traditional orientations. In response to this dichotomy, and consistent with Nasser's secular socialist philosophy, the new government embarked upon a program to create a sense of national unity and patriotism and to "Egyptianize" education. Nasser therefore expanded mass education and eliminated tuition fees at all levels. He merged the curriculum of *Al-Azhar* with that of the government's new standardized curriculum. The Arabic language became more important than any other subject on examinations. Whereas previously, Egyptian students attending local foreign schools, like Dalal, a character in Alifa Rifaat's short story, "Me and My Sister," could become fluent in the language of another country but not attain proficiency in Arabic, all students now had to pass their Arabic exam with 50 percent proficiency.

Foreign community and missionary schools and private Egyptian schools did not escape Nasser's attention. Based upon the argument that a major source of cultural division was between Egyptians educated in foreign schools and those educated in state and religious schools, and in keeping with Nasser's goal to create national unity and a sense of patriotism, the government abolished foreign schools in 1958. However, because these schools were still needed, they simply became Egyptian private schools and, along with the existing Egyptian private schools, were subject to more direct curricula control from the Ministry of Education.

At the turn of the twenty-first century the secular government is in a struggle against Islamic fundamentalists whose goal is an Islamic state with an Islamic education system. The educational curriculum is still centralized, although the Egyptian government is no longer socialist, and English is a popular foreign language.

### **EXTENDED FAMILY**

In Arab societies, the institution of the extended family finds its roots in a feudal-type economy, in which many related individuals of both sexes and all ages engaged in agricultural labor mainly for the benefit of the household and local taxation. Traditionally the extended family included siblings, sons and their wives, cousins, uncles, aunts, grandmothers, and grandfathers; all often lived under one roof or in the same vicinity of a village or town. Moreover, the extended family provided a strong support system, protection, income, reputation, and honor, as well as a center for socializing and entertainment. Set up on the basis of a patriarchal order, family elders, especially the males, played a central role in the life-affecting decisions of young adults, from marriage choice to medical treatments. With industrialization and urbanization, however, members of many extended family groups were compelled to seek urban-based jobs and careers. Consequently, the institution of the extended family was forced to coexist alongside the evergrowing smaller nuclear family unit. Today the extended family is more common to villagers and Bedouins than to urbanites.

### **EXTRAMARITAL SEX RELATIONS**

"Such of your women as commit indecency, call four of you to witness against them; and if they witness, then detain them in their houses until death takes them or God appoints for them a way. And when two of you commit indecency, punish them both; but if they repent and make amends, then suffer them to be . . ." (Quran, Verse 20, pg. 102). Despite Quranic rules on the subject of adultery, most Arab societies have long tolerated a man's involvement in extramarital sexual relations. Many Arab women, especially those for whom a lack of educational and professional status has relegated them to a relatively weak position in the household, are expected to silently acquiesce to their husband's infidelities. On the part of a wife, however, fidelity is crucial irrespective of her husband's behavior. As the woman is seen as the repository of family honor, infidelity on her part is viewed as a shameful matter for both her husband and her family. For example, in the punitive laws in such countries as Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon, it is decreed "that if a man catches his sister or mother in an adulterous sexual affair and kills her, he should be imprisoned for no more than six months because the crime was committed in defense of his honour." (Shaaban). This decree often applies equally to a husband who kills his wife. In Iran, the highly controversial mut'a or temporary marriage is seen by certain religious authorities as an Islamic alternative to Western promiscuity, and its function is to contain sexual desires and needs within a legal and moral framework.

### **FAROUK, KING OF EGYPT**

Farouk I became the king of Egypt in 1936 upon the death of his father Fuad I and remained king for sixteen years until his overthrow in 1952. Born in Cairo in 1920, Farouk may be the person that the madwoman in Youssef Idris' short story "The Errand," refers to when she shouts, "Long live his Majesty the King, President Mohammed Bey Abou Batta." Farouk came to the throne as a popular ruler of whom much was expected. But his reign soon became notorious for its despotism, corruption, and incompetence. His reign was further discredited by Egypt's serious economic problems, as well as the country's defeat in the Arab Israeli war of 1948-49. A military coup led by General Mohammed Naguib and Lt. Colonel Gamal

Abdel Nasser forced King Farouk to abdicate on July 26, 1952. Egypt became a republic. Farouk died in exile in Italy in March 1965.

## **FOLKLORE**

One of the most popular characters in folklore from the Middle East is the "wise fool" Joha, also known as Jeha, Goha, Mullah Nasreddin in Persia and Nasreddin Hidja in Turkey. It is believed that these tales originated in Turkey around the 12th or 13th century. They are numerous short tales, often anecdotal, embodying bits of wisdom or good common sense. Another popular collection of tales is *Kalila wa Dimna*, animal fables in which 2 jackals offer moral and practical advice (some see a connection with the 6thC Aesop fables from Greece). The tales are well respected literature and are usually illustrated in miniature paintings. Next to the Quran, *Kalila wa Dimna* is considered to be one of the most beautiful works in Arab prose. It was translated from the Sanskrit into Persian, then into Arabic, Spanish and Italian around the 13th century. It was the first book in Arabic to appear after the invention of printing. Other types of folk literature include: the fables of Luqman, a wise man versed in human and divine knowledge; in the Sirah tradition a "life" or "biography" tracing tribal history or national hero, such as the famous Persian *Shanahmeh* or *Book of Kings*; Tales of the Arabian Nights which was viewed by Middle Easterners as less worthy common or vulgar literature and became more popular and well known among Westerners; and lastly the folk tales indigenous to individual countries but which often have similar or even identical themes to folktales all over the world.

## **INHERITANCE LAWS**

### **Natal Family Property**

According to all schools of Islamic law, women's inheritance is unequal to men's. The Quran states that men shall always inherit twice as much as women. This inequality is based on the assumption that it is the role of men to provide for the material needs of women. Although the Quran makes it clear that a woman was to legally inherit and control some portion of her family's property, it is not uncommon in rural and tribal areas for male family members to take over a sister's share, sometimes, but not always, in return for supporting the sister. Husbands frequently do not respect a wife's right to control her own property.

### **Marital Property, Divorce, and Abandonment**

According to traditional interpretations of Islamic law, a man is allowed to divorce unilaterally. A woman, however, can sue for divorce only with great difficulty; she must also appear before a court, which is unlikely to approve her request unless her husband is missing or has been proven insane. It is for this reason that, in Islamic tradition, the mahr or brideprice, determined at the time of marriage should ideally include some money to be paid to the wife in case of divorce. When honored, a woman's entitlement to this sum was meant to prevent a husband from terminating a marriage whenever he wished. Moreover, traditional Islamic law stipulates that a woman, upon divorce, should receive financial support for three months or, if she is pregnant, for nine months or until the birth of the child. In reality, especially in rural areas, husbands often do not comply with this agreement.

It is not uncommon for a divorced woman to be left financially stranded and unable to collect her mahr or brideprice. In the case where a woman is abandoned by her husband, she may legally take her husband to court and demand money to support her children. In reality, however, the court rarely forces husbands to pay. The only security a divorced or abandoned woman has is her undisputed right to return to her parental home. Upon her return, however, a divorcee is often subjected to the same restrictions as are imposed upon a single girl, and she is required to enter into a new marriage that reflects well on the status of her family. Moreover, a divorcee who returns to her family or that of her relatives is often given a considerably lower status than that of her married female counterparts in the family. In traditional households, she cannot openly express her opinion or correct that of others. She must make herself as inconspicuous as possible.

The loopholes of Muslim inheritance and divorce laws are particularly problematic in countries, such as Morocco, where rural women do not inherit bridewealth but, instead, retain the right to be supported by their family. Thus, in fact, for such women to claim their inheritance means to forfeit the protection of their family. If a woman cannot fall back on her family and her husband (or former husband) cannot or will not support her, she can work to earn additional income. Such jobs, limited in choice and social benefits, might include becoming a seamstress, a midwife, or bath attendant. Most women, however, must often take

on the low-status and exhausting job of field laborer. Since this job requires that a woman be unveiled, and thus exposed to male workers, she is highly vulnerable to social criticism. Such a situation is particularly difficult for a woman of rural or small town origin who, having married an urbanite and thus removed herself from her natal family, is forced, upon divorce, to return to an area with which she has long lost contact.

During the past two decades, certain Arab countries have reformed their inheritance and divorce laws. In Iran, for example, a new law was introduced in 1986 that recognizes a divorced woman's rights to a share of the property couples acquire during their marriage. Moreover, in numerous countries marriage contracts now allow for protective provisions, including divorce rights for women, as long as they are not openly contrary to Islamic law. Since, traditionally, women who filed for a divorce were to receive nothing, such reforms afford a certain measure of protection. Nonetheless, these innovations are, for the most part, a symbolic victory for women more than a tangible one. Only Turkey, Albania, and former Soviet Central Asia have introduced secular inheritance laws in all spheres.

## **ISLAM**

When we talk about Islam we are referring to a vast network of civilizations, races and histories. Islamic history covers the sixth century in the Arabian peninsular to the twentieth century in America via medieval Spain. Since it is not possible to extricate Islam from the societies in which it is embedded, it is often inappropriate to ascribe purely Islamic origins to phenomena which are not simply Islamic. Veiling is a good example of this. The veil pre-dated Islam in a number of manifestations and it had differing social meanings as it does today: there is nothing in the Quran which expressly demands of all Muslim women that they veil. There are only passages which suggest modesty for the wives of the prophet (33:59 and 24:31). The extent to which women veil is therefore dependent on country (nation) region (rural/urban) and educational level (class). The position of saints and the practice of saint worship is another example. The Quran repeatedly makes it clear that *no one* must be worshipped but God, not even the Prophet Muhammad. But in many countries we do see shrines to saints (North Africa) and festivals celebrating important figures (worship of Husayn in Shi'ite Iran). Oftentimes these practices are hangovers from different religions traditions which have been incorporated into Islam. But it would be misleading to say they are somehow unorthodox, as orthodoxy in Islam usually depends on who has the power to dictate what is "right". For Shi'ites, what they do is completely orthodox, even though Sunnis might disagree. As is the case with any religion, influences from outside cannot be avoided; ideas about what is the "real" Islam will differ depending on whom you ask. But the basis of Islam, or, what it means to be a Muslim is found in the Five Pillars of Islam.

