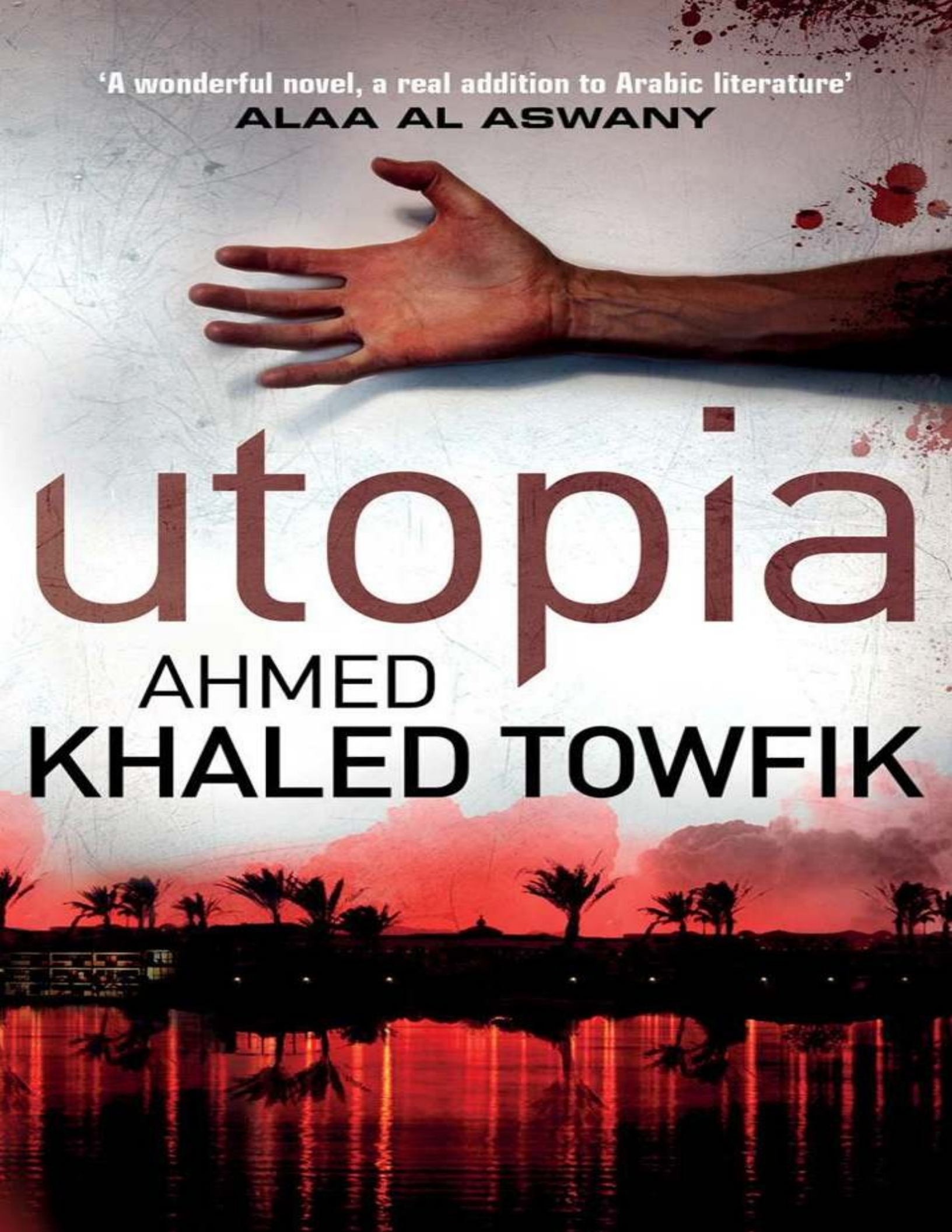
'A wonderful novel, a real addition to Arabic literature'
ALAA AL ASWANY



utopia

AHMED
KHALED TOWFIK

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UTOPIA

AHMED KHALED TOWFIK

Translated by Chip Rossetti



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Glossary
A Note on the Translator

The Utopia mentioned here is an imaginary place, as are the characters who live in and around it, even though the author knows for certain that this place *will* exist soon. Any resemblance to places and individuals in our present reality is purely coincidental.

Ahmed Khaled Towfik

Indeed I live in the dark ages!
A guileless word is an absurdity. A smooth forehead betokens
A hard heart. He who laughs
Has not yet heard
The terrible tidings.

Ah, what an age it is …

– Bertolt Brecht, translated by H.R. Hays

Part One

Predator

1

It was like the famous old poster for the film *Platoon*. That's what ran through my mind at the time.

The reason was that I have that poster hanging over my bed.

Willem Dafoe looks up to the sky – nothing separates him from it – lifting his arms as if in a final prayer. He has fallen to his knees after the bullets have ripped him apart, at the moment that death becomes larger than life itself, at the moment that death becomes a kind of artistic beauty.

The scene was fearsome, especially since it wasn't on the television screen. Everything was real and terrible and cruel and, and …

And seductive.

Please don't deny it.

I saw him standing, worn out by exhaustion. With the loss of blood and hunger wearing him down, he couldn't undertake this pursuit to the end. I saw him bend over, his palms on his knees, trying to catch his breath. Then I saw him look up as the helicopter slowly and calmly circled around him. It had all the time in the world: there is no target clearer than an unarmed man in the sands of the desert. A man worn out by running. A man worn out by hunger. A man worn out by desperation.

Don't fight it, you idiot! What would a few more moments of living with the Others give you? What haven't you accomplished in the past twenty years that you planned to accomplish if you'd stayed alive? This flight of yours is no different from a cockroach fleeing on the kitchen wall, or an amoeba sliding under the lens of a microscope. It's the call of instinct, that's all. It's a flight reaction that nature planted within you. You should learn how to disregard it so you can get the rest you deserve.

The machine guns burst into life and he looked up. Yes, those shots are for *your* sake. They trace that long line in the sand, the line that passes by you. Willem Dafoe in the *Platoon* poster.

It occurred to me that film directors were stupid to show someone hit by bullets falling instantly to the ground. No, this man looked up and it seemed as if he wanted to say something, then he fell to the ground, his face in the sand.

Germinal gasped in terror but I noticed that glimmer in her eyes: the glimmer of excitement, no doubt about it. Her chest rose and fell. Our fingers touched as we stood there behind the wire watching the helicopter descend, throwing up a cloud of sand around it. Then the American guard jumped out of it to examine the corpse. He kicked it with the tip of his boot, then bent over to feel the carotid artery.

He gave the thumbs-up sign.

'Lovely!' he shouted in English.

Then he ran towards the helicopter and in seconds the giant mythical beast ascended, having completed its hunting assignment. All these guards were retired Marines – I don't know why – and they certainly weren't lacking in physical fitness.

Germinal gasped in terror.

Germinal gasped in ecstasy.

Death: the great game we haven't yet played.

I stand in front of the mirror.

I make sure my hair is shaved in the well-known style of the Mohawk Indians: shaved on the sides, with a tall purple tuft in the middle, like a rebellious wild rooster. My chest is bare except for several bulky necklaces covered with skulls and voodoo icons. I'm not a devil-worshipper; in fact, I don't believe in the existence of anything at all, but those things look provocative on my chest.

The tattoo is strange, too. Girls here like it. My shorts are carefully designed to show off my legs in the most macho way. Sometimes I go barefoot, but not today. I put the new ring through my nose, and the other ring in my eyebrow. I won't wear the tongue stud today. Then, patiently, I start colouring my teeth: red for the canines and yellow for the incisors. Blue for the molars. This dye is excellent and doesn't come off easily. They say it isn't toxic, but who cares about that? If only it were toxic!

I put in the new contact lenses that turn your pupils white. It has an exciting effect on girls when you look at them with eyes gone white, like you're the Grim Reaper. It really blows them away.

I make sure that the wound on my forehead is open. I meticulously manipulate the edge of it so it looks bloody. Wounds are a turn-on, no doubt about it. It's a trend that appeared two years ago, and now there are people who specialise in it. The important thing is for the wound to look as grotesque as possible, and artificial, too, so people who see it won't be disgusted. There's a

real art to it.

An Israeli doctor who specialises in this art cut this wound for me. He said he studied it in New York. His name was Eli. He was a nice guy. He told me his father got a similar injury in the 1973 war with the Egyptians. He asked me if I knew anything about that: I told him that I had an uncle who had died in that war, but I didn't know the details. It's been fifty years since those events. I don't know why – at some point – the Egyptians used to hate Israelis. But I've got no interest in understanding those things. I might go to war, if I was asked to, for one reason: to break up life's routine. Walking through a hail of bullets in the desert with dead bodies scattered all around! How awesome would that be?

In Utopia, where death retreats behind barbed wires and becomes nothing but a game that adolescents dream of …

Sixteen years old, and you don't belong anywhere except Utopia. You're a Utopian resident, softened by a life of luxury and boredom. You end up unable to tell an American from an Egyptian from an Israeli. You end up unable to tell yourself apart from other people. If it weren't for the remnants of lust in your veins, you couldn't tell men from women.

Who am I? Let's not talk about names. What's the value of names when you're no different from anyone else?

Salim *bey* told me, 'You read a lot. You're crazy.'

I told him that reading, as far as I'm concerned, is a cheap drug. I use it only to withdraw from my conscious self. In the past, they used to read in order to gain consciousness. Imagine that!

I'm no longer a child. I'm past sixteen. I've read every book I could get my hands on until I'd had enough. Books are a rare commodity here, but I found a treasure trove of them with Salim *bey*, the editor-in-chief of that newspaper, who lives two hundred metres from my house. He has lots and lots of books, and I began reading as a challenge, because Mourad doesn't read, and neither does Larine. It's beautiful to do something they can't stand doing.

For some reason, I fell in love with this habit, and found in it magical worlds I could escape to whenever I wanted. Salim *bey* would watch me in amazement when I visited his office, saying, 'Believe me, son, there's nothing of interest in those books. I buy them because they make the office look sophisticated, but life is your only teacher.'

I didn't reply. I would take ten books at a time from him, exchanging them for some Libidafro, which I'd stolen from my father. Salim is a widower who hasn't remarried. So I can guess what he plans on doing with the Libidafro. This way,

before the age of sixteen, I'd read most of the books I'd found on philosophy and religion, as well as novels. I don't like reading about politics at all, and I take no interest in it. The same goes for history. I also read a lot on the Internet, and I seem to have read more than I should have because I can no longer stand seeing another book. No doubt that's why I'm more cultured than my friends.