### **Almsgiving *Zakat***

One of the "Five Pillars" of Islam. Giving up a portion of one's wealth to help the poor and needy. Can be extended to travellers in need, war veterans or the generally destitute. Giver must be a Muslim.

### **Call to Prayer *Adhan***

Issued from the top of a minaret or a rooftop before the five daily prayer times. Number of times phrase is repeated varies slightly, but it is always in Arabic.

*Allahu Akbar*

God is Greater

*Ashadu an la ilaha illa-Llah Allah*

I witness that there is no God but God

*Ashadu anna Muhammadan rasulu-Llah*

I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God

*Hayya 'ala-s-salah*

Rise up for prayer

*Hayya 'ala-l-falah*

rise up for salvation

*Allahu Akbar*

God is Greater

*La ilaha illa-Llah Allah*

There is no God but God

### **Calendar, Islamic**

Known as the Hegirian calendar, after the Hegra or flight of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622. Based upon cycles of the moon, as opposed to the sun, like the Julian and Gregorian calendars. A Hegirian year consists of twelve months; some of thirty, some of twenty-nine days.

### **The Fatiha**

Literally "Opening". The first chapter of the Qur'an. This is one of the shortest of the Surahs (chapters) and all Muslims are required to learn it in Arabic. It is a central part of ritual prayer and is frequently recited as individual or spontaneous prayer and in appropriate circumstances i.e. marriage, funerals etc. It is always concluded by saying *amin*.

*Praise belongs to God, the Lord of the World,  
the Merciful, the Compassionate,  
the Lord of the Day of Judgement.  
Thee we worship and Thee we ask for help.  
Guide us on the straight path,  
the path of those to whom Thou showest kindness,  
of those upon whom Thy wrath rests, nor those who go astray.*

### **Festivals, Holy days and Holidays**

**Ashura** is observed on the tenth of the month of *Muharram* as a fast day. For Shi'ites it coincides with the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn at Karbala.

**Ra's al-'Am** The Islamic New Year which falls on the first day of the Islamic month *Muharram*.

**Mawlid an-Nabi** The Prophet's birthday. Celebration of this date began as a public holiday around the 12th century. Celebratory customs differ regionally.

**Ramadan** is the month of fasting. No food or drink is permitted from sun-up until sundown. Many people awaken before sun-rise and eat a small meal. In many countries criers and musicians walk the streets in the very early morning to wake people for this purpose. At sunset a small break-fast is eaten, followed later in the evening by a larger meal. Often these evening meals are long and very festive. Fasting *sawm* is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Fasting is seen as a way of coming closer to God. Morally it is also a reminder of the privations of the poor and a spur to charity.

**Laylat al-Qadr** is the 27th day of the month of Ramadan, in which Muhammad received the first passages of the Qur'an.

**'Id al-Fitra** is the feast of fast-breaking at the end of Ramadan.

**Id al-Adha** is the Feast of Sacrifice which commemorates the occasion when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son. It takes place during the pilgrimage to Mecca.

### **The Five Pillars**

These tenets are accepted almost unequivocally by all sects and branches of Islam. Non-observance however, does not constitute departure from Islam, but many would agree that professing the *Shahada* is essential.

**Shahada** The profession of faith affirming: "There is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God."

**Salat** Ritual prayers. said five times daily ; canonical prayers.

**Zakat** Almsgiving roughly equivalent to a voluntary religious tax distributed to the poor. Historically it was sometimes official and organized by the government.

**Sawm** Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan.

**Hajj** The pilgrimage to Mecca required of all Muslims who are physically or economically able to undertake it.

### **Muhammad, Messenger of God**

This is the name of the Prophet Muhammad. It means "the praised one" or "he who is glorified". Muhammad was born in 570 A.D. in Mecca. His father died before he was born and his mother shortly thereafter. He was raised by an uncle and when he was about twenty years old he married his first wife and employer, Khadijah, a wealthy business woman. He managed her trade caravans and made a reputation as a reputable, honest trader, becoming known as *al-Amin*, the trustworthy, among the Meccans. Around 610 C.E., Muhammad began to receive revelations when he was on retreat in a cave outside Mecca. The voice which spoke to him was identified later as the angel Gabriel who was transmitting the word of God to Muhammad for him to transcribe. Muhammad is seen in Islam as the final messenger in a chain of prophets starting with Adam and including Jesus, Noah, and Abraham. Muhammad is the final messenger, relating God's message to humanity in its entirety. Muhammad's position within the Muslim tradition is unique. Known as *al-Insan al-Kamil* or The Perfect Human Being, he acts as a standard for humanity to look up to in their striving for goodness.

### **Mohammedanism**

This is an archaic and inaccurate term for Islam. The term was dropped from usage because it suggested that Muslims worship Muhammad in the same way that Christians worship Christ. This perception confuses the messenger with the message. Muhammad is not analogous to Christ because he is not considered divine.

### **Pilgrimage**

The *Hajj* or the greater pilgrimage, is one of the five pillars of Islam. It is a pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest city of Islam. Rituals are performed in and around Mecca's Great Mosque, at a specific time each year; because the Islamic calendar year advances by ten days every year, this date differs, but it is always in the month *Dhu-l-Hijjah*. It is required of all Muslims who can "make their way" (Quran, 3:97). Before World War II the number making the pilgrimage each year was around 10,000; today it may exceed two million. Muslims from all around the world attend and racial equality is an important part of the event, emphasizing Islam's universal appeal. Male pilgrims are required to shave their hair and all put on a white robe symbolizing purification. No jewelry, perfume or other adornments are permitted. The pilgrimage lasts for several days in which the pilgrims pray, meditate, circumambulate the Ka'ba, where the black stone is housed, in the center of the Great Mosque, and perform a variety of ritual acts. Someone who has completed the Hajj is known afterwards by the honorific title *Hajji*. The *Umrah* is the lesser pilgrimage which is a shorter, less rigorous version of the Hajj. Its rites can be completed within a couple of hours and it can be performed at any time of the year. Recently it has been made permissible to perform the entire *Umrah* within the confines of the Great Mosque.

### **The Quran (or Qur'an)**

The Quran, literally "The Reading" or "The Recitation", is the holy scripture of the Muslims. Revealed to the Prophet Muhammad between 610 C.E. and his death in 632 C.E., it constitutes the word of God to humanity and is the primary source of Islamic law and doctrine. The language of the Quran is Classical Arabic, the language most closely associated with the Meccan aristocracy of the period. This form of Arabic became the basis for classical literary Arabic and it remains a benchmark for literary endeavors, although in the twentieth century there have been some radical shifts in what is considered literary language. Muslims consider the language of the Quran inimitable, as it is the speech of God. Its literary and rhetorical standard is, therefore, seen as sublime. The book was only partly written down upon its revelation. The first systematic commitment of it to writing took place under Uthman, the third Caliph of Islam, in the middle of the seventh century. Since then the text has undergone virtually no significant changes. The Quran is the primary authority for Islamic law and doctrine. It is looked to by Muslims as an answer for potentially any social, religious or legal situation. It is divided into 114 chapters (*Surahs*) each of which is composed of verses (*Ayahs*). It is compiled in such a way that the shorter verses are preceded by the longer ones. The thematic range of the book is considerable; from eschatological descriptions (day of judgement, end of time) to proscriptions for marriage laws, divorce, inheritance and economic transactions. It contains many stories from both the Jewish *Midrashic* tradition as well as other biblical narratives with didactic purposes. It also



reflects the historical events of developing Islam in, for instance, its dealings with religious minorities and in its concern for social justice.

### **Saints**

There is a widespread cult of saints among the various Islamic communities of the world, although many groups would claim that saint-worship is strictly prohibited as it infringes the Oneness, or uniqueness of God and compromises Islam's strict monotheism. However, saint worship is a vital part of popular belief and often has historical and cultural roots which pre-date Islam, although the specific saints are chosen from among Islamic history.

### **Sects and Sectarianism**

There are two main branches of Islam, the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. This split occurred in the first century of Islam and concerned who should rightfully take over leadership of the young Islamic community after the death of the Prophet. The *Shi'at 'Ali*, "partisans of 'Ali," claimed that the rightful leader was 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet. 'Ali was passed-over in succession to the caliphate three times. When he finally became caliph in 656 C.E., he faced widespread opposition and set up headquarters at Kufa in present-day Iraq. He was assassinated in 661. The beginnings of the Shi'ites were, therefore, political and concerned leadership of the community. Theological differences only began to appear after the eighth century and primarily concerned the nature of the authority of their leaders (*Imams*), who were believed to hold secret, divine knowledge and to have a special relationship to God. This concept is known as the doctrine of the *Imamate* and is the essence of Shi'ism. Although Shi'ites make up only 10% of the Muslim population, they constitute a majority in Iran, where Shi'ism has been the state religion for approximately five hundred years. Within Shi'ism there are three principle groups: Twelvers, those who follow the Twelfth Imam and who constitute the vast majority of Iranians, 60% of Iraq's population, and small communities in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan and Syria; The Zaydis who make up about 40% of Yemen's population and the Isma'ilis who can be found in Central Asia, Iran, Syria and East Africa. The Agha Khan is the leader of the latter group.

## **ISRAEL, HISTORY**

In 1919 after the end of World War II (1914-1918) and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France divided between them the Empire's Middle East holdings. In 1920 the League of Nations gave Britain the mandate in Palestine, which was formerly under the control of the defeated Ottoman Turks. Emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to Palestine had been growing as a result of anti-Semitic violence and a movement called Zionism. The aim of the Zionist movement was to establish an autonomous Jewish home or state in Palestine, the ancient homeland of the Israelites, who were the forefathers of the Jewish people. In 1897 the first Zionist Congress was convened in Basle, Switzerland under the leadership of Theodor Herzl. Herzl was influential in gaining support for his idea of a Jewish state where Jews would no longer be considered as "others" and therefore often subjected to persecution. The movement was greatly encouraged by the Balfour Declaration issued by Britain in 1917 which expressed support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." With the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany in the 1930s Jews fled his brutal regime. Many of them emigrated to Palestine, purchased land and settled towns and cities. This rise in immigration deeply disturbed the Palestinian Arabs who feared the growing number of Jews would end in the Arabs losing their land. The "Arab Revolt" of 1936-1939 was the first major outbreak of Arab-Israeli hostilities, although British authorities were present as a dominant third party to deal with it. The Peel Commission, set up in 1937 to find a solution to the problem, recommended the partition of Palestine. Immigration of Jews was restricted during World War II (1939 -1945).