At my relatively young age, I am pretty much satisfied that there is nothing new under the sun, and that not a single thing exists that you can learn any more. There's a social imbalance that has led to the state we're in, but it's an imbalance that should continue. Everyone who tries to reform it risks losing us everything. This is a situation like McCarthyism in the United States, when Americans in the last century felt that they had to defeat every leftist trend because it threatened their very existence. That's what Salim *bey* told me.

I've been intimate with every girl I found appealing, and I've tried all kinds of drugs, even the new phlogistine imported from Denmark, which smells like lemon. They say it's extremely expensive, but what does 'extremely expensive' mean? We chew this phrase in our mouths without knowing its meaning. What I do know is that it takes you far away the moment you put a drop of it on the skin of your forearm, and with it, you can see those seductive flames it gets its name from. You come back to your senses hours later, only to realise you need more.

I had started experimenting with marijuana – no big deal – and I've tried ecstasy and LSD. The problem with the latter is that you really can't be sure you're still alive until you come down from it. In every group, you have to have one person who doesn't take it so he can keep an eye on the others: they call that person the 'trip-sitter'. When euphoria penetrates the trippers' minds, jumping off a balcony, setting fire to themselves or staring at the sun until they go blind seem like very logical things to do. It's exciting, but I wouldn't like to be blind for the rest of my life.

I've tried lots of drugs. We buy them from the American guards, but the problem with drugs is that they lose their excitement if they're easily available. An important part of the game is that they should be forbidden and hard to get hold of; you should already be worried about your next hit as you take the first one. When drugs are available all the time, you lose any pleasure in them. They become boring and vulgar.

It doesn't help that my parents aren't used to watching me. No one interferes in my life in any way. I have a right to take anything in any quantity and at any price. If I can't, then they shouldn't have had me.

Being a parent isn't that much work. I could be a father to a hundred sons if you gave me a thousand women, and I'd thank you for them.

Today I told Larine that Suzanne is pregnant.

That's become routine in my life. I don't know why nature endowed me with such fertility. My father only had me, and I don't believe he was capable of having other children. But I came into the world as a real force of nature: I touch a girl and, a month later, she comes to me saying she's missed her period. What girl over twelve here hasn't had that experience and got used to it? In any case, the result is the same: I'll get a cheque from Larine and give it to the girl; the girl will head to the medical centre to get rid of this nightmare. A one-day operation ends it quickly – it's just that the girl is forced into a life without sex for two months. Really boring.

Suzanne … Katie … Maya … Germinal …

But I prefer the last of them for some reason. It isn't love, of course. Is she sexually exciting? Maybe. But I no longer know if the girl is a turn-on or not since they all look alike down to the last detail.

In exasperation, Larine told me: 'Don't you do anything else with your life except sleep with girls? It's getting tiresome.'

'Maybe I'm a lecherous pig,' I said as I stretched out my leg on the table in front of me. 'It's not my fault. It's hormones.'

'If only that was the case, but I really can't imagine you feeling pleasure or desire. You're doing it out of boredom, that's all.'

'Maybe I *am* bored,' I said in the same tone. 'It's still not my fault.'

What can you do in this artificial paradise? You sleep, you take drugs, you eat until food makes you sick, you vomit until you can recover the enjoyment of eating, you have sex (it's weird that you notice how boredom makes your sexual behaviour aggressive and sadistic). If you knew another way for a person to live his life, I'd be happy if you could tell me about it.

But I've found a way.

I'm no longer a child, as I told you. Ramy went hunting and he had a wonderful time. Shadi did it. Akmal tried it and couldn't keep anything from us. He showed us the souvenir he'd brought back from there. He seemed to have been under the influence of hashish, that vile drug they used to take at the turn of the century. Of course, in the year 2020, phlogistine has become the name of the game.

I decided to try hunting for myself.

It's Utopia, where looking for a way to pass every minute of your life consumes you.

2

I know why Rasim did it.

Sixteen years old, and centuries of accumulated experiences. Like the Roman emperors, there's nothing I haven't tried and nothing I haven't experienced. There's nothing new to stimulate your curiosity or your enthusiasm in Utopia. Nothing changes. Sometimes it seems to me that we are prisoners, and the people outside are the free ones. It reminds you of the Nazi concentration camps you see in war movies.

Utopia, the isolated colony that the rich created on the North Coast to protect themselves from the sea of angry poverty outside, and that now fences in everything they might want.

I can show you its landmarks: the giant gates, the electric fence, the security patrols run by SafeCo Inc., a company mostly staffed by former Marines. Sometimes one of the poor tries to sneak in without permission, and the helicopter hunts him down and kills him – just like it did in that scene I can't get out of my head.

Beyond that there's the Garden District, which has been set aside for schools – to convince parents that they are still 'those kind of people' – and for houses of worship, with its scattering of mosques, churches and synagogues. Some people here still insist on praying to a supreme being they can't see. Anyway, the younger generation has got rid of this habit. I think the adults cling to all that because they're afraid of losing everything in an instant – of losing their privilege, of finding themselves on the outside. They still don't feel that they deserve the life they're living, whereas the younger generation has come into the world believing everything is theirs by birthright. Anyway, the adults have given up advising their children to follow in their footsteps.

In my opinion, there is another important reason: the adults are crazy about combining the traits of wealth and piety. The idea that wealth and piety go together has seemingly been carved into the brains of Egyptian parents since time immemorial. It's that image of *Hajj* Abdul-Sami getting off the plane returning from the Hijaz, his expensive *abaya* on his shoulders as he hands out money left and right with a dignified, stately smile on his face, with the scent of his costly cologne, and his golden prayer beads. It seems as though that image is really carved into our parents' minds.

I've read a little about religions and, in my mind, piety is linked to the idea of renouncing the world. But all this piety won't convince me that the pious aren't addicted to liquor and aren't continually raping the women – and men – of the Others. They made their money from the Others' flesh – from their dreams, their hopes, their pride and their health. So the things they do seem weird to me. But it's their business anyway.

The Malls District. This is where you can buy phlogistine unofficially from some of the police. Next you see the mansions: the mansion of Alawi *bey*, the iron king. The mansion of Adnan *bey*, the meat king. The mansion of my dad, the pharmaceuticals king. Then the private airport: the airport is there, of course, so that you won't be forced to go outside. In the past, my people were obsessed by the notion of having to flee to the airport if the Others on the outside revolted – the trip to the airport would be difficult, terrifying and dangerous. The Others would block the path of their cars and rip their passengers to shreds.

I know these things because I read a lot. There are a lot of stories, beginning with the French Revolution, when mobs roamed the streets of Paris and stuck the breasts of the Princesse de Lamballe on pikes, and ending with the Iranian revolution in the 1970s, when the director of SAVAK – if I remember correctly – found his car carried on the mob's shoulders, with him in it, and then could find no way out of the situation except to stick his gun in his mouth and pull the trigger. My God! Even as I write these words, I can feel a shudder of delight! A gun in your mouth … cold metal … and a squeeze that ends it all!

Afraid of this trip to the airport, my people decided to build their own private airports inside their communities. As time passed, there was no longer a danger of revolution, but the airports remained where they were, as a luxury.

When you've crossed the farthest boundary of consciousness, you realise that consciousness expands to include within itself other boundaries, ruled by habit, boredom and monotony. Even pissing in the kitchen sink seems reasonable and boring.

The council hall. A thick cloud of tobacco smoke. The giant office in the Association Building, and the look of wisdom in the eyes of the adults. The ticking of the clock. Words. Words. I've heard them so often they no longer mean anything.

We are one family … blah, blah. *We're not like the Others*… blah, blah.

Blah, blah, blah for the thousandth time.

Check out Rasim pretending to look like he's paying attention. He's combining it with a look of shame and remorse. I challenge a single emotion to

find its way to that dead, imperturbable face. Two dead eyes that remind you of the eyes of killers in that outside world when the camera lens zeroes in on them. A man kills his wife and her lover, then takes a seat at the coffee shop. A woman kills a child for the sake of an earring worth no more than 100 Egyptian pounds, then her picture appears in the tabloids. You'll see she has those eyes.

But he – Rasim – is also talking. The idiot is talking. 'Really, I don't know what came over me, to make me …'

For the millionth time.

The chief judge is talking in a resounding voice that he no doubt personally enjoys: 'We don't involve any outside party in our problems. Azzam *bey* will take it upon himself to pay the cost of …' – blah, blah, blah – 'Your son is my son, and vice versa …' – blah, blah, blah.

And Azzam *bey* solemnly undertakes to pay the cost of … as he plays with his gold prayer beads.

Family court brings prominent people in Utopia together, because this community has carved out its own separate laws and courts. There is a young man in court who did something wrong or did something to make the adults angry with him. Here, what gets you into trouble is when you destroy or break into the personal property of someone else from Utopia. Rasim had had too much to drink and destroyed part of the Elite Mall that belongs to Mustafa *bey*. Maybe he stole something. No one needs to steal, but you need the excitement, the tension and the shame of stealing. Kleptomania is the cause of most crimes here; the rest take place in a moment of drunkenness, a moment of madness among friends who are no longer friends.

These cases are settled in courts like this one. There is usually a mutual understanding on hand, and plenty of willingness to appease. No one wants disputes to leave Utopia.

Excitement.

Crime.

Assault.

Breaking the rules.

Provocation.

Violating taboos.

Disorderly conduct.

Misdemeanor.

Destruction.

Tension.

Adrenaline.

Change.

Disobedience.

Dissolution.

Shock.

Privilege.

Astonishment.

That’s the name of the game.

For reasons like those, and on a night like this, Rasim lay down submissively and let three of his friends do what they wanted to him.

For reasons like those, they’re always conjuring up spirits. Those aren’t spirits, you idiots! It’s your subconscious mind fooling you through something called the ‘ideomotor effect’. That’s why the glass on the Ouija board moves – because you want it to.

For reasons like those, they fool around in cemeteries at night. Akmal talked about necrophilia, but I didn’t find the idea tempting, and I imagine you would agree with me.

For reasons like those, no girl resists your advances here for more than three days. And when she gives in to you, you won’t believe how eager she is for it out of sheer boredom. But that doesn’t blow your mind.

When you’ve crossed the farthest boundary of consciousness, you realise that consciousness expands to include within itself other boundaries, ruled by habit, boredom and monotony.

For reasons like those, I want to try the greatest experience of them all.

I wake up. I take a leak. Smoke a cigarette. Drink coffee. Shave. Fix the wound on my forehead to make it look terrible. Have sex with the African maid. Have breakfast. Pour some milk on the eggs and beat them with a fork. Throw the disgusting mixture in the trash. Yawn. Laugh. Spit. Wolf down some roasted meat. Stick my finger down my throat. Enter Larine’s bedroom to puke on the carpet. Laugh. Stick my finger in my ear. Grab a bottle of whiskey from the bar and take a swig. Dance. Stagger. Stand on the couch. Fall down on the carpet. Read the paper, which is nothing more than Utopia’s society pages. Every colony has its own newspaper but there are also public newspapers you can’t read because they have so much crap in them. I take out a tube of phlogistine and pour some drops on my skin. I get high. See the green flames. Laugh. Walk naked in the living room. Put on my clothes. With a charcoal pencil, I draw

slogans on the wall, saying: *Kill Whitey*. I don't know what that means, or who Whitey is, but that's what they do in movies. I put on some orgasm music – the new rhythm that came out last year. Adults think it's nothing but insane screaming, and they look back fondly on the refined sounds of heavy metal and death metal, which nobody listens to any more. I dance. Puke. Eat some more. In one hour, I've done everything, and there's nothing left in life that interests me or that I want!

In Utopia, your mum is still your mum. You can't get rid of her.

Larine, coming back from the mall, carrying several bags containing what we need. Things that are eaten, drunk, smelled, rubbed under your armpits and painted on fingernails. I know that most of what she's bought we don't need. We could get rid of most of it. It's because of boredom. It's because of frustration. I don't know much about her sex life, but I think Mourad hasn't slept with her for ages. He must have bored her so terribly that even Libidafro no longer works with her. When no one has sex with you, you buy things you don't need. When no one has sex with you, you secretly take drugs and drink heavily. When no one has sex with you, you meddle in other people's business. She said something about the vomit on the carpet and asked the maid to clean it. She said phlogistine would kill me. She said I'm wasting my potential. She said … She said …

Apropos of nothing, I told her, 'I want to try hunting.'

(She gasped.)

'Is there anything you don't have?' she cried, her eyes growing wide in alarm. 'You have enough money to buy all of Utopia—'

'—and everything around it.'

'You have enough girls to satisfy a virile sultan from the Arabian Nights—'

'—and boys too.'

'You have enough sources of entertainment to make a troop of crying orphans happy—'

'—and their grandchildren too.'

'So what's the problem?!'

'The problem is all of it. I have everything. Now it's time for the one thing I haven't tried and I haven't yet got.'

'If you ever bring this subject up again, I will tell your father!' she said hysterically.

Mourad wasn't here. He was in Switzerland going over the numbers in his bank accounts. In any case, I highly approve of this activity, since it means he's

increasing the amount I spend on phlogistine. Sometimes I wish he wouldn’t waste his time, and just send us cash from abroad.

‘Mourad doesn’t get involved in my business,’ I said to provoke her. ‘He’s too smart for that.’

‘For the thousandth time,’ she scolded, waving her finger in my face, ‘as far as you’re concerned, his name is Papa – not Mourad. I let you call me by my name rather than Mama, so that we can remain friends, but there are limits that you must not cross. I won’t allow it.’

But you instantly know that she isn’t serious.

All these years, his name has been Mourad. She can’t change it in an instant just because she’s decided to play the role of the strict mother.

Larine won’t allow it because she wants to pretend that she doesn’t allow it.

Mourad won’t allow it because he ought not to allow it.

So what?

3

When the graves are open and demons fly out
When the skulls of children lie scattered about
When angels' wings are stained with gore
When Cinderella becomes a whore
When Beelzebub says the time has arrived
Only then can I close my weary eyes
And die

– Orgasm Songs

The car carrying Rasim, Shadi and Riri races with mad speed. It races, then comes to a halt with a surprising slam on the brakes that makes it spin around on itself like a top.

Mahi's Ferrari races towards it. If they were to collide, Rasim's car would split in two. But Mahi pulls the handbrake at the last moment, so that the Ferrari spins around itself with a squeal that all of Utopia can hear. Good girl, Mahi! Rasim revs his car engine and races, and is just about slam into one of the Others who works here, but the idiot jumps up on the kerb.

For some reason I can't understand, these people insist on living. Really, I'm not joking here or exaggerating. If I were one of the Others, I would have let the car's tyres run over my innards.

Mahi finishes her turn, and peels away to catch up with Rasim. In all probability, cars will be wrecked today. But the problem is that we don't die. I don't mean that we are immortal, but we've transcended illness and accidents. The Others get ill and go for hospital treatment, and their cars that still run on petrol flip them over into ditches or slam them into a tree. If only death were so easily available here! Then the excitement would be huge. I don't know why, but accidents are rare among us, and even when they happen, they don't kill anyone.

From time to time, you see a violent chase between young people in cars. Often a car or two flips over, which throws an out-of-the-ordinary excitement into life, but unfortunately, you can't flip a car every hour of the day.

Why don't we kill ourselves? I don't know. Suicide seems vulgar, rather

common. All that foolishness reminds you of the Others. The lovelorn youth sets himself alight – the vulgarity of it! Kerosene, a flicker of light, a poor neighbourhood and some chickens. Chickens, of all things! All of it makes my stomach turn. The father who failed to feed his children, the girl who swallows a bottle of aspirin …

We are bigger and superior to all that nonsense. Death should be elegant and theatrical.

Your death and the deaths of the Others are alike. So let other people die. At least you can watch them as they die, instead of them seeing you.

Meet Mike Rogers, head of security. An American man from Missouri, he's good company. He has a thin, blond moustache, that distinctive crew cut, bulging muscles; the edge of his olive-green undershirt sticks out from his jacket. I enjoy talking with him in American slang, using that drawn-out country accent like a lazy cow mooing as it grazes in the meadow, and a lot of obscene insults that make him laugh.

Mike was a Marine. He fought in Vietnam at the beginning of the century. No, sorry – he fought in Iraq. I confuse Vietnam and Iraq a lot, since they are two far-off, remote countries that Americans had rough experiences in. He once told me, as we were taking phlogistine, 'Our mistake in Iraq was that we were there among the population more than we needed to be. We quickly corrected that mistake and withdrew from the cities to solidify our presence in locked, fortified bases around the oil wells.'

'From what I've learned, you were defeated in Iraq.'

He laughed heartily, then collected his breath. 'You're talking like the Europeans,' he said. 'We started the war to topple the tyrant, control the oil, and transform that wealthy country into fragments. OK – we did all that to the letter, so is there some other word for "victory"?'

'Was oil that important?'

'It was. How many wars we got into because of it! Then biroil suddenly appeared, right out of the blue. That American chemist who formulated it in 2010 got the Nobel prize. Only then was it possible for us to forget the Middle East and stick out our tongues at the oil sheikhs and tell them what we really thought of them. They can drink their oil if they want, but getting biroil has its price!'

'Was that when you bought all the Egyptian antiquities?'

'Yeah. The Egyptians didn't have anything for sale except the past, and we bought it. We paid for it in the biroil that Utopia and communities like it

monopolise. A fifty-year contract that provides you with all the biroil you need to live. How do you suppose those cars and planes of yours move? For the last ten years, all cars and planes have run on biroil. The age of cars and engines that run on gas is finished, or nearly finished. Gas has become as cheap as water, but the problem is that there are so few machines that use it!'

This history lesson didn't interest me at all. I'm not interested in how things were, or how we ended up where we are now. What interests me is what we are now and what we will be.

We then discussed the most important service he could render me.

I asked him if I could try hunting. I offered him my reasons, which could be summed up in three words: boredom, boredom and boredom.

His manner changed and he placed the official glass barrier of formality between us. 'Impossible,' he said firmly. 'Even if you attempted it, I would prevent you. Things are dangerous these days, and risking it isn't safe.'

'Ever since I was born, you've all been saying that things are dangerous these days,' I said in annoyance. 'Nothing happens. Those people outside the fences are nothing but sheep, believe me.'

'If the angry sheep ganged up on a child, they'd tear him to pieces with their legs,' he said, lighting up a cigarette.

'Have you ever heard of angry sheep?'

'They've lost the capacity for anger but, like sheep, they sometimes get agitated for no reason, and with no clear justification. We're living in one of those moments.'

Then he let out a puff of smoke. 'Listen,' he said finally, 'I won't allow you unless I receive a clear directive from Mr Mourad.'

I knew that Mr Mourad wouldn't agree to it. He doesn't want to take chances with his sole heir.

So I sat around that night with the rest of the gang as we took phlogistine.

The faint smell of lemon filled the place.

We sat on the ground. Someone passed around the thin glass pipe. In it was a small dropper that you fill. Then you squeeze three or four drops on your forearm.

Hand it to the person next to you. Then wait.

Wait until you see the dancing green flame …

Let it drip out all the perfumes of existence. Let it drip out the fragrance of ferns in the swamps where dinosaurs walked millions of years ago. Let it drip

out the scent of Cleopatra's sweat and Julius Caesar's blood. Let it drip out the incense the dervishes burned in the nights of Fatimid Cairo. Let it drip out the flames that consumed Cairo, or so they told us, and let it drip out the fragrance of all the *belles* of Paris dancing the can-can. Let it drip out all the musk of sperm whales and the breaths of Asian tigers slinking through the jungle darkness. Let it drip out the jungles themselves. Let it drip out the fragrances of pansy, narcissus, lilac and iris. Let it drip out all these scents together, then … then what? I forget …

Now you are no longer here. Now you are the master of space and time and existence itself. Now all that you have ever dreamed of is right here with you. You can imbibe ideas in cups, and pour the liquor into the antechambers of your mind. You can swallow fragrances and see them. You can smell light. Everything you feared has departed to the place of no return. Genius ideas occur to you but you forget them when you examine them closely. Brilliant witticisms evaporate before they leave your mouth. But you decide that your friends heard them. So you laugh. So they laugh. A little later comes the numbness and your eyes glaze over. This is the moment. It's the tunnel you won't come out of for hours.