At the wars end, the horror of the Holocaust was revealed; this was the death of six million Jews, along with Gypsies, homosexuals, and other ethnic and political groups, in the Nazi concentration camps. There was great sympathy for the Jews among the western nations in particular and in November 1947 the United Nations voted, despite the strong opposition of the Arab people, to partition Palestine, dividing the land between Jews and Arabs. On May 14, 1948 the British mandate came to an end and Israel declared statehood. The next day Arab armies invaded Israel and fighting raged between them until January 1949 when separate armistices ended the war but failed to bring peace between the two peoples. Many Arabs fled or were driven from their homes in what is now Israel by the Israeli army. The Israelis had gained further territory and the west bank of the Jordan River designated for the Palestinians by the United Nations came under the

authority of Jordan. A small area along the Mediterranean, the Gaza Strip was controlled by Egypt. There were further confrontations in 1956 and in 1967. In 1967 Israel succeeded in the course of the war in occupying the West Bank and the Gaza Strip which held until 1994 when peace initiatives led to the formation of an autonomous Palestinian entity in the Gaza Strip and in Jericho in the West Bank.

## **JEWES OF NORTH AFRICA**

Jews have lived in North Africa, an area commonly known as the Maghrib (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya), long before Islam entered the area in the seventh century. As "People of the Book" Jews held a protected place in the Islamic community which permitted them to practice their religion. The Muslim ruler guaranteed their lives, liberty, and property and was responsible for their freedom of religion. Jews, in turn, like other non-Muslims, paid special poll and land taxes which were abolished in the nineteenth century. They lived in their own quarters in most towns and villages and governed themselves according to their own religious laws. However, if a conflict arose between a Jew and a Muslim, the conflict was settled in the Islamic courts.

The Jewish population in the Maghrib increased from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries due to the forced emigration of many Spanish and Italian Jews. The new immigrants gave urban Maghribi Jewish communities a somewhat European character. Jews formed different socioeconomic classes. The wealthier class was made up of bankers, businessmen, urban real estate investors, and merchants; artisans, grocers, peddlers and small-scale merchants formed the lower middle class, the dominant socioeconomic group. There were also sizable numbers of poor and unemployed Jews.

Colonialism in the Maghrib emerged during the nineteenth century and French policies in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco deliberately exploited existing differences between the Muslims and Jews. Privileges were offered to the Jews who were generally eager to accept them. In Algeria most Jews were accorded French citizenship in 1870. Elsewhere, Jews were given preferential access to places in French schools. Financial support was given to the Alliance Israelite Universelle, a French international education foundation, which operated primary and secondary schools for Jews throughout the Maghrib. As a result of French policies, many Jews adopted the French language and culture. At the same time, these policies produced among many Arabs a view of the Jew as collaborator. Jews were seen as profiting by, and becoming a part of, a political force that most Arabs considered oppressive and humiliating.

Italian colonialism arrived in the early twentieth century in Libya. The colonial policy pursued by the Italians was more moderate and accommodating. Steps were taken toward granting limited political rights to the people under occupation. In 1923 Italy annexed Libya and many Italians settled in the country. Jews and Muslims continued to coexist amicably.

Political changes in the Maghrib and in the Middle East from the late 1940s through the early 1960s resulted in the emigration of thousands of Jews to Israel, France and other French-speaking areas of the world. First were the independence movements in the Maghribi countries which heavily emphasized the place of Islam in an independent Arab state. Many Jews were reluctant to join these nationalist movements and expressed concern for their own future after independence, but other Jews supported the movements and made significant contributions. In Tunisia and Morocco a few of these supporters were rewarded with important positions in government after independence.

The Second important event was the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 in the heart of Arab and Islamic territories, and the Arab-Israeli war which followed its creation. Throughout the Maghrib there were protests and anti-Jewish riots. Violence, especially in Libya, and the potential for violence in other areas, encouraged Jews to emigrate. Other North African Jews emigrated to Israel for religious reasons.

After Tunisia and Morocco gained independence in 1956, Tunisia's Jewish population declined from approximately 86,000 in 1956 to 4,700 in the early 1980s, while Morocco's declined from 200,000 in the late 1950s to about 20,000 in the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, a sizable minority from each country chose not to leave. Both governments asked Jews to remain because their skills were needed. There were Jews who stayed because they held high and middle-level positions in government, business and education, while others with less education remained because they believed that few opportunities existed for them elsewhere.

Age, or the feeling that North Africa was still their home, was a determining factor for some Jews. In 1994, Tunisia's Jewish population was estimated at 872, while Morocco's was about 2,800.

In the case of Algeria virtually all of its 175,000 Jews had left, mostly for France, during its war of independence with France, 1954-62. Colonialism had been more invasive in Algeria than in Morocco or Tunisia, and most Algerian Jews had been French citizens since the nineteenth century and could not imagine life outside the French cultural and political orbit. Moreover, Algerian attacks on synagogues during the war, which reflected both bitterness toward a group seen as "turncoats" and displaced anger against the French, encouraged Jewish emigration.

In 1948 the Jewish community in Libya numbered 35,000. Following the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, anti-Jewish violence erupted in Libya, and in 1970 the revolutionary government confiscated most of the remaining Jewish property subject to compensation in government bonds. By the 1970s, fewer than 100 Jews remained in Libya.

## **MARRIAGE, ARRANGED**

Marriage in Arab societies was from the beginning a family affair in which the desires of the bride and groom had little importance. Thus young women entered marriage without any claim to their husband's affections. The practice of arranged marriage is by no means unique to the Arab world. Upper class European families with significant amounts of property were careful to arrange their children's marriages. Nonetheless, it is in Muslim societies that the practice continues to be reinforced by the recognition, in Islamic law, of "marriage guardians," usually the father or paternal grandfather, who may rightfully contract marriages for both men and women without their consent. Indeed, in most Arab countries, the minimum legal age for parentally supervised or arranged marriage is between 15-17 for girls, and slightly older for boys, although marriages not conforming to age requirements continue to be arranged and are often legally sanctioned. Consequently, "Muslim societies are almost totally married societies. Singleness disappears from the female population before age thirty." (Youssef, *Women in the Muslim World*).

Traditionally the aim of arranged marriage was to create a bond between two families, with personal attributes of the bride being of secondary importance. It also served the twofold function of reinforcing parental authority and establishing control over a woman's sexuality which, in the Arab world, is perceived as the principal threat to male honor and pride. Marriage negotiations are often handled in a series of stages, allowing the families to assess such aspects as the bride's current availability or the reputation of the groom and his family. Once an agreement is reached, the marriage guardians determine the mahr or brideprice - a sum of money to be paid to the woman's father, as well as clothes, jewelry, and furnishings given by each side. A sum of money is also frequently set aside to be paid to the wife in case of divorce. The amount of money that a groom or groom's family can pay is important in determining his eligibility as a spouse. Although the mahr theoretically belongs to the bride, she is often encouraged to leave the money with her parents to administer.

In the case where a woman refuses a proposal, she risks endangering the relationship between the families in question, and thus inciting the wrath of her parents. Yet the greatest pressure upon a woman to marry comes from her own community at large. Although Muslim women cannot be legally forced into an arranged marriage, an unmarried woman risks being socially marginalized. Moreover, as work and educational experiences outside the home are, in Arab societies, often associated with suspicions of loose, or immoral behavior, parents and male siblings are strongly compelled to scrutinize a daughter's every movement outside the home. "It is precisely because of this strict control that marriage comes into perspective for the single woman as an avenue of greater freedom." (Youssef, *Women in the Muslim World*). Some women, however, are especially at risk of being traumatized when faced with an arranged marriage. Exemplary in this respect are girls who, after having spent considerable time in a modern school, "are forced to return to a traditional pattern of subordination to husband and mother-in-law, breeding and childcare."

In certain Arab societies, recent developments in women's rights and personal status have allowed, at least in some families, for the bride's opinion to influence the proposal or for her to choose her own spouse. Moreover, whereas traditionally mothers did not inform their daughters that they were to be married until shortly before the allotted time, young women - even among the more conservative elites of Saudi Arabia -

now insist on seeing and knowing their future husband and are generally more active in taking decisions about their marriage.

It should be noted that in Iran, *mut'a* or temporary marriage is practiced, in addition to traditional marriage, by some Shi'i Muslims. According to this practice a man may take a temporary wife (*sigheh*) as his legal spouse. The duration of the marriage contract is agreed to by the couple upon the payment of a *mahr*. Once the agreed time period is up, the marriage ends automatically, with no need for divorce, unless renewed.

## MARRIAGE BETWEEN KIN

"No social rule is apparently more ancient than the incest prohibition." (Tillon). Yet, world history abounds with examples of marriages between kin, as do vestiges of traditional societies existing today. Although there are Islamic hadith which both oppose as well as support cousin marriage, many Arab communities have long held a preference for patrilateral cousin marriage, i.e., marriage between the children of two brothers. Such marriages are seen to strengthen kinship, which has historically played, and continues to play in many Arab social groups, a key role in structuring social and economic relations. (see Patriarchy). Marriage between kin has also been, and continues to be in some communities, a way of regulating the behavior of the husband and wife. If a husband beats or divorces his wife, for example, he risks cutting himself off from his own kin. On the other hand, if he abandons his wife without severing his kinship networks, the wife might be discouraged from suing for divorce, for to sue her cousin would do harm to the reputation of her entire family.

The practice of marriage between kin is equally common to non-Muslims, and can be observed among Jewish and Zoroastrian minorities in Iran. Moreover, in certain Mediterranean societies, such as Lebanon, marriages between an uncle and his niece can be found equally among Muslims, practicing Jews and old Arab Christians.