I signalled to Germinal to come over to me. She was a little pale after the scrape-and-suction surgery she'd had last week – for the third time – to get rid of my latest child. She was completely in the moment, so she must have been deep in the middle of the green flames now.

'I decided to experience it,' I told her. 'I want to bring back a souvenir.'

She swallowed anxiously, although it didn't seem as if she were really alarmed.

'We've tasted all the amusements here,' I added. 'The same thing happened to Nero and Caligula. There's no longer anything like the methods the two of them had to add some excitement to life.'

'But that's dangerous,' she whispered. 'You know that. The people there hate us with a passion. If they saw us among them, they'd—'

'That's what I want. Danger. Death.'

Her face began to glow with euphoria at hearing that word. Danger. Excitement. Words that are no longer in our lexicon.

Hunting people isn't that strange. I've read a lot about the subject. Did you know that hunting tribes of Bushmen was a sanctioned sporting activity in South Africa in the last century? In the year 1870, the last Bushmen from the Cape died out from all the hunting.

Although hunting is illegal in Utopia, the grown-ups overlook it as long as we don't do it openly. It's Utopia's all-purpose motto: Do what you want, as long as

you don’t infringe on the property of the rest of Utopia’s residents. Most importantly, do what you want but keep it a secret – we don’t want the burden of having to appear to take a firm hand or show any empathy with anyone.

But we, the young people, have come to consider hunting a kind of test of manhood. Rasim did it. One night, he sneaked into one of those scary districts where the Others live. I think twenty years ago it was called Bab el-Shaareya or something like that. He kidnapped one of those worthless Others and brought him back to Utopia. He and his friends spent some fun days chasing this abductee in their cars. Then they killed him and Rasim kept his amputated hand, after having it embalmed. Every one of my friends has taken part in this sport at one time or another: the sport of hunting the Others, and bringing back a valuable souvenir to show to people like me.

‘Tonight we’ll set off outside to bring one of them back,’ I told Germinal. ‘You’ll come with me.’

She loves it when I order her about. It makes her feel defeated and titillates her masochistic streak.

When no one gives you an order in your whole life, when everyone pampers you, when your most trifling dreams are realised, then you desire the person who forces something on you. We used to play that game a lot: we would order the girls around, and each girl would have to do what she was told, whatever it was.

Anything.

Germinal’s eyes twinkled with enthusiasm.

But I was thinking about a suitable plan. It’s not easy to sneak into the world of the poor outside. The greatest difficulty is getting through the gate in the reinforced security perimeter around Utopia. The poor and the children of big-shots look alike when you see them in the dark from a helicopter. Shots in the dark, two lifeless corpses and a regrettable incident. The problem would be solved by a meeting of the adults, and my father would get several million by way of compensation. I think this solution would please him, but it wouldn’t please me. That’s all.

What should I do?

4

You dive into the middle of the green flames that are the distinct characteristic of the drug phlogistine. That cold green fire that you swim in and get high from. Then you stick your head out, seeking more.

I told Germinal, ‘Did you know that they don’t use the names “Larine” and “Germinal” there? They use names like Batiaa, Zakiyya and Atiyyat.’

She burst out laughing. I don’t know why, exactly, but it pleased me quite a bit.

‘I know that,’ Germinal said as she smoked her fifth joint. ‘We see it sometimes on TV in those old shows.’

The truth is that we have our own special television that only shows us what we want to watch. It’s a cable and home-movie arrangement. There’s a high demand for movies about sex, violence and crime. It’s weird that the Others are interested in the same movies on their cheap televisions but for different reasons. Here, our love of violence is caused by boredom. Their love of violence is caused by poverty and repressed hatred. Why did the Roman emperors and plebeians love to watch slaves tearing each other apart? Why didn’t poverty make the poor more merciful? If only a sociologist could explain that to me. As far as I know, the nature of emperors is completely different from that of plebeians, so why did the two natures agree on one thing – namely, brutality?

It was ten o’clock. It was time to get moving. I had a carefully devised plan. At eleven o’clock, the bus that transports the workers to their different neighbourhoods would arrive. Yes, there are workers in Utopia because there are jobs we can’t do. They come in the morning in a special bus and return in it at night. They are under observation at all times. They don’t talk and don’t raise their eyes, but you can smell their unpleasant mix of hatred, malice, flattery and suppressed anger. Years of subjugation have made them closer to animals. Day by day they lose part of their humanity until they end up truly horrible creatures.

I waited with Germinal in the darkness near their meeting place. My eye fell on a man who seemed about my size, and her eye fell on a woman just about her size. It was a simple trick: in fact, the oldest trick in the world.

I stood a few steps away from the man as I bit into a hamburger with relish. I

saw the man’s eyes widen as he stared at my sandwich. His Adam’s apple moved as he gulped down his saliva.

‘You want a bite?’ I asked to entice him.

He looked at me warily, like a wolf when another one calls him to a piece of meat. He didn’t respond.

I looked around me, then said in a whisper, ‘I can’t give it to you here. Come behind this wall. If one of the guards saw us, there would be trouble for you.’

I didn’t give him the chance to think about it. I hurried behind a nearby wall and stood there.

After a minute, he appeared as I expected, drooling, his eyes fixed on the sandwich.

‘Here it is!’

How ugly he looked! His entire world had narrowed down to this sandwich in my hand, and he was no longer aware of anything taking place around him.

At that point, Germinal came around the wall, then slammed a piece of brick she had hidden in her bag onto his head. It wasn’t easy for her because she wasn’t used to it, so she was forced to bring it down on his head twice because the first blow didn’t finish him off. Right there in the dark, we tore off his clothes and I put them on. The advantage of these clothes is that there is an ID card in each pocket. He had worn a cap on his head. No problem: that would hide most of my face.

Shaking, Germinal took the sandwich from me and stood near the selected woman.

The scene was repeated with almost the same steps: the lure, the wall. I brought down the piece of brick on the woman’s head, then stripped her of her clothes so Germinal could wear them. We hid our original clothes under a rock. The woman’s head was wrapped in a scarf, which again simplified matters.

Oh, what an adventure!

It was only at that moment that I felt the adrenaline coursing through my veins. Euphoria!

I looked up at the sky and began taking in air in great gulps to calm my heart down a little bit, so it wouldn’t leap out of my chest. Stop! Dammit, you have to stop!

Then we got on the bus, transformed into a man and a woman who were of Them: poor, dejected; coarse, awful-smelling clothes. But whoever said adventures were comfortable?

The bus slowly started moving towards the outer gates. Checkpoints. An

American soldier shone a light on our faces.

The moment of weakness is when they can see you, but you can't see them. But you place your faith in the filthy clothes and the head coverings. No one knows us on the bus; these people no longer know who comes and goes. When we want to go back, it will be easier, because I'll call my father and ask him to send us someone to bring us back to Utopia.

That happened with Shadi when he found himself besieged in Ataba Square in Cairo, unable to return. He called his father, the communications king, who let out a string of abuse, then sent him a helicopter reserved for the Marines. It was a dramatic, frightening scene when the helicopter started hovering vertically over Ataba, shooting bullets over people's heads as the rescuers abseiled down to pick up Shadi and his quarry.

The helicopter ascended over people's heads like one of the pagan gods of the Aztecs. Wow! How exciting!

Germinal whispered in my ear, 'The clothes smell horrible. This woman didn't bathe.'

I ordered her to be quiet. Our good behaviour was the only thing protecting us now that we had left the gate, and now that the Marines had inspected our IDs without looking at our faces.

They really don't look closely at whoever is leaving. All they do is confirm that you're there. The important thing is who's coming in. It's nothing but a show, to let the sheep know who the boss is.

> The red planet stomps on the face of the sun
> Angels scream as the deed is done
> You belong to me, for you're my prey
> As I tear your body apart today
> When you're in my cells and you're part of me
> Then you'll know the meaning of eternity
>
> *– Orgasm Songs*

Night and silence and the thrill of adventure. The desert. I think I dozed off for a time.

A terrible smell came near Germinal. A terrible smell and the breath of a mouth with rotten teeth. A woman: anatomically, at least. Or, as Rasim describes women like her, 'It's a man with a hole, that's all!'

She brought her head close to Germinal like a dragon looming from the back seat.

‘Hey girl, you got a cigarette?’, she whispered.

Frightened, Germinal shook her head no. Oh, the naiveté of your reactions! If a mad dog sniffed you, you wouldn’t behave like this.

‘You got anything to eat?’

For some reason, this woman thought she was sitting behind an open buffet table.

Germinal put her hand in the bag she was carrying and unthinkingly handed her the rest of the hamburger.

The woman greedily wolfed down the sandwich. She chewed it with almost sexual pleasure. She said that if she could find a cigarette, then life would be even more fantastic.

‘Do you work for Hamzawy *bey*?’

Germinal didn’t know what to tell her. She nodded her head yes. The woman said he was a scoundrel, a thief and a bastard. The man is a friend of my father’s, but I agree with every word. She went into great poetic detail about his character.

I turned to her and spoke roughly, trying to unburden myself of my proper-sounding Arabic: ‘How did you guess she works for him?’

‘Because she’s a pretty girl and because she had this sandwich.’

She cupped her hand and, with the tips of her fingers, grabbed Germinal’s chin. There was something uncomfortable about her gesture, about this movement that transgresses normal behaviour. So Germinal jumped as if she had been touched by a snake. The long nails must have scratched her soft skin.

‘He loves pretty girls,’ the woman added. ‘He has an army of maids. The son of a bitch has sex with three girls in one bed sometimes, even though he’s past sixty. But it’s what they eat: lobster and that new medicine that he gets shipped fresh every day from France.’

I knew the name of the new medicine because my father imported it: Libidafro. It was impossible for the woman to pronounce. Years ago, they had Viagra, then along came this drug that could work miracles. So the men of Utopia never give up sex: they don’t grow old and don’t get feeble, and their lust for women is eternal, like Greek gods. But the older ones only get their opportunity with the Others, unlike the young guys. You conquer a woman by way of your machismo, your money, your prestige, or your power. The grown-ups have power, prestige and money, but they don’t have the natural machismo that drugs can’t produce.