## MOSQUE

A mosque is literally "a place for prostration" but throughout the history of Islam it has been much more than a place of worship. It may serve as a school, council chamber, law court or a community center. Apart from beautiful rugs which cover every inch of floor space, lamps, a pulpit and a pool or fountain for washing, the mosque is usually empty of furniture. Though mosques can be storefronts or even a room, some of the most exquisite architecture in the Muslim world is seen in its mosques. Their beauty derives from the proportions of the construction and the harmony of the decoration in tile, stucco or mosaic. All mosques, however grand or complex, follow the same basic model, consisting of a covered hall for prayer and a walled courtyard for assembly and ablution. The focal point of the mosque is the *mihrab*, a niche which denotes the direction of prayer, which is always facing toward Mecca. Most mosques have one or more minarets, towers from which the *muezzin* calls the people to prayer.

## MUSEUM WEB SITES

Two of the great museums in the United States are the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the museums that are part of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC.

<<http://www.si.edu>>

<<http://www.metmuseum.org>>

A very useful site is the World Wide Web Virtual Library of Museums.

<<http://comlab.ox.ac.uk/archives/other/museums.html>>

## NAMES

In Islam, the seventh day after birth is important, for this is when the child is usually named and a sacrifice is often performed, although it is not absolutely required. People name their children after relatives, or saints, or sometimes auspicious events. But it is most common to follow the Prophet Muhammad's suggestion, giving children names with references to God such as *Abdallah* slave of God. The infant is given his or her own name, but there are other names that the individual will acquire over time. For example, when one has become a parent, one is entitled to use the *kunya* an honorific name prefaced by *Abu* (father) or *Umm* (mother). The child also bears a *kunya* either *Ibn* (son) or *Bint* (daughter). Thus

*Abu Zayd* is father of Zayd; *Umm Zaynab* or mother of Zaynab; *Ibn Umar*, son of Umar; and *Bint Ahmed*, daughter of Ahmad. Other honorific titles of interest are: *Hajj* (feminine *Hajja*) one who has gone on pilgrimage to Mecca; *Ayatollah*, miraculous sign of God; and *Shahid*, martyr, for someone who died in a holy war.

In Israel, among Jews from Europe, the custom of naming a child after a dead relative was common; or using the initial of that person as the beginning letter of a name. Hebrew names are also popular among Jews in Israel and elsewhere, but new names are growing out of the Hebrew language, names of animals, place names and names reflecting personal qualities such as *ehud*, compassion and *Gad*, fortune. Some chose names which reflected their hopes for the new land. David Green, first prime minister of Israel became David Ben-Gurion or 'son of a lion cub'. Jewish immigrants who wanted to feel part of their new homeland often translated their last names into Hebrew so that names like Berg, meaning mountain in German, became *Harari* in Hebrew. Hebrew names such as *Elisheva*, Elizabeth or oath of God, often include the syllable *el* in their name which means God.

### ORAL TRADITION OF LITERATURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Reciting stories and poems is a part of everyday life in the Middle East. In public it is enjoyed primarily by men and children, but within the circle of women the oral tradition is strong and often can illustrate sensitive issues of love, sex, marriage, etc. Men tell tales in coffee houses, public baths, wedding feasts and other celebratory occasions. In the past, and still to some extent today, accomplished poets would compose long original passages of rhymed verse relating to the occasion often with *rabab*, a fiddle-like three stringed instrument, echoing the spoken word. This type of performance can still be heard on radio, especially during the month of Ramadan.

### OTTOMAN ANATOLIA IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY: THE PEASANTRY

Anatolia is the peninsula of land that once served as the heart of the Ottoman Empire but today constitutes the Asiatic portion of Turkey. During the late nineteenth century, Anatolia possessed different land patterns. There were large estates, some of which included villages, which were either privately owned or which were owned by the state. In the latter case the Ottoman government leased the estate to a tax-farmer (*multezim*) who was responsible for the collection of the taxes on the estate and kept a percentage of the tax revenue. There were also small-sized landholdings (3-4 hectares) and middle-sized holdings (5-10 hectares), many of which were owned or rented by peasants. Although laborers were employed in some instances, the majority of direct workers of the land were sharecropping tenants, like Memed in Mustafa Kemal's novel *Memed, My Hawk*, and renters who held small- or medium-sized holdings. However, only share-cropping tenants on large holdings and owner-producers and rentals of small parcels of land are discussed here.

There were two different forms of sharecropping on large holdings. Sharecropping on some of the large estates in Southeastern Anatolia, Mehmed's home region, represented feudal or semi-feudal relations of production where the lord-peasant bonds were quite strong. An example of this type of relationship was found among Kurdish tribes. Kurdish tribal lords registered large tracts of land in their names through the 1858 Land Code. To cultivate the land they relied on their power to secure tribal members as tenants to work the lands and they reduced small peasant owners to sharecropper status through usury and other means.

In the other form of sharecropping on large holdings, which could be found in the regions of Western Anatolia and the Black Sea coast, the ties between lord and peasant were weaker and there was a more limited, economic arrangement of rent payment. Because of a scarcity of labor and a dominance of small peasant ownership, large landowners preferred to rent their land out to sharecroppers families. They represented an inexpensive source of labor power, particularly for cultivation of crops which required year-round work.

In both types of sharecropping arrangements, the tenants had very little to show for their work. They paid high interest rates on loans from the landlords (*aghawat*), a government tax on their agricultural output and

another on their animals, in addition to providing food for their families. In Anatolia, where laborers were in short supply, the sharecroppers were in perpetual debt, providing landlords with a constant source of labor. If tenants ran away, as Memed did, the landlord (*Agha*) had the right, based on the 1858 Land Code, to find them and force their return to the estate.

The peasants owning or renting small farms lived in various areas but were most dominant in Central Anatolia, where, in the late 1830s, numerous estates were broken up by the Ottoman government and redistributed to peasants. Many of the peasants produced cotton for export. They also paid a range of high taxes, similar to that of sharecroppers, while the large landowners paid fewer taxes. The small owner-producer also paid interest rates to money-lenders that ranged from 24% to 48%; large landowners were able to secure loans with lower interest rates from the Ottoman Agricultural Bank and other sources. The small owner-producers were also in permanent indebtedness, but they exerted high levels of effort and were content with very low levels of consumption in order to retain their farm. Moreover, while the government instituted high taxes, it also attempted to support the small peasantry against large landowners by prohibiting the expropriation of lands because of debts, except in the Southeastern Anatolia tribal areas.

In sum, peasant sharecroppers living on large estates and owner-producers and renters of small landholdings in late nineteenth century Anatolia lived in perpetual indebtedness and poverty because of the existing land patterns; unjust government laws that favored the wealthy and powerful; heavy taxation, which resulted in extensive revenue for the Ottoman government's treasury; and high interest rate on loans.

## **PALESTINIANS, HISTORY**

Palestine was, since ancient times, a crossroads between Asia, Europe and Africa. As a modern political identity it came into existence as a result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. Before the war the area was part of the vaguely defined region generally known as southern Syria. During the nineteenth century in Europe, Palestine was synonymous with 'The Holy Land' on both sides of the Jordan River. Palestine was occupied by British forces in 1917 and its separate identity was given international recognition when Great Britain assumed the mandate for Palestine and Transjordan under the League of Nations in 1922. The following year the British unilaterally divided the area of the mandate into Transjordan, east of the Jordan River, and western Palestine. The area east of the river eventually became the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, waves of Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe, settled in Palestine, altering the balance between the indigenous Arabs and the native and immigrant Jewish population. The mandate had included provisions of the Balfour Declaration calling for the "establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people" and "that the rights and position of other sectors of the population are not prejudiced." Opposition by the country's Arab majority to the establishment of a Jewish homeland increased the conflict between Arabs and Jews, and led to open warfare after the 1947 UN partition of Palestine into a Jewish and Arab sector. With the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel in May 1948, the west bank of the Jordan River came under Jordanian control, and the Gaza Strip under Egyptian control. As a result of the 1967 war between Israel and the Arab nations of Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq, Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian Liberation Organization was created in 1964 to fight this occupation and the state of Israel. After years of conflict and growing Palestinian nationalism, the PLO and Israel signed a Declaration of Principles in 1993 in Oslo, which included a five year plan for limited autonomy for Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank and a transfer of powers. There has been a decline in support for the peace process due to the violence and the slow pace of negotiations, and as of January 2000 the future of Palestine is still uncertain.

*Adapted from Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East. Simon and Schuster, 1996.*

## **PATRIARCHY**

"The best woman is she who delights her husband and obeys him when he commands her, and, in his absence, looks after his wealth and dignity." (Prophetic Hadith). As in many other traditional societies, family order in the Arab world has, long before the establishment of the Islamic faith, assumed a patriarchal form: Fathers, husbands, and sons are endowed with authority and a position within the family superior to that of mothers, wives, and daughters. Central to the institution of patriarchy in the Arab world is the

lineage system, in which the members of a lineage do everything in their power to keep the lineage as strong as possible, strength in this case deriving from the number of a family's sons. This system, while important to traditional urban upper classes, was and remains vital to the security of village and nomadic families, who must protect their land, water, and other rights from outsiders, local landlords or government representatives. Arab societies are also patrilineal, i.e., they are based upon the male agnatic tie. Unlike daughters, whose names are not registered separately from their fathers, sons carry on the family name. Sons are also expected to provide for their family financially, as it is the custom for daughters to join the family of their husband upon marriage.

Islamic family law, while subject to many local variations and interpretations, continued to reflect both patriarchal and patrilineal traditions. Thus religion, despite certain injunctions of the Quran to the contrary, served to reinforce the inferior position already occupied by women. Traditional patriarchal norms entwined with religious duty meant that a woman was to be unconditionally obedient to her husband. Many of her basic life decisions (marriage, divorce, inheritance) were and are, in certain communities, decided by him. In Arab societies, a wife is also a repository of family honor. A wife's obedience to her husband's commands reflects directly on his reputation in the community. Thus, in order to protect family honor, a husband has the right to control his wife's movement outside the house, to determine to what extent she may interact with other men, and to decide whether she can work for wages or seek an education. Disobedience on her part might compel him to repudiate or divorce her, or to bring a second wife into the house. In the case of divorce, it is the husband who, according to religious law, receives custody of the children after they have reached a certain age. Only when a husband overtly violates Islamic teaching or revered tradition might his wife refuse to conform to his demands.

Although traditional patriarchal behavior still flourishes in many Middle Eastern communities, many Arab women have developed strategies in order to counteract the effects of male control. For example, a wife might respond to her husband's oppression by leaving the house unkept, supplying insufficient food for guests, feigning mental or physical illness, or forming strong female bonds through neighborhood associations and kinship networks. Even in the highly conservative elite circles of Saudi Arabia, a young wife may now manage to escape strict supervision, especially in the anonymity of modern city life where she can more easily conceal an outing. In the past, Arab women have also been incited to challenge patriarchy through their participation in national wars of liberation from colonial powers. The demand for extra manpower in such wars or civil strife allowed many women, such as Palestinian and Algerian women, to overcome seclusion and to gain status as active and effective members of their country's resistance. Nonetheless, although an increasing number of Arab women are becoming visible, educated professionals, their concerns as women seeking rights continue to conflict with traditional groupings bent on propagating a seclusionist agenda.

Finally, it should be noted that not all Arab communities in the Middle East are patriarchal and patrilineal. The Al Tawariqu nomadic groups, dispersed along the Southern Sahara in Algeria, are both matriarchal and matrilineal, i.e., it is the mother's descent which dominates over that of the father. Customs common to the Al Tawariqu are the veiling of men, the right of women to have premarital relationships, to freely divorce their husbands, and to remarry without social constraints. For a Tarqui women, whether she is a virgin or not is irrelevant to her marriage. Moreover, a man who makes a woman pregnant and then refuses to father his child will suffer the contempt of his community. Arranged marriage, however, is occasionally practiced among the Al Tawariqu.

## **POLYGAMY**

Polygamy, the practice of having more than one legal wife, although not an exclusively Islamic institution, has been generally more common in Islamic countries than elsewhere. The Quran itself states that a man may "marry as many women as you wish, two or three or four. If you fear not to treat them equally, marry only one." (Quran, Sourat El Nissa: Verse 3). While the Quran also indicates that men "will not be able to be just between" their wives even if they try, the past majority of religious interpreters of Islamic law have largely ignored the injunction concerning equal treatment; thus they did not place legal restrictions on men who violate this religious precept. Those religious thinkers who have heeded the Quranic injunction, however, maintain that Islam forbids polygamy, since, in their view, it is humanly impossible for a man not to differentiate between his wives.

Reasons for practicing polygamy vary, especially according to class. In the Arab upper class, large polygamous establishments were not uncommon and might have included a combination of wives, concubines, and slave girls. All provided the wealthy man with status, and with female servants, entertainers, sexual partners and mothers for to bear hopefully enough children for his family to outnumber that of all his friends. Among the lower classes, the motivations for polygamy were more simple: the desire to have more women as workers, or to get a young wife to supplement a wife who had grown older. Although in many respects polygamy represents the pinnacle of male dominance, it is arguable that, within the cultural context of Arab societies, the practice has had some positive dimensions. Indeed, particularly in rural areas, polygamy has often served to foster female solidarity against the male master.

In the past few decades, the institution of polygamy has undergone reform in several countries of the Middle East. For example, it has been outlawed in Turkey and Tunisia, and curtailed in Morocco. Yet in most Arab societies, particularly in rural areas, men continue to legally or illegally bring additional wives into the house if the first does not comply with such expectations as sexual satisfaction, the fulfillment of domestic duties, or the bearing of sons. In urban areas, where the nuclear family predominates, it is relatively more common for women to occupy an important and responsible position in the household. With an education, a professional life, and reduced pressure from extended family, such women are less inclined to acquiesce in the practice of polygamy and may work to undermine it. However, in such countries as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, where little if any reform has occurred in the area of personal or family law, even among the urban elites there is nothing to stop a man having several wives. And in some countries, such as Algeria, the principal women's organization does not contest the right of a man to have four wives.

### **PUBLIC BATHS (HAMMAM)**

Inspired by the Roman and Greek practice of hot air bathing, hammams in Arab countries did not begin to proliferate until around 600 A.D., when the Prophet Muhammad himself recommended sweat baths to enhance fertility. Soon after, the hammam gained religious significance. It also became an annex to the mosque, and was used to comply with the Islamic laws of hygiene. So that people could bathe before morning prayer, it was traditionally required that the hammam be fully prepared before dawn.

Instead of the sizeable central baths built by the Romans, the Arabs preferred several smaller baths scattered throughout the city or town. These baths, like their larger Roman counterparts, became central to the social life of a town's inhabitants. Originally a religious and recreational meeting place for men of all social classes, the hammam was strictly forbidden to women. However, once the medicinal properties of the hammam became apparent, women were permitted. Although, initially, only those women who had just given birth or had an illness could enter the hammam, its steamy, secluded chambers soon became an important part of the lives of all Muslim women. Presently, the hammam provides a highly relaxing, though often noisy, atmosphere, in which women can revel in the rituals of bathing, massage, and beauty treatments, followed by a winding down in a sofa-filled rest hall. Here a variety of exotic refreshments are often served, depending on the fruit in season.

Although, in recent times, hammams have largely lost their wealthier patrons, they remain an important center of communication for many Arab women. Some women go once every week or two. Within the confines of the bath, women of all social classes can meet and gossip; and it is not uncommon for a village bath mistress to be the hub of her local women's communication network. The public baths also provide employment opportunities for widows, divorcees and spinsters who cannot count on family to support them. While the job of bath attendant or "scrubber" is low-status and strenuous, it nonetheless allows a woman to earn enough to survive.

### **QURAN**

The Quran, sometimes written Koran or Qur'an, is the sacred scripture of Islam. The literal meaning of the word is "recitation" because it consists of the collected pronouncements of the prophet Muhammad. Muslims do *not* regard Muhammad as the author of the Quran because the words of the Quran are believed to be the actual speech of God. Muhammad was simply the vehicle through which God chose to speak to humanity. The Quran is roughly as long as the Christian New Testament and is divided into 114 chapters known as *suras*, each of which has a name, usually relating to its initial word or some theme or incident in



it. *Suras* vary in length from two lines to over seven hundred. The first chapter, *al-Fatiha* (The Opening), is recited by devout Muslims every day as part of their prayers.

*In the name of Allah, the most Merciful, the most Kind.  
All praise is for Allah, the Lord of the Universe,  
the most Merciful, the most Kind;  
Master of the day of judgement.  
You alone we worship, from You alone we seek help.  
Guide us along the straight path-  
the path of those whom you favoured,  
not of those who deserve your anger or went astray.*

*(Ghulam Sarwar, Islam: Beliefs and Teachings, Muslim Educational Trust, 1982)*

## **SHADOW PLAY**

The Shadow Play is one of Asia's oldest forms of entertainment; still popular in the Arab world and other Mediterranean countries. Outside a coffee house or in the marketplace, a puppet master and his assistants manipulate the little leather figures, throwing their shadows on a white cotton or linen screen while they carry on a dialogue with a background of music. Older students can prepare a shadow play to share with young children in school or in a community setting. They will need to write the dialogue of the skit they are going to perform and make the puppet figures of the characters.

Shadow figures were traditionally made from leather and were carefully preserved over generations. However they are equally effective when cut from stiff paper and attached to a long thin piece of plywood. The screen can be made of white sheeting and stretched on a frame at least 3 feet by 3 feet. It can be smaller but it is harder to see for a group. The screen should rest on a table so that the performers can sit comfortably behind the screen while moving the puppets against it. A strong light behind the performers will throw the shadow of the puppets on the screen so that the audience will view the show from the other side. Background scenery is constructed in the same way. Bold outlining of the features of the puppets and of the scenery is most effective.

## **SILK INDUSTRY IN THE SYRIAN REGION AND THE SHARECROPPER**

In the excerpt from Fragments of Memory, an autobiographical novel by Hanna Mina, an impoverished Syrian family is seen living under a tree in a small village and dependent upon the charity of its people. The family, like thousands of others, were once sharecroppers in the silk industry, which included the production and export of silk, in its various forms, and which had become the focus of economic activity for much of the Syrian region from the 1850's to the early 1930's, despite periods of declines. Many French banks and merchant houses, in addition to local banks, investors and merchants, financed the silk industry during its existence. Mina's family, and thousands of others, some of whom worked as day laborers, were involved in the production aspect of the industry, while thousands of other families were concerned with the processing of silk for export and domestic use. When the silk industry collapsed for good in the 1930's, sharecroppers, among others, suffered great loss.

The production of silk, which was the concern of sharecroppers, began early in the spring in Syrian coastal towns such as Antioch, Latakia, Aleppo, al-Suwaydiya--temporary home of the Fragment's family--and in coastal towns that are now part of Lebanon, Tyre, Acre, Tripoli, in addition to the Mount Lebanon area. Landowners, renters of land and *multazims* (tax-farmers) purchased the silkworm eggs, which were either locally produced or imported from France, Japan or China. They would distribute the eggs to the sharecroppers (day laborers) who were responsible for their care during their development. The sharecroppers would then place the silkworm eggs in a shed or in one of the rooms of a small mud house the family occupied. In both cases, the structure was located in or near a field of mulberry trees. After a few days of incubation, tiny worms would emerge from the eggs sometime between late April and mid-May, depending upon the geographic location. Once hatched, the sharecroppers would feed the worms shredded leaves from the nearby mulberry trees, which in the 1890s covered sixty percent of Mount Lebanon and its environs. After having nourished themselves for days, the worms would crawl to pieces of *sheeh*, an oriental type of worm wood, provided by sharecroppers, and begin to fabricate a cocoon around themselves

for the next thirty to forty days. When finished, the cocoon was a little bigger than the size of a peanut in a shell. The sharecroppers would take the cocoons to a place where the enclosed silkworms were "choked," a steaming process used to kill them before they turned into butterflies, and to unseal the glue which kept a cocoon together. The cocoons were then placed in bags for sale to silk merchants by a landowner.

The division of bags between the landowner and a sharecropper was based upon the power relationship between the two parties. As in Fragments of Memory, the landowner would often take seventy-five percent of the bags of cocoons produced and would pay the sharecropper for the other twenty-five percent, minus any debt incurred for the purchase of food and supplies. Sharecroppers would then purchase more supplies, plant a vegetable garden near his home, pick and dry figs, and perhaps press grapes and olives for himself or for other people. Sharecroppers were also often expected to work for the landowner at any time and without pay.