‘The son of a bitch sleeps with three girls a day,’ the woman said. ‘But he hasn’t touched his wife in ten years. You ask me how I know all this: there are no secrets here, dearie. What goes on behind the walls is our only entertainment, as you know. Don’t be embarrassed: I know he’s done it with you. If you swore to me on the Quran that he didn’t do it, I wouldn’t believe you. Hamzawy *bey* couldn’t keep himself more than a week from that soft skin.’

Then she finished the sandwich, burped loudly and wiped her mouth, saying, ‘He has low taste, too. He likes to slum it. I used to work for him, and he wanted me. I’m as ugly as a monkey, there’s nothing about me to attract any man. But he was drunk and demanded me, as if phlegm had collected in his throat and he needed a spittoon. Women like us can’t deny Hamzawy *bey*. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s fear. Maybe it’s his power. It’s a delightful notion, that this wealthy giant of a man wants you. The important thing is that you always accept it. Girl, don’t say that women who do that are always forced. Not on your life. Class has its attractions. The important thing is that the pig was alone with me for a few moments, then turned his back on me once his lust was sated and he realised how repulsive I am. He threw up and kicked me repeatedly, and then he threw me down the stairs like in those old movies, the movies of Yusuf *bey* Wahbi. He began calling me terrible names. I know where this man’s from. These men don’t come from heaven. They all came from the lowest of the low classes, but while we were like dumb animals, they knew how to squeeze blood from a stone.

Then, in the darkness of the bus, she looked at me and said, ‘And you, stud? Do you work for Hamzawy *bey* too?’

‘Mourad *bey*,’ I answered cautiously and in the same rough voice.

The time had come to learn something new about Mourad – my father.

She let out a snort, breaking the silence and darkness of the bus, and said, ‘So, my fine buck, you’re one of those, are you? Heh, heh! I knew it as soon as I heard your soft voice. A perfect match! She works for Hamzawy *bey* and you’re with Mourad *bey*. If it was the other way round, it would be a disaster. Mourad *bey* would beat her with shoes and Hamzawy *bey* would whip you to shreds. Heh heh! So you and he go the other way. The fat cats approve of the both of you!’

It was amazing information. I began to recall Mourad’s behaviour, and here and there I found some questionable things I hadn’t noticed.

Was the woman spreading rumours without a shred of truth, or was it really like that?

What does it matter? Mourad is the man who gives me orders I don’t follow, and hands me money. What’s the importance of his moral behaviour? I’m not responsible for my father’s morals. Anyway, I won’t be like him.

At this point, the woman lowered her voice as she said in the darkness: ‘Despite that, I bore him a child. The only thing that comes into the world is a child you don’t want and who you pray to God will stop breathing. He was really a bastard son. I was alone when he was born. I cut the umbilical cord with a rusty knife I found beside the bed, then I lifted the baby by his feet and looked at it. A lump of flesh covered in clotted blood. The bastard was demanding his right to live. The bastard was demanding food, air, warmth and affection. There was nothing I could do for him.’

At this point, Germinal asked nervously, ‘What did you do?’

The woman laughed and laughed. Her chest shuddered; her chest rattled. She coughed. Spat. Then she tilted her head back and started snoring loudly.

The shadows of the road danced across her features, made uglier by bitterness and want. Another rocky road was inscribed on the lines of her face.

I was on fire; her words had inflamed my imagination. All this pain. All this suffering. Death. Murder.

I put out my hand and squeezed Germinal’s hand. I’d bitten my tongue from the pain of ecstasy. It’s all I could do now.

5

We had entered the territory of the Others.

We left the other world behind a long time ago, the day we disappeared beyond the walls of Utopia.

Shubra.

So they call it.

Shubra, which I had only seen in movies. The name has a strange, harsh ring to it. Sierra Madre or Rio Grande must have a similar ring to American ears. The bus stopped in the middle of the crowd and some of the passengers got out. I beckoned to Germinal to get off the bus with me. This was a good enough place to start.

Where had that woman disappeared to? I didn't know. That's how nameless faces melt into the darkness and crowds.

A strange mix of smells, sights and sounds. The first and most prominent smell was the stench of sweat. Dissolved in this smell were the strange odours of food, trash, human excrement and maybe blood.

There were carts laden with food. Mixtures of food. There was a mound of rice and a mound of a strange white substance I think they call 'couscous', oranges, tangerines, and unrecognisable hot drinks. For a long time, there have been itinerant alcohol vendors, but what kind of alcohol is this? A fist-sized bottle costing fifty Egyptian pounds, even with all this inflation! If it was urine, it would cost more than that. Old perfume bottles, filled with some substance that is impossible to determine. I think red wine is a common ingredient in all these liquids. Mourad said that selling alcohol in the street was unimaginable twenty years ago, but morals are corroded by poverty just as metal is by dripping water. The strangest thing is that methyl alcohol doesn't blind these people, the way it does everywhere else in the world. If their stomachs are made of stone, then their livers are made of steel, and their optic nerves are electric cables.

The sandwiches were another problem. A pile of sandwiches. A sandwich, filled with what they claimed was liver, cost only twenty Egyptian pounds! If they were rat livers, you couldn't sell them for that price.

After a minute in this world, I concluded that these people were just pretending to be alive.

They pretend they’re eating meat, and pretend that they’re drinking alcohol, and of course they pretend they’re drunk and have forgotten their problems. They pretend they have the right to err and sin.

They pretend to be human.

Only then did I understand why we isolated ourselves in Utopia.

In this world there is nothing left but poverty and haggard faces, from which savage, hungry eyes bulge out. Thirty years ago, these people had some rights, but today they’ve been completely forgotten. Even electricity and water is an individual problem for each one of them. Whoever can get an electric generator or dig a well does all right; the rest just have to make do.

The strange thing is that their numbers multiply with an unbelievable speed. For us in Utopia, the average birth rate is almost zero, while their birth rate is always growing. The average man has ten children, five of whom die because there is no medical treatment of any kind, but there is continual population growth in spite of that. They seem to rely completely on herbs and popular remedies. My father holds a monopoly on all medicine on the market. The prices are unreal, but there’s always someone who will buy. The enigma of this country is that there is a buyer at all times and at any price, which proves that Marx was probably an idiot when he imagined that the balance would tip when the poor are no longer able to buy.

Some of these people are religious, because religion is the only hope they have for a better life after death. A person can’t suffer all his life and then die and be turned into carbon without reward and punishment. In Utopia we have a lot of religious people, and planes are continually going to Mecca for the pilgrimage, but the reason – I think – is that the lords of Utopia are afraid of losing everything in an instant. They fear waking up to find themselves in the middle of this crowd buying rat-liver sandwiches and drinking red wine. The situation demands a great number of pilgrimages and prayers to avoid this bleak fate. In short, it’s difficult today to find a person who is pious for piety’s sake.

We walked in the middle of stupefied crowds. We tried not to draw attention to ourselves, but I felt the enormity of this adventure we had thrown ourselves into.

Germinal clutched my hand nervously, and I looked at where she was pointing.

There was a wooden cage piled high with repulsive-looking chicken skins. The terrible thing was that people were buying these things. I fought back the gorge rising in my throat and pushed it far down. Our reaction was going to give

us away. If one of them looked closely at our faces, they would see that we'd never known a single day of hunger.

The vendor called out to us, 'Come here, brother! How long has it been since you cooked vegetables in grease? These skins completely hit the spot!'

He lifted a strip of skin and waved it as if to entice us.

It seemed that chicken feet were also popular – and heads – and wings. But where was the chicken itself? Even their chickens had apparently been turned into nothing but skin and bone. No muscles and no innards.

A mangy stray child snatched something from the vendor's stand and ran off with it, pursued by curses and slippers.

Piles of filthy, used clothes were sold for a hundred pounds apiece. Some people claim that the Egyptian pound used to be more valuable than the dollar once. I don't believe that: a dollar now equals thirty pounds, and here was a horrible example of inflation since that shirt should not cost more than a quarter-dollar. That was the reason why such things were valued at hundreds of pounds. In any case, I suspected they preferred to barter, believing the trade would be closer to the real value of things.

We left this market area and made our way through a cluster of hovels made of tin sheets or bamboo and scrap wood. The ground was wet and our feet sank in it – a mixture of mud, leftover washing water and overflowing sewage. I walked cautiously because stumbling here would be a kind of suicide.

At the doors of the hovels stood filthy, repugnant-looking women, cackling at me seductively. I thought the youngest of them had passed thirty-five a long time ago; still, she was not practising her trade because she hadn't got married yet but, rather, for the money.

As far as I knew, no law had been passed allowing prostitution, but it was now really out in the open. It had become stronger than the law, stronger than tradition.

The age of marriage had reached forty years for women, and there was no longer an age of marriage for men. Then one of those economic revolutions happened, and conditions for marrying became easier. It became sufficient to find someone who accepted you –no need to provide a home and a salary. Everyone took care of themselves and the children would find what they needed to live on somehow. So the age of marriage had been lowered again.

All of this was uglier than it needed to be.

More disgusting than it needed to be.

More real than it should be.

When ugliness and rot are on the march against all the excitement that

imagination can produce, intrusive thorny branches coil around fruits, and scorpions crawl among pearls.

Her name was Katie. She was American. The first girl I knew. At thirteen she was the eternal romantic dream. She was larger than life and reality. Then I made her my conquest that night on the damp sand of the beach. What did I know, what did I see, what did I smell with her? I fell from the peaks of Olympus to crawl through the mud, and I learned that reality is uglier than you can imagine.

We needed to finish our mission and leave – to kidnap our victim and flee.

A girl looked at me and winked, paying no attention to Germinal, who was walking next to me.

At that point, an idea occurred to me.

Men could be risky, definitely riskier than this soft, easy prey.

Germinal seemed to understand as well, and she moved away from me. So I walked by myself to where the girls were standing, looking for someone who would be available for a good time. I picked out one of them. I chose her simply on the basis of her physical strength: she would have to endure being violently pursued by cars in the middle of the desert. Maybe she'd be a shooting target.

She was a hideous girl – the only thing that separated her from a man were trivial anatomical difference: wide haunches and big bones. If she glued a moustache on, she would look like Mourad. She was definitely right for the job.

I looked at her forearm intently. Yes, it was certainly the right size, and there was a roughness to it that would prove its origin: no one would call me a liar at our get-togethers when I opened the plastic bag to show them this forearm. They made fun of Ramy and accused him of buying the hand from the cemetery guard, because the hand he had brought was smooth and elegant.