The silk processing phase began after merchants sold the cocoons to silk-reeling, or spinning, factories. In the early years of the 20th century there were one hundred and ninety-five French owned factories and one hundred and eighty-eight owned by local people. The factories were usually located in rural areas and close to mulberry tree estates and employed thousands of people, including hundreds of unmarried women, who unwound cocoons and twisted them into fiber strong enough to handle. Some of the fiber, or thread, was then sent to thousands of peasant homes where it was woven into fabric. The poor grades of thread and fabric were kept for domestic use while the best grades were exported to Europe, mostly to five major factories or merchant houses in Lyons and Marseilles. Initially the manufactured silk fabric was the dominant form of export, however the spun thread gradually replaced it as the main silk export. By the end of the 19th century the export of the cocoons had replaced the thread to the extent that it represented over half of the silk exports to the silk-reeling factories in France. In the early years of the twentieth century silk exports accounted for about 45% of the total value of exports from Syria.

After reaching its peak in 1910, the silk industry collapsed permanently in the early 1930s. During this twenty year period the industry had suffered from Japanese and Chinese competition in the silk trade and the effects of the first World War (1914-1917), when famine necessitated increased fruit and grain production and replaced most silk-related activity. At the end of the war, with encouragement from French banks and investors and the silk factories of Lyons, the industry enjoyed a brief revival but collapsed for good in the early 1930s for a number of reasons: an industry largely dependent upon imported eggs; an inefficient structure composed of thousands of scattered workers; dependency upon French capital and market; and more importantly, an inability to compete with the low prices of rayon (artificial silk made from cellulose), and the world's economic depression. The permanent collapse of the silk industry had devastating effects on entire villages up and down the coast and in the Mount Lebanon area, places where the production and processing had been the main focus of economic activity. Some large, but many small, landowners lost their land to debt. Day laborers and sharecroppers like the family in Fragments of Memory lost the only source of their meager income. Sometimes families were able to generate a little temporary income from the indentured labor of daughters. Once this income was used families, like the one in Fragments, ended up destitute and dependent upon the charity of others. It would be years before an economic recovery occurred.

## **TAURUS MOUNTAINS OF TURKEY**

The Taurus Mountains, *Toros Daglari*, consist of a system of fold ranges: the Western Taurus, Middle Taurus, and the Southeastern Taurus, that extends in broad arches along the Mediterranean coast of southern Turkey and north of Syria. The Taurus system is rugged and relatively inaccessible. It is composed mainly of limestone and therefore is full of caves, potholes, and underground streams. However, some areas in the Taurus are forested, with oak, fir, and pine. The edges of the mountains have also been a source of minerals, such as chromite, lead, and iron.

The Western Taurus, starting on the Mediterranean coast, near Fethiye, is a fold range that trends northeast as far as Lake Egridir and then turn abruptly southeast to the coast between Alanya and Silifke. Each flank of the Western Taurus is composed of a series of folds and each fold, in turn, contains three to five distinct

ranges. The elevation of these ranges run between 5,000 and 7,000 feet above sea level. There are numerous lakes, most of which are saline, in the northern part of the Western Taurus. The Taurus also has a mountain wall, which acts as a barrier to movements. Roads are few and no rail communication exists with the rest of Turkey; the whole of the region is in marked isolation from its neighbors. To the south of the Western Taurus, and fronting the Mediterranean, there is a lowland plain, the Plain of Antalya, where the soil is fertile.

East of Silifke, the Western Taurus gives way to an arc, with an abrupt change of trend. This second fold of ranges is called the Middle Taurus, although it is also known as the Main Taurus. It runs northeastward from Silifke, is narrower than the Western Taurus, but has elevations that reach 12,251 feet above sea level. It also contains five gaps or passes which have been important in the movement of migrating people and invading armies into interior Turkey. The most famous passageway in ancient times is the Cilician Gates. Another pass is presently used by the railway, which runs from Ankara to Aleppo.

To the east and southeast, and running parallel to the Middle Taurus, is another series of fold ranges known as the Southeastern Taurus range, also called the Anti-Taurus. The Southeastern Taurus possesses the highest points in the Taurus Mountain system, with *Mor Dagi* and the heavily glaciated *Cilo Dagi* reaching elevations of 12,490 and 13,504 feet above sea level, respectively. These fold ranges also contain valleys and gorges, as well as recent and ancient lava flows in the north.

Excluding the *Amanus* range and the *Kurd Dag*, two fold ranges, which are structurely a part of the Southeastern Taurus with a similar trend, but which are separately distinguished, there are five parallel ranges within the Southeastern Taurus system. Four of the ranges die away about forty miles to the northeast of Adana and give rise to a lowland basin, the Seyhan-Ceyhan Plain. The fifth range continues further to the southwest as the *Misis Dagh*, and forms the western side of the Gulf of Iskenderun. The Gulf, which lies between the two fold ranges of *Misis Dagh* and *Amanus*, provides the only natural deepwater harbor on Turkey's southern coast.

Yasar Kemal, the author of *Memed, My Hawk*, provides a description of the area north of the Gulf of Iskenderun to a place perhaps in the foothills of the Southeastern Taurus, but not far from from the Middle Taurus, and the setting for his story. He writes in the first chapter of his fictional novel:

*A little farther inland, beyond Anavarza on one side and Osmaniya on the other, on the way to slahiye and beyond the low hill-tops . . .the rocks suddenly begin to appear and with them the pine trees. Beyond the pines are plateaux where the soil is grey and arid, the snowcapped peaks of the Taurus appear very close, almost within arms' reach. Dikenli, the Plateau of Thistles, is one of these highland plains, with five small villages clustered on it. It is here, in one of the small villages, where Memed lives.*

Historically, the Taurus Mountains, which consist of the Western Taurus, Middle Taurus, and the Southeastern Taurus, were a barrier between the Mediterranean Sea and the interior of Anatolia, although gaps allowed for the passage of people. The mountains, especially in the eastern portion of the Southeastern Taurus, have often served as strongholds for oppressed groups who were able to resist outside attacks and maintain control. The mountains have also been used by fleeing rebel groups who found their inaccessibility to their advantage.

## **TURKEY, GLOBAL INEQUITY AND THE ECONOMICS OF**

Global inequity can be defined as the vast differences throughout the world in the standard of living of a countries people. This is usually measured by:

- per capita income - the average national income.
- gross domestic product - total flow of goods and services produced by the economy over a period of time, normally a year.

- gross national product, the gross domestic product plus income accruing to domestic residents arising from investment abroad, less the income earned in the domestic market accruing to foreigners abroad

Economic differences between Turkey and the United States can be used as one example of global inequity. There are enormous disparities between the economies of Turkey and the United States and other Middle East countries. For example the per capita income in Turkey is \$1,120, in the U.S.A. it is \$18,400, according to figures in *Global Studies Series: Middle East* (3rd edition) Dushkin Publishing Group 1989. The gross national product of these two countries are \$58.1 billion and \$4,486 billion, respectively. The difference in GNP should, however, be seen in the light of the corresponding figures for each country's population; Turkey has 54,168,000 people and the United States has 252,502,000

Tourism is a major source of foreign currency for Turkey. By the late 1980s Turkey received an estimated \$1.3 billion from about 2.8 million tourists. Visitors come from the United States and from around the world to see the ancient ruins, to visit the beautiful beaches along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, and to ski in the mountains of the northwest. Since 1984 a large number of tourists have come from the wealthier Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to see the historic mosques and art treasures of Islamic Turkey.

### **TURKISH FOLKLORE**

While the myths of Greece and Rome are familiar to many, it is probable that the oldest stories of humans, gods, and demons came to us from Turkey, found on tablets of clay in the ruins of the ancient Hittite Empire (1450-1700 BCE). For hundreds of years myths, fairy tales and folk tales have been recited in village homes and coffee houses throughout the land. The themes are familiar to us, the king putting his child to the test, a lover disguised as an animal till true love frees him; tales of courage and adventure, goodness and wickedness, heard and read the world over. But originating in Turkey are the Tales of the Hodja by the humorist Nasr-ud-Din, a legendary figure believed to have lived in the 14th/15th century during the reign of the early Ottoman sultans. The honorary title of Hodja denotes the rank of a scholar well-versed in the Qur'an. Folksy, witty and humorous these tales delight the reader while portraying foolishness, hypocrisy and home truths.

A very popular form of folklore the world over is the proverb or wise saying. A collection of 4,000 Turkish proverbs was published more than one hundred years ago and these same proverbs can still be heard to this day.

- Stretch your feet according to your blanket.
- Thorns and roses grow on the same tree.
- Open your eyes, not your mouth.
- Stairs are climbed step by step
- Beauty passes, wisdom remains.
- A hungry stomach has no ears

### **VEIL**

See ISLAM

See WOMEN AND FAMILY

### **THE WHITE SISTERS**

The Roman Catholic order of the White Sisters, officially known as the "Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa," and mentioned in the excerpt from Fadham Amrouche's *My Life Story: The Autobiography of a Berber Woman*, was founded in Algiers, Algeria, in 1869, by Charles Lavigerie (later a cardinal in the Catholic Church) and Mother Marie Salome. The mission of the White Sisters is to serve the spiritual and material welfare of African women through religious, social, medical, educational and cultural works in various African countries. Today, the congregation of White Sisters, whose habit, or dress, is now brown and white rather than only white, is estimated to consist of 1,475 members, representing diverse

nationalities, race, background, and education. Frascati, Italy, serves as the location of their general motherhouse.

## **WIDOWHOOD**

In Arab societies (including Arab Muslim communities in Israel), the situation of the widow often differs substantially from that of the divorcee. The widow, together with her children, generally returns to her family, where she is fully supported financially. Unlike a divorced woman, a widow is not usually expected to remarry. Moreover, if the widow has several children and is relatively aged, she is less likely to find another spouse, especially as her widowhood is often seen as a "bad omen" in Arab culture. These factors combined provide sufficient rationalization for the widow to be secluded in her parental home and confined to a life of chastity in memory of her late husband and devotion to her children. Although widows seem to have greater social mobility than divorced or abandoned women, they may find it equally difficult to become economically independent. Even if they are able to find a position in their local labor force (as bathhouse workers, seamstresses, courtesans, etc.), they may find themselves socially and culturally marginalized. However, in some areas, such as present-day rural Morocco, widows are often given a measure of status by being allowed to manage the cultivation of land, a traditionally male preserve.

In Israeli Jewish communities, widows, like divorcees, typically lose social and economic status after the end of their marriages, although war widows do enjoy certain benefits and extra status. However, it remains true that when the husband dies, a widow and her children are often expelled to the margins of their social circle.

## **WOMEN'S RIGHTS *see* ALGERIAN WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

### **WOMEN AND FAMILY**

Many of the customs relating to women and family in the Middle East, such as courtship, engagement, marriage, divorce, and inheritance, differ significantly according to geographical location, education, and social status. There are especially noticeable differences between urban practices, on the one hand, and, on the other, those of rural, Bedouin, and tribal communities. However, certain customs do prevail in the majority of Arab communities. For example, Muslims are generally expected to marry in order to produce children, especially males, for the purposes of increasing the Muslim community their own family. As marriage and motherhood are seen in traditional Arab milieus as the sole sources of a young woman's identity, she experiences a strong pressure from family and community to marry during her adolescent years.

Many of the patriarchal features typically found in Middle Eastern societies, especially in rural areas, have long existed in southern and parts of eastern Europe, China, India, and elsewhere. Nonetheless, it has been in Arab society and culture, perhaps more than others, that attitudes toward women have been determined by patriarchal traditions and family honor, central to which is female chastity. Although the subordinate position of women is governed by Islamic law in its various interpretations, it was a combination of Quranic, interpretive, and older Near Eastern concepts which caused it to be codified into law and embodied in customs. As anthropologist Germain Tillon observes, "when religion has taken over a custom that predates it, practice invariably reinforces the law. Conversely, when religion has opposed custom, the incidence of religious infractions will give us the most valuable evidence concerning how deep-rooted the usage in question is." This point is particularly brought to light in the fact that, in many Arab societies, many of the Quranic rules favorable to women have been largely unheeded or ignored.

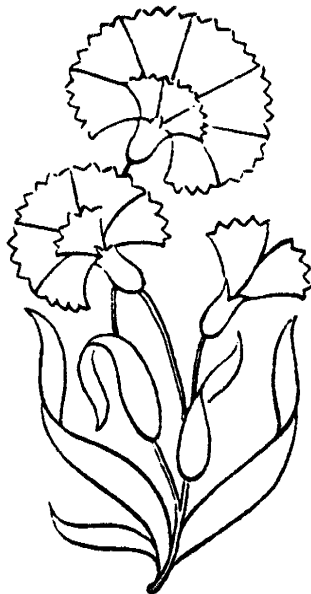
### **WORKERS AND STUDENTS OVERSEAS**

Many young men, and some women, leave the the Middle East to study or work overseas. Europe is a favorite destination for men seeking low skilled jobs because there is more opportunity there. In countries like Egypt and Morocco there is high unemployment; overseas workers contribute greatly to the families' finances. However, there is a growing hostility towards foreign workers in many parts of Europe, leading to prejudicial and hostile acts. This treatment of foreigners causes resentment and anger among the workers towards Western countries.

Other young people go abroad to study at universities and often, when they return to their own countries, can not find jobs in their fields. They return with a knowledge and experience there may be no outlet for and this can lead to dissatisfaction and unrest.

# **Different Voices: Different Lives**

## **Glossary**







<b>'aba'ah</b>	A black cloak-like wrap worn by women in Saudi Arabia and in other Arab countries. It is called a <i>chador</i> in Iran. It is sometimes spelled <i>abiyah</i> .
<b>ablution</b>	The Muslim ritual of washing ones hands and feet to purify oneself before prayer.
<b>abu</b>	Arabic word for father.
<b>Abu Zaid</b>	See Background Notes.
<b>agha</b>	A Turkish military officer; landlord; master, lord, sir.
<b>aghawat</b>	Plural of agha.
<b>'Ali b. Abi Talib</b>	The cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. 'Ali was the First Shi'a Imam and also the 4th khalifa to rule over the Islamic community (656-661).
<b>aliyah</b>	A wave/s of Jewish immigration to Palestine, then to Israel. See "Israel, history" in Background Notes. (plural aliyot)
<b>'alhadari</b>	A form of religious poetry which is sung unaccompanied.
<b>Allah</b>	Arabic word for God.
<b>alum</b>	Any of various double sulfates of a trivalent metal, especially aluminum potassium sulfate.
<b>Anatolia</b>	The Asian part of Turkey. Anatolia is also referred to as Asia Minor.
<b>Arab Legion</b>	The name of Transjordan's military force that was involved in the Arab and Jewish conflict concerning the division of Palestine in the 1940s. Transjordan is now known as Jordan.
<b>al-barani</b>	The outer hall of a public bath.
<b>arak</b>	A strong colorless liquor made of raisins; milky white when diluted with water.
<b>baraka</b>	Supernatural blessing or grace.
<b>barouche</b>	A four-wheeled carriage with a collapsible top, two double seats inside and opposite each other, and a box seat outside for the driver.
<b>bath attendant</b>	See "hammam".
<b>bazaar</b>	A market, usually covered in Iran. See "souk".
<b>beads</b>	See "prayer beads."
<b>Bedouin</b>	Nomad, nomadic, rural. The name given to nomadic tribes that moved family and flocks around desert regions in the Middle East. Many of these people now live in settled areas.
<b>bey</b>	A Turkish title for a military commander, provincial governor in the Ottoman Empire, and sometimes an independent ruler; and a Turkish title of honor and respect.
<b>bride-price</b>	It is also known as the bridal gift ( <i>mahr</i> ). The gift, which may be cash or in kind, is announced at the signing of the marriage contract. It becomes the property of the bride,

technically, but most often ends up in the hands of the family. If the husband divorces the wife, she receives either all or half of the bridal gift, depending on the time of the divorce.

<b>British Mandate</b>	The League of Nations's approved system whereby Britain, as an "advanced" state was to tutor a less advanced state in the complexities of democratic self-government until the latter was ready to rule itself. The British Mandate included Palestine and Transjordan, the latter now known as Jordan.
<b>carob</b>	An evergreen tree of the Mediterranean region having compound leaves and edible pods.
<b>Chapter of the Merciful</b>	A chapter, <i>sura</i> , from the Quran. See "Islam, Quran" in Background Notes.
<b>chador</b>	A black cloak-like wrap worn by women in Iran. See "'aba'ah."
<b>circumcision</b>	For Middle Eastern males, whether Muslim, Jewish or Christian, circumcision is regarded as essential and is performed at various ages to puberty. It is public and marked by ceremony. Some Muslims and Coptic Christian girls are also circumcised at about seven or eight years old, however, the operation is performed in private and without ceremony. Female circumcision can range from making a slight scar on the clitoris to removal of the labia. The practice occurs in such diverse regions as Egypt - although it is now illegal in that country - Sudan, Arabia, Africa south of the Sahara and southeast Asia. The farther one travels up the Nile Valley into central Africa, the more severe a version of the operation.
<b>Cossack</b>	A person from the Crimea in the Ukraine.
<b>couscous</b>	A traditional dish of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, couscous is made from coarsely ground durum wheat called semolina and is precooked.
<b>damun</b>	Fertilizer, manure, dung.
<b>darbouka</b>	A drum with a round top and a narrow base.
<b>dervish</b>	A Sufi mystic. The most familiar dervishes were those who were members of the Turkish Mawlawiyya Sufi order, know colloquially as "the Whirling Dervishes," because members danced and whirled around their sheikh as they voiced their dhikr.
<b>dhikr</b>	"Remembrance," a Sufi practice of repeating or remembering God's name to become more conscious of God's presence. Often accompanied by music and dancing.
<b>Diab</b>	A character in stories.
<b>djellabah</b>	A full loose garment with a hood and with sleeves and skirt of varying length worn in Morocco.
<b>djinns</b>	Spirits, genies, invisible beings, either harmful or helpful, that interfere with the lives of mortals.
<b>efendi</b>	Gentleman (when referring to non-Europeans wearing Western clothes and a "tarboosh"); title of an educated, professional man; used after the name, it is a title of respect.
<b>ezba</b>	An agricultural estate or farm.
<b>faqih</b>	A scholar of Islam; a jurist.

<b>Farid el-Attrash</b>	A famous Lebanese-born singer, musician, and actor who lived most of his life in Egypt. He sang and played traditional Egyptian music. El-Attrash died in the 1980s.
<b>Fayruz</b>	A very popular Lebanese songstress.
<b>al-fatiha</b>	Literally “the opening,” refers to the first chapter ( <i>sura</i> ) of the Quran. It is a prayer that is memorized by all Muslims and is recited during daily prayers, when an engagement is agreed upon, and on many other ritualistic occasions.
<b>feast of the sheep</b>	Also called “the feast of the great sacrifice,” <i>‘Id al-Adha</i> or <i>‘Id al-Kabir</i> . It is the celebration that ends the pilgrimage at Mecca.
<b>feddan</b>	One feddan is approximately equal to 1.03 acres.
<b>fellah</b>	A tiller of the soil, a peasant man, a laborer. (Plural fellahin)
<b>fellaha</b>	A peasant woman, peasant girl. (Plural fellahat)
<b>flagellating</b>	Whipping or flogging, usually done as a religious practice.
<b>galabia</b>	A loose, full-length outer garment made of either cotton or wool that is worn by men in the Gulf states and in North Africa. It is also known as a <i>dishdasha</i> in the eastern Gulf states. (Gallabeyya and gallabiehs are variations in spelling)
<b>gefilte fish</b>	Fish-balls made of ground up fish.
<b>ghandagh</b>	Sweetened hot water.
<b>ghardara</b>	Earthenware dish from which one eats food. (Plural ghadarat)
<b>ghutra</b>	A headcloth worn under the <i>'iqal</i> , or a circular hard band of material that sits on top of the head, by men in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.
<b>Giza</b>	A city on the Nile and a part of metropolitan Cairo. Giza is also the site of the Great Pyramids.
<b>Golah</b>	Hebrew for “Diaspora”. Jews living dispersed among gentiles.
<b>hagg</b>	Literally “pilgrim.” The word is also used as a term of respect to an older person.
<b>haik</b>	An outer garment that covers the head and body and is worn by Algerian women.
<b>hajj</b>	The pilgrimage to Mecca.
<b>hajji</b>	A male pilgrim; an honorable title of a man indicating that its bearer has made a pilgrimage to Mecca. (feminine: <i>hajja</i> )
<b>hammam</b>	Arabic word for “bath.” Public baths were, and sometimes still are, places for social gatherings as well as for cleansing the body.
<b>hareesa</b>	A dish of meat (ox) cooked with husked wheat.
<b>harem</b>	A harem is one of many words derived from the Arabic word, <i>haruma</i> , meaning “to be forbidden, or unlawful, or sacred.” A harem by definition means sanctuary or sacred place, an area with restricted or limited access. The private quarters in a domestic

residence and by extension its female residents are also referred to as a *harem* because access to these quarters is forbidden to men who are not close relatives. The *harem* was where the indoor work of the family was planned and carried on.