I approached her, and she straightened up and laughed, revealing yellow teeth that hadn't been cleaned for years.

'How much?' I asked her in an experienced tone of voice.

She replied in a hoarse, grating voice that reminded me of the sound made by rubbing the Styrofoam pellets that wrap electronic equipment: 'I take fifty. All night long for two hundred pounds.'

'Where?'

She laughed stupidly, then pointed to the ruined buildings around us, saying, 'In my palace, baby – anywhere.'

I stuck my hand in my pocket, but she said, 'Not me. Him.'

She pointed to the ruins. Of course, she would have a pimp to protect her and take her money.

‘He’s my uncle.’

I looked behind me and found Germinal watching the scene from a distance. So I pulled the girl by her wrist and we walked, making our way into the middle of the darkened ruins. From time to time we encountered young men squatting as they smoked foul-smelling hashish. Or they clutched a container holding I-don’t-know-what and sniffed its contents. Occasionally one of them called out to us: ‘Go right ahead!’

They seemed to know the girl and didn’t interfere with us. She was a working girl doing her job, and it was not good manners for anyone to hassle her.

‘Here he is, just ahead.’

There was a grey-haired man with a huge body, standing beside a leaning lamppost. In his belt was a giant butcher’s knife, and in his fist was a blade he had fashioned out of a car spring. I think they call it a ‘shiv’. He had one bad eye, covered with a white cataract, and there was a scar that cut across his face lengthwise. He seemed closer to a thug than a pimp, which was little more than an academic distinction in these dregs of humanity.

I approached him, still holding the girl’s wrist, and said hoarsely, ‘One time.’

I pulled fifty pounds out of my pocket.

He counted them several times as though he were stripping bare the contents of the US Treasury. Then he spat, off to the side, and stuck the money in his belt.

‘Here?’ the girl asked me, as she undid her skirt.

‘I’d prefer to go somewhere else. I’m shy.’

She let out a loud, vulgar snort, and headed off with me.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Germinal trying to join us, afraid and stumbling. Amidst these ruined buildings and rats, she had to be living the worst moments of her life.

Finally, we were almost alone. The girl opened her mouth to speak:

‘Come on. You’re the fi—’

But the next instant, I attacked the base of her neck with a hand-chop I had learned in Cambodia. She fell to the ground, motionless. Only her eyes were fixed in a stare.

The next moment, I heard Germinal calling me. By some miracle, she had made her way through the ruins and all the drug-users who were gathered there.

‘It’s done!’ I told her, breathing heavily. ‘I’ll call my mother and ask her to send someone to get us out of here.’

I put my hand in my pocket to pull out the knife I was going to use to carry out my mission.

At that moment, we heard a commotion. I lifted my eyes and saw ten of those young men surrounding us. I heard someone say, ‘They aren’t like us! They’re from Utopia!’

Part Two

Prey

1

My beloved cornea – and a dream of something beyond sex …

I know I’m going to die two days from now – don’t tell me otherwise. Don’t repeat this idle talk, otherwise I’ll stab you with my knife. Let me dream one last time.

I haven’t done this for a long time.

My beloved cornea – and dream of something beyond …

When did everything disappear?

I don’t know.

It’s like watching the sun at sunset. You never know when the day is finished and night has begun. Or when the light faded and things grew cold, and when twilight’s red blood flowed, staining the horizon. Or when the colour violet came to dominate everything. You can’t grasp the moment itself. You can’t say, ‘Here it was day, and here night came.’

I only remember that things grew worse without an abrupt change. Each time, the difference between yesterday’s situation and today’s was slight, so a person closes his eyes every night muttering to himself: ‘That’s life. Life is still possible. You are still capable of finding food, shelter, and some treatment. So let tomorrow come.’

Then you wake up one day to realise that life is impossible, and that you are incapable of obtaining tomorrow’s food and shelter. When did that happen? You ask yourself, but get no answer.

The agreed-upon time was midnight.

I made my way between the ancient hovels in what used to be Shubra Street. Yes. I remember that there was a wide street here, where cars would travel on both sides.

I made a bet with Zenhom that there was a cinema here once. The son of a bitch has no idea what ‘cinema’ means, but he argues in vain.

To be honest, I, too, don’t recall whether there was a cinema here or not. But at least I remember what a cinema was. There were enormous images that moved, and there was darkness where you could easily smoke hashish. I seemed to have had one or two experiences there, but I don’t recall who I was with.

The agreed-upon time was midnight.

The subway gate was locked. But I knew how to open it: just stick the tip of a nail into the rusty government lock, hit it with a rock and the lock opens up, as does the chain. All the night boys like me knew this entrance. But we were always careful to lock it when we left. We didn't want anyone to be able to enter our secret underground world.

I pulled back the iron security gate and slipped inside. The empty, darkened passageways smelt rotten.

I lit a torch and raised my arm to widen the circle of light.

There lay broken-down subway carriages like lifeless beasts. They came to an end when the masters stopped using them and departed for their settlements, Utopia and others like it. There was no longer any maintenance. There was no longer any electricity. Eventually, these rusty beasts had slipped into an eternal sleep. It was clear they wouldn't be moving again.

Some young men don't know that they exist at all!

At some point, these carriages had been quite famous; this had been the greatest thing the government had achieved in ages. I don't know when they broke down and fell apart, but it was probably at the same time as the birth of Utopia. I think people enjoyed this public project for fifty years at least. After that, it became a shelter for stray dogs.

Then there were no longer any stray dogs.

There was no longer anyone but us.

My beloved cornea – and a dream of something beyond sex … Alas!

They recognised me by my limping walk and from my build, and Mina shouted out, 'Hey, Gaber! Christ, we've been waiting for you a long time!'

You can't tell anyone's religion here unless he utters an oath along the lines of 'by Christ' or invokes the Prophet Mohammed's name. Even names have become everyday and neutral, not indicating anything: Fareed, Awad, Emad, etc. If there's one advantage to this society of ours it's that it's never heard of religious divisions. The paradise of sectarian equality has been realised, but in an astonishing way that never occurred to the most freethinking philosophers. Since poverty has made everyone equal, no one knows any longer whether you're Muslim or Christian, except when you announce that you're going to Mecca on pilgrimage, or your inner wrist is exposed, showing a tattoo of the cross. Had it not been for the end of the petroleum era, the situation, which was ripe for explosion at the dawn of the twenty-first century, would have ignited.

'You got any flog?' Abd el-Zahir shouted in my face.

I let out an ugly sound from my nostrils. Do *I* have phlogistine? These idiots

can’t pronounce the whole word so they’ve decided that it’s ‘flog’.

‘Where would I get it, you son of a—’

Then I stuck my hand in my pocket, took out a joint and tossed it at him.

‘This is what I’ve got.’

He made another ugly noise and moaned, ‘Great. We’re back in kindergarten.’

But he lit it anyway, exhaling a thick cloud of smoke. There was no longer anything capable of having an effect on that nervous system; no doubt he needed a ton of hashish to feel temporary happiness. Phlogistine – the lord of drugs, but where were we supposed to get some? In Utopia, rivers of phlogistine flowed. They ate and drank it. They sweated it. Women had phlogistine periods and men urinated it. Water didn’t pour out of taps – phlogistine did. They washed their feet in phlogistine. They put phlogistine in their dogs’ water bowls. If a revolution ever happened, it wouldn’t be for equality, but to answer the demands of those who had been deprived of their natural right to phlogistine.

Abd el-Zahir was a thug, but he was a good guy. I admit that I loved him and trusted him. Especially when that insane obsession wasn’t taking over and he wasn’t telling us his plan about biroil and Utopia. I considered those ideas a kind of intellectual masturbation. He hadn’t done anything. He wouldn’t do anything at all. So he spent his time describing the hellish pleasure that would await him if he carried out that biroil plan.

‘Suleiman is waiting for us there,’ said Mitwalli, scratching his ear with a finger, ‘at the Saint Theresa entrance.’

The rusty, filthy signboards didn’t say anything at all. But we’d learned how to find our way by the light of the flickering flame.

So we jumped onto subway carriages that no longer contain a single seat or a single pane of glass; and from there we jumped onto the rails and then to the other side. We started running in the dark, heading towards that entrance.

That’s where we saw them.

There were five of them standing there, and we understood at once they were Bayoumi and his gang.

In the middle of them, by torchlight, we saw one person with torn clothes, terrified, with blood pouring out of his nose.

They had grabbed Suleiman.

A person could endure life without shelter.

Without food.

Without drink (perhaps for several days).

Without clothes.

Without a roof over his head.

Without a sweetheart.

Without dignity.

Without a family (except Safiya).

Without a refrigerator.

Without a phone.

Without a television.

Without a tie.

Without friends.

Without shoes.

Without trousers.

Without phlogistine.

Without a condom.

Without headache medicine.

Without a laser pointer.

But he couldn’t endure life without dreams.

Since childhood, I hadn’t experienced life without dreams.

To wait for something. To be denied it. To shut your eyes at night and hope for something. To be promised something …

Only at twenty did I realise the brutal truth: that I had to live without dreams.

There wouldn’t be anything there, my friend. Not today, not tomorrow, nor the day after.

Your life was one looooo(*what are you waiting for?*)oooooo(*nothing*)ooong,grim present.

Only in those moments did I realise that I had to engage in a relentless war with that annoying child within me. The inner child screamed and kicked at the ground with his feet: ‘No dreams? But how?’

Then he would launch into a stream of filthy curses, hitting and biting me. But every night I slapped him and ordered him to be quiet. No dreams, you son of a … There won’t be a tomorrow. They took tomorrow from you, and you have to accept it, just as you have accepted that you don’t have any food or drink or clothes or roof over your head, or a sweetheart or dignity or a family or a refrigerator or phone or television or tie or friends or shoes or trousers or phlogistine or a condom or headache medicine or a laser pointer.

He would let out more filthy curses, then fall asleep.

One*looooo*(what are you waiting for?)*oooooo*(nothing)*ooong*,grim present.

I wasn’t the bravest or the strongest. So Abd el-Zahir walked towards them, brandishing his dagger, and spoke in a voice that he wanted to be powerful, but came out nervous and cracked: ‘What do you want, Bayoumi? For a long time, we’ve been like trains on two tracks, moving in opposite directions, but not meeting.’