<b>hectare</b>	One hectare equals 2.471 acres.
<b>henna</b>	A reddish orange cosmetic gained from the leaves and stakes of the henna plant. It is used by women to decorate the body in intricate designs, mostly the hands and feet, on special occasions. It may also be used to dye or rinse hair.
<b>hookah</b>	(Persian) A water pipe. See “nargileh.”
<b>Hossein</b>	Son of 'Ali b. Abi Talib and Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Mohammad. He and his few companions were massacred at the Battle of Karbala (Iraq) by the Ummayyads in 680. He is revered by Shi'a Muslims. Hossein is sometimes transliterated as Hysayn or Hussein.
<b>howdah</b>	An upholstered seat with wooden posts which supports a canopy and curtains and which is placed on a camel's back. Women and children rode in howdahs without being seen when taking long or short journeys.
<b>imam</b>	A prayer leader; a religious leader.
<b>Imam Ali</b>	See 'Ali b. Abi Talib.
<b>infidel</b>	In Arabic <i>al-Kufr</i> . It means unbelief in God or blasphemy, but in Islam it has the stronger meaning of one who denies God, the one sin that cannot be forgiven.
<b>juwani</b>	The innermost hall of a public bath.
<b>Kabylia</b>	A region in Northeast Algeria which is populated by Berbers.
<b>kaffiyyeh</b>	A headdress of cloth worn by Arab men, often patterned in checks. It is worn with a circular band of material, an <i>'iqal</i> that is used to hold the scarf on the head. It is also known as a <i>ghutra</i> in some of the eastern Gulf states.
<b>al-khayriya</b>	The vow or votive offering, where the animal is slaughtered and the hareesa cooked at the shrine of a saint.
<b>kaid</b>	A district administrative officer.
<b>Karbala'iyi</b>	A title given to a person who has performed the pilgrimage to Karbala, the holy city for Shi'a located in central Iraq. See “Hossein.”
<b>Khadija</b>	A woman's name taken from the name of the Prophet Muhammad's first wife.
<b>Khalifa</b>	Arabic word for a chief.
<b>al-Khidr</b>	“The Green one,” a mysterious figure in Near Eastern folklore, who is thought sometimes to bestow blessings, protection, and mystical initiation. He is considered to be a special agent of God.
<b>Kilim</b>	A carpet or rug, usually long and narrow.
<b>kismet</b>	Fate, fortune.
<b>kohl</b>	A powder used by women in Middle Eastern countries to darken their eyelids.

<b>Kokuc</b>	An Anatolian game played by children on a dung heap.
<b>Kuthair of Amzah</b>	An Arab literary hero.
<b>lira</b>	Italian currency.
<b>loofah</b>	The fibrous pod of an Egyptian plant, used as a sponge when bathing.
<b>mabruk</b>	Arabic meaning “congratulations.”
<b>mabruk arusa</b>	Arabic meaning “congratulations bride.”
<b>mandeel</b>	A handkerchief.
<b>marabouts</b>	Persons, living or dead, who are believed to have a special relationship with God which makes them particularly well placed to serve as intermediaries with the supernatural and to communicate God’s grace <i>barakah</i> to their clients. See “Islam, saints” in Background Notes”.
<b>mashtah</b>	A woman whose profession is to help women dress and to decorate them with cosmetics and accessories, particularly brides on their wedding day.
<b>medlar tree</b>	A tropical fruit tree.
<b>misbahah</b>	A chain of beads on which the faithful recite the ninety-nine “names,” i.e., attributes of God. See also “rosary”.
<b>mizmar</b>	A pipe musical instrument.
<b>Mohammedan</b>	An incorrect term describing a Muslim and meaning a follower of Muhammad. The Europeans of earlier centuries did not understand that while a follower of Christ, called a Christian, believes that Christ is the Son of God, a Muslim, which means “one who submits to the Will of God,” or a follower of God, views Muhammad only as the Prophet and Messenger of God and as a role model; he is not divine.
<b>monstrance</b>	A vessel in which the Host, the blessed bread that is believed to be the body of Christ, is displayed in the Roman Catholic church.
<b>muezzin</b>	A Muslim crier who calls the hour of daily prayers from the minaret of a mosque.
<b>Muhammad</b>	The Prophet of God in Islam who received revelations from God through the angel <i>Jabril</i> (Gabriel).
<b>mujaddarah</b>	A Syrian and Lebanese dish of rice, lentils, onions, and oil.
<b>mukhtar</b>	A village chief; a headman.
<b>mullah</b>	A local religious leader.
<b>mulukhiyya</b>	An herb similar to spinach used as the main ingredient in an Egyptian dish of the same name.
<b>nargileh</b>	A long tubular eastern tobacco pipe in which the smoke passes through water before reaching the mouth.
<b>nazir</b>	A farm superintendent.

<b>oke</b>	One oke is equivalent to approximately 1 1/4 kilograms.
<b>omdah</b>	See “umda.”
<b>Ouled-Nail girls</b>	Arabic for “children of the Nile.”
<b>para</b>	Yugoslavian currency; one hundred paras equals one dinar.
<b>piastre</b>	Egyptian currency; one hundred piastres is equal to one Egyptian pound.
<b>prayer rug</b>	A small woven rug used for daily prayers by Muslims. In Islam, formal prayer occurs five times a day.
<b>Prophet</b>	Refers to the Prophet Muhammad. See 'Islam, Muhammad' in Background Notes.
<b>purslane</b>	A trailing weed with small yellow flowers and fleshy leaves that are sometimes used in salads.
<b>al-Qadr</b>	The night of power, a night during Ramadan.
<b>Qais of Lila</b>	An Arab literary hero.
<b>Quran</b>	See Background notes
<b>Queen Hatshepsut</b>	An Egyptian pharaoh who is always portrayed in male dress.
<b>Ragazzi</b>	Italian slang for children.
<b>Ramadan</b>	The ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar. It is also the Muslim month of fasting which marks the revelation of the Quran.
<b>rosary</b>	See <i>misbahah</i> . The rosary in Islam is made up of 99 beads, the number of the names of God. The widespread habit of the Turks, and some other Islamic peoples, of carrying a rosary in the hand at all times, ostensibly as a memory device to encourage constant remembrance of God, was taken up by some as a profane custom of busying the fingers to pass the time which led to the unfortunate expression “worry beads”.
<b>Sabbath</b>	According to the Jewish calendar, the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week, Saturday, and it is observed as a day of rest and worship by Jews. For Christians, the Sabbath is the first day of the week, Sunday, and it is observed as a day of rest and worship by most Christians.
<b>Sabbath loaf</b>	Called <i>Challah</i> it is a braided loaf of bread eaten on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath.
<b>Sahara</b>	A vast arid area of northern Africa occupying over 3 million square miles and extending from the Atlantic coast to the Nile Valley and from the Atlas Mts. south to Sudan.
<b>Sahel</b>	The region below the Sahara in western Africa, including Niger, Mali, Chad, Upper Volta, Mauritania, and Senegal.
<b>sant</b>	A type of date palm tree.
<b>sayal</b>	A type of date palm tree.
<b>Sayyeda Zeinab</b>	Granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad.

<b>sayeda</b>	Master, chief, title of Muhammad's direct female descendants.
<b>Scheherazade</b>	The fictional narrator of <u>Tales of the Arabian Nights</u> or <u>The Thousand and One Nights</u> .
<b>setti</b>	Or <i>sitti</i> , Arabic for grandmother; often used as a title of respect when addressing older women.
<b>shabrawi clogs</b>	Type of footwear.
<b>Shaduf</b>	A counterpoise mechanism for raising irrigation water.
<b>sheikh</b>	A pious elderly man, a scholar of religion, a Sufi master, a teacher, or tribal leader.
<b>shtetl</b>	A village in Eastern Europe populated by Jews.
<b>shuyukh</b>	Plural form of sheik.
<b>sig</b>	A game of draughts, something like checkers, where pebbles are used for pieces and the ground serves for a board.
<b>skinbottle</b>	Usually made of goat skin and used as a canteen for carrying water.
<b>souk</b>	A traditional Arab market or bazaar. Often outdoors, they are sometimes covered with branches for shade or with permanent coverings, as is usual in Iran.
<b>soil of Aleppo</b>	A kind of clay, found around Aleppo in Syria, which is mixed with perfume and used in washing hair.
<b>Sufi</b>	A follower of Sufism, Islamic mysticism. See 'dervishes' in the glossary.
<b>Sura</b>	A chapter in the Quran.
<b>tajmaat</b>	A gathering of people, a crowd.
<b>tarboosh</b>	A round, dark-felt cap with a flat top and a black tassel.
<b>tattooing</b>	Tattooing on the chin was common among Berbers.
<b>temporary wife</b>	In Iran a woman can become a temporary wife by signing a contract with a man to be his wife for a certain fee and for a definite period of time. Any children born as a result of this temporary marriage are legitimate.
<b>toman</b>	An Iranian coin of small value.
<b>ululations</b>	A loud, protracted rhythmical sound made with ones tongue. It is made by women in the Middle East as an expression of joy, exuberance or mourning.
<b>umda</b>	Village headman.
<b>umm</b>	Mother, or, when preceding a proper name, the mother of so and so. This is used to refer to married women in a respectful way and in order to avoid calling them by their first names. For example, "Umm Hasan" means "mother of Hasan."
<b>wastani</b>	The middle hall of a public bath.
<b>water-pipe</b>	See "nargilleh."

**White Sisters** See Background Notes.

**youyous** See “ululations.”

**zikhr** See “dhikr.”

**Zionism** The Jewish national movement to establish a homeland. See 'Israel, history' in Background Notes.