Bayoumi swore and burst out laughing. He spat and said, ‘What do you know about trains, you sons of whores? I remember them well, and I rode on them more than once. Trains didn’t meet, except when there was an accident, and when that happened, mangled bodies and blood covered the fields!’

His words were clear. It went beyond a hint.

He stuck his hand in the sack Suleiman was carrying and pulled out the carcass of a giant dog. He lifted it by its neck, despite its heavy weight. I saw his biceps bulging, soaked with sweat, glistening in the flickering light.

‘We’re part of this discussion. This involves us.’ We weren’t about to put up with this, too. An empty stomach drives a hungry man insane. After all this effort, how could the dog we’d spent three days ambushing be snatched from us?

When would we be able to find another dog? There were no longer any dogs in the streets at all. No cats. No rats.

The intoxicating smell of grilled meat in the ruined buildings and joking around with puffs of hashish. And Safiya, who hasn’t tasted decent food in a month? All this would have been waiting for us if we hadn’t come across this son of a bitch.

At this point, Abd el-Zahir lost his head, and screamed with a voice that made the subway passages shake, ‘You’ll see, you bastards! That dog is ours! Ours alone, and you’ll have to take it over our dead bodies!’

With those words, we all charged at those bastards.

2

I’ll be dead in two or three days.

You ask me how I know that? I’m telling you I have no chance of being saved. I was born to lose, and the young guy coming from Utopia will get the better of me, no doubt about it.

That’s why I remember. That’s why I’m rolling the taste of my life on my tongue, the same way a person gets a bitter aftertaste after emptying a bottle of bad wine.

I remember things, places, faces, words, lines of poetry, books and smells, but mostly, I remember women.

Her name was Azza.

Why do I remember her now?

Azza used to sell bread on our street corner.

Azza laughs. Azza moves. Azza scowls. Azza winks. Azza is elated. Azza argues. Azza wriggles. Azza whispers. Azza smiles. Azza thinks.

Azza sells bread.

She’d tell me over and again, ‘You read a lot. You’re crazy.’

I told her that reading, as far as I’m concerned, was a cheap kind of drug. The only thing I did with it was withdraw from my conscious self. In the past, they used to read in order to acquire consciousness. I told her about the romantic poet, Kuthayyir Azza.

‘Oh, get lost,’ she told me.

‘So I’m lost.’

She told me that el-Sirgani was a predator who guarded her jealously. That he carried a knife made of a gazelle’s horn that he could run through my glasses. The big guy el-Sirgani wanted her. He thought she belonged to him. After he got his hands on her, he would probably make her work with his niece, Somaya.

The inevitable day came that we had expected. We were terrified. I wanted to know. She wanted to know. El-Sirgani wanted to know.

I only remember that he was breathing through his nostrils like a bull. I only remember that he was tearing at the flesh of his forearms and chest with his knife-blade for no apparent reason, only to show me that he wasn’t afraid of anything.

I only remember the cutting. A cut that started from the upper eyelid, passed through the cornea, and moved to the lower eyelid.

I lost my cornea. Stupid people say, ‘His eye is ruined,’ but they don’t know what the cornea is. I know a lot of things. Even as the blade was tearing my eye, I knew the anatomical difference between the cornea and the eye as a whole.

Nevertheless, I confess that I injured him a lot. If you reckon the loser by the amount of blood spilled, then he lost. It’s true that he was the one who injured himself, but what counts is who bleeds more. His friends carried him away as he bellowed like a bull, threatening me with more of the same. Liquor must have been playing with his mind a lot.

I told her, as she bandaged my bleeding eye, that I wanted a kiss.

‘Get lost!’ she said. ‘Your eye is ruined.’

I laughed in spite of the pain. In spite of the blood that flowed, filling my mouth as I lay on my back.

‘It’s not my eye,’ I replied. ‘It’s only my cornea.’

Her name was Nagat.

She had a ruined eye like me.

She had no work, besides stealing from shopkeepers.

Her husband left her because he tried several times to persuade her to ‘open her mind,’ but she refused in disgust. There was a treasure in his house that could guarantee him a good life, but the treasure refused to be sold.

One night, he came to her drunk, along with three of his friends. Then he left them in the shack with her and went out for no apparent reason. But she came out behind him, locked them in the shack from outside, and filled the alley with screams and wails. Quickly, every one of the neighbours discovered within himself a feverish defender of morals. There in the shack, drunken human flesh, incapable of resisting, waited for someone to slap, kick and spit on it, which the neighbours did enthusiastically.

Her husband didn’t dare to return, because, compared to her, he was weak in body and character.

Nagat laughs. Nagat moves. Nagat scowls. Nagat winks. Nagat is elated. Nagat argues. Nagat wriggles. Nagat whispers. Nagat smiles. Nagat thinks.

Nagat steals fish from vendors, which is her particular line of work. That was before a good-for-nothing from Badrashin stole her fish.

‘Marry me, Gaber,’ Nagat said to me. ‘I’ll be a servant at your feet.’

I told her that people should only get married to bring someone better into the

world. A child more beautiful than you. Wealthier than you. Stronger than you.

What's the use of marrying misery to unhappiness? Soot to mud?

What new thing would we bring into the world, except more misery?

I told her that in Utopia they deserved to marry and have children. She said that they were rotten sons of bitches. I told her that they were the ones who determined what 'rotten' meant, and who the sons of bitches really were. So they had the right to get married and have children.

'Everyone who owns enough to buy dinner for the next two years deserves to get married and have children.'

Her name was Nagat.

She had a ruined eye like me.

Did I find some enjoyment with her? I don't recall. I only know that I need her now.

Her name was Awatif.

Why do I remember her now?

Awatif was a nurse before their salaries were cut, and before they found there was no point in working. Most of them worked as doctors, treating people for paltry sums. Their medicine is a blend of herbs, honey and folk remedies; sometimes, it's medication that the inhabitants of Utopia put on the market but never use themselves. And sometimes they use some of the really effective medicines that people working there steal for us, and which are sold at an exorbitant price, including antibiotics and sedatives.

Awatif laughs. Awatif moves. Awatif scowls. Awatif winks. Awatif is elated. Awatif argues. Awatif wriggles. Awatif whispers. Awatif smiles. Awatif thinks.

Awatif treated my eye.

Awatif said that she loved a man who could fight and lose his eye over a woman.

Awatif said that the men she'd met were prepared to sacrifice her for a cigarette butt.

Awatif said that I was her man.

Awatif said that I reminded her of a doctor she'd once loved, who then became addicted to morphine and died of an overdose.

Awatif was brown-skinned and beautiful.

She was beautiful. The jewel that nature carefully polished and made beautiful for princesses to wear – and that fell in the mud. A mangy dog picked it up between its teeth and began to run – and run …

And as I chase the dog, it’s not for the sake of the jewel.
Instead, it’s because I’m hungry. God Almighty, I’m hungry.

3

Fists flew everywhere.

Punches. Stabs. Kicks. Gobs of spit. Curses. Fists. Blades. Sweat.

I'm very weak. I have nothing that enables me to face a situation like this. I can only pretend that I'm fighting, like those fake swordsmen who dance at weddings, but I know my limits and I know that it's what has kept me alive. You have to stick to gangs. Stick to the strong who take what they want. You have to gain their trust, and convince them that you're necessary. But you shouldn't attach yourself to them more than you have to, and lose your life when they lose theirs …

I tried my luck with violence and lost my cornea. That's enough for one lifetime. I won't lose a cornea and a nose, or a cornea and an arm.

Punches. Stabs. Kicks. Gobs of spit. Curses. Fists. Blades. Sweat.

When I realised we were getting the worst of it, I decided to flee.

I turned and forgot all about grilled dog meat. I jumped onto the subway track and raced in the darkness.

If luck was on my side, I'd find the passageway that would lead me outside.

Someone behind me yelled, 'Wait!'

I didn't know whether it was one of my friends blaming me for my cowardice, or one of my opponents who wanted to catch up with me to rip out my throat. Same difference. I just ran and never looked back.

In Utopia, they don't eat dogs. They raise them to pamper them, and for their protection.

We were like them once, then we learned that dogs were a cheap source of protein. If the revolution happens, we'll begin by devouring all their fat, pampered dogs.

This was the passageway. I ran through it and stumbled. I'd lost the torch, but I knew the way in any case.

There was an old poster advertising a mobile phone – a special offer from some company. This was when there were mobile phone companies, before Mansour *bey*, the telecoms king, took them over. Of course, no one was interested in us using those things at all any longer, but this part of Egypt was still covered by the network anyway.

There was another poster for cooking oil.

There was a poster with a half-naked, beautiful girl on it. Someone had disfigured her features and blacked her out. Someone did that one day, claiming that he had done it to safeguard morals. The truth is that it was a symbolic rape of that beautiful woman, but sexual prohibition was no longer one of our problems today, strangely enough. With all this poverty, the barriers of morality had collapsed, and sex had become the easiest thing to get. Sex for a paltry price, or else rape.

But in spite of that, I continue to aspire to something else. I aspire to something beyond sex. To that thing that leaves you lying beside her, after your lust is depleted, paying attention to her, and perhaps caressing her smooth cheek with your finger.

A mysterious affection that I won't call love. I'm not that naive and starry-eyed. I'll call it 'something beyond sex'.

Azza, Awatif, Nagat …

I opened the iron gate and emerged into the open air and darkness.

I carefully closed the padlock so that no one else could sneak in. Those people in the subway tunnels could take care of themselves, and they knew how to get out.

I was saved by a miracle.

But I was hungry.

Later, once I'd caught my breath, I would know if it had been my good luck to have remained alive and hungry, or if it would have been better for me to have died in the dark subway tunnel.

I don't know. I don't have power over death. I'm a bacteria forced to live, no matter what.

At least there was Safiya. My sister.

There's one thing in my life that has remained clean or that I have succeeded in making that way. Once, on the television at the coffee shop, I saw in a Western film a noble knight who was walking with a woman when he came across a muddy puddle. So he took off his cloak and threw it on the ground so she could walk over it and not get her shoes dirty.

With Safiya I didn't play the role of the knight. I played the role of the cloak itself.

That's why I was alive. I wouldn't die and leave Safiya to steal or shake her behind, selling the only thing she has to sell. I wouldn't die and leave her to women who would scratch her face and call her filthy names. I wouldn't die and

let her go hungry.

I wouldn't die and let her live without a life.

The numbers don't lie.

For every one hundred crimes of violence against women, eighty-five women are killed.

For every one hundred female murder victims, there are four who have their throats cut like sheep, and two are burned.

My beloved cornea – and a dream of something beyond sex …

I saw everything collapse.

I warned them a thousand times, but they didn't believe me; or they believed me, but didn't care.

Sometimes I feel that Egyptians are a people who deserve what happens to them. A submissive people, lacking resolve, who bend before the first whip that lashes the air.

In the past, when I would philosophise, I told one of my friends, 'Balfour gathered the Jews into one national homeland he had promised to them and, in this way, he rid the world of them.'

He ignorantly asked me who Balfour was, so I told him, 'He was a man who gathered the Jews into one national homeland he had promised to them and, in this way, he rid the world of them.'

A look of wonder appeared on his face.

'Whoa!' he cried. 'A man who gathered the Jews into one national homeland?'

'I think there was another promise,' I continued. 'There was someone who gathered the good-for-nothings, the sluggish, the bums, and those lacking ambition from the ends of the earth into one national homeland – Egypt. That's why you don't find people lacking ambition in Japan. That's why you don't find good-for-nothings in Germany. That's why you don't find bums in Argentina. They're all here, my friend!'

'Whoa!' he shouted in amazement, as he let out a puff of hashish smoke. 'There's someone who promised the—'

He didn't finish what he was saying, because his head lolled forward on his chest and he passed out. A thread of saliva dribbled down his chin.

'Those people are *you*, you dogs!' I used to tell them. 'Your situation has sunk so low that you're now *eating* dogs! I warned you a thousand times! I told you about the theories of Malthus and Gamal Hamdan and the prophecies of Orwell

and H.G. Wells. But all you do is get high on hashish and cheap liquor and pass out. Now I swing between sadness over your condition, which is my condition as well, and curses, because only now do you realise. My anger at you is like the anger of Old Testament prophets at their people, one of whom rejoiced and sang when the Babylonians besieged his city. He felt that his honour had finally been regained, even if it would be his last feeling of ecstasy. I curse you, you fools! I curse you!’

But what frightened me was that they didn’t care at all.

They were absolutely disinterested.

They looked for the next woman and the next rolled cigarette and the next meal and they didn’t realise what they’d come to.

I curse you, you fools! I curse you!

4

Safwat works in Utopia.

He dives into the sewage pipes to unblock them, although the sewage system there is good and carefully maintained. I should mention that those gated communities have their independent private services. We no longer have anything that could be called a sewage system. We make do. Most homes rely on ditches, and there is a cart that empties them out and then gets rid of the waste in a nearby location. Some people have no homes to begin with, so sewage pipes aren't a problem for them.

It's amusing to observe to what extent human necessities have shrunk. In the beginning, there were apartments with telephones, refrigerators, televisions and baths. So people were always complaining about the dog's life they were leading, where they were forced to watch mindless TV programmes, and getting disruptions in electricity, phone lines and water. When you lose all of that, there's no longer any source of complaint. So, you see, it's a special kind of karma. When there's no electricity, it never gets cut off.

So let the storm rage. Let the storm rage.

Safwat works in Utopia.

Safwat is a sewage-pipe diver in Utopia.

Safwat reads the newspaper and tells me, 'They're going to cancel customs duties on wood imported from the EU.'

Then he looks at me in confusion and asks me, 'Is that beneficial? For whom?'

I give him a summary of my philosophy, which I've honed over the course of all these years, 'I don't understand what it means, but it's detrimental to us, and that's that. Any decision that is taken at any moment is against us.'

Safwat shows signs of understanding.

Safwat is in a relationship with a housemaid. Apparently, she's been struck by the loss of her sense of smell, or by a cold. This housemaid would get phlogistine for him. Her employer isn't careful with this expensive liquid, and leaves it lying everywhere. She would steal drops from the bottle to get it for Safwat, and he would bring it to me.

After that, I add some drops of lemon juice to the liquid to give it that smell

and that cold sting when you put it on your skin. The centimetre of liquid turns into five centimetres, and I sell it at a sky-high price to our young guys. When they complain that they aren't seeing the green flames, I tell them angrily, 'Addiction has destroyed your nerve-endings, you sons of bitches! There's nothing that can get you high any more, except the pangs of death itself!'

So they bite their tongues. My words have some truth to them.

Fraud? What does that mean? The best fraudster, without exception, is the one who adulterates drugs. This saintly man works for people's benefit, in my opinion. He's a social reformer raking in money!

Safwat works in Utopia.

I was waiting for him to come back from there.

From the minute those two got off the bus, I sensed they were strangers.

I didn't know everyone in the neighbourhood, but I definitely knew misery and suffering. I knew hunger. I knew frailty. I'd encountered them quite a lot, so I'd come to recognise them with total ease from a distance, no matter how disguised they were.

Here I saw fake misery, suffering and hunger.

I saw fear, which was unusual. In our world you didn't often see fear; instead, there was a kind of surrender to fate and hopelessness.

I stood watching them from a distance.

I saw amazement. I saw disgust. I saw loathing. I saw apprehensiveness.

All of these are alien feelings in my world. No one feels disgust among us. No one feels a sense of amazement. By age nine, any child has seen everything and been very hungry, and often has been raped three or four times; so you see on his face the look of someone who has seen it all, like an old, experienced prostitute.

These two aren't from here, I told myself. They're not from the Others.

You can cut my arm off if they aren't from Utopia.

I saw the guy walking with the girl amid the crowds and the haze of sweat.

He stopped when he came to – to Somaya.

He was negotiating with her.

He had very bad taste. Somaya was the ugliest girl here: she was closer to a man in his prime, not to mention the fact that her uncle was el-Sirgani himself! El-Sirgani who had ripped out my cornea …

By an amazing coincidence, el-Sirgani had lost an eye – or a cornea – in a fight not too long ago. Our relationship was no longer as bad as it used to be, but we avoided confrontations. We only barked at each other again whenever we

saw each other.

He wasn't a thug. He was a pimp. It's true that his body suggested the first profession, but let me assure you that he was a pimp. He didn't sell his physical strength and force, rather he sold his women. The only goods he had for sale was Somaya, and of course, she didn't sell very well.

That stupid boy had chosen Somaya, and therefore he was at the mercy of el-Sirgani. He could do anything. He could threaten him with a machete and take everything he had on him, or accuse him of attacking his family's honour – like the actor Stephan Rosti in old movies – and force him to accept any one-sided condition.

The most important question here was: what was the role of the girl who was with him, and why wasn't he satisfied with her? Was she his sister? Who makes a deal with a hooker in front of his sister? For that matter, who makes a deal with a hooker in front of any other woman?

In any case, the guy had taken Somaya with him and led her into the ruined buildings.

No one would pick a fight with him. She was protecting him. But if she screamed or called for help or something happened to her, then he'd be torn to shreds. The guys in the ruined building sniffing glue would tear him apart until her uncle arrived to finish the job of flaying him alive.

Curiosity to know more got the better of me, so I forgot all about Safwat and what he had on him, and I started making my way into the middle of the ruined buildings, looking for Somaya and her client.

The girl who could be his sister would probably run into some problems. I couldn't stand seeing a girl in a trouble, because it reminded me of Safiya.

I thought I could rescue her if that happened.

I wasn't strong, but I was popular. I was also part of Abd el-Zahir's gang, so I was under his protection. Any attack on me was an attack on him – that wasn't a trivial matter.

Standing there in the dark, I was suddenly surprised by a strange sight. The guy landed a karate-chop on Somaya's neck, and she crumpled to the ground like a heavy sack. He didn't want her for sex. He wanted to hurt her, for some reason that I didn't understand.

Or maybe I did understand!

But he was really stupid. El-Sirgani never let Somaya out of his sight and, consequently, there had to be someone watching her from a distance to guarantee that she wouldn't escape or take more money from the client. So I knew that the news of this had reached el-Sirgani with lightning speed.

Ten young guys raced in the dark. They leaped over the rubble of collapsed walls, bricks and piles of rubbish. They leaped over rocks. They leaped right into the scene the moment it happened.

They surrounded the guy and his girl, while Somaya lay in a heap on the ground, unaware of what was going on.

Then Suka shouted in his rough, guttural voice, ‘They aren’t like us! They’re from Utopia!’

Part Three

Predator

1

The hatred in their eyes was clear. They probably had the same look in their eyes when they stormed the Bastille. They were one and the same. The rabble has a standardised type and appearance, regardless of the difference in countries and languages. In their hands flashed blades that weren't part of knives: instead, they were parts of car frames that had been turned into murder weapons. There was a water pipe or two like in *Gangs of New York*.

Germinal trembled and clung to me. We wouldn't get out of this.

I felt a hand roughly searching through my pocket, then it pulled out my mobile phone.

Their eyes all turned to the body lying on the ground. The message was entirely clear, and they understood it, 'They kidnap any one of us they find, take them back for their entertainment, then kill them!'

I understood that the first punch would open up the floodgates, after which punches would come raining down.

Only who would start it? Goodbye, Germinal. In spite of everything, life was boring. Maybe ridding ourselves of it was a kind of change.

'Don't hurt them, guys. They're innocent. I saw the girl fall: no one touched her.'

It was one of them, speaking with determination. I couldn't make out his features, because my eye was looking at the situation as a whole, not at individuals.

'I saw him hit her, Gaber,' one of them said.

'You didn't see anything, you son of a …' retorted my mysterious rescuer, who apparently was called Gaber. 'The glue you've been sniffing has killed off your brain and blinded you.'

Then he whispered in my ear, 'Got any phlogistine on you?'

I hesitated.

'Either that, or you'll be seeing your ears on the ground in a second!' he hissed.

I reached my hand into my sock and pulled out a small bottle resembling an ampoule that had been stuck to my ankle with tape. He snatched it from me and waved it before their eyes. 'Do you know what this is? Phlogistine! Anyone who

hasn’t yet tried it should know that it’s totally different from glue-sniffing and pot and Parkinol pills. Take it and try some. One drop on your forearm. Don’t do too much of it, dumbasses: I’ve seen someone die from it in seconds because he put two drops on.’

They all seemed to know what he was talking about.

Instantly they forgot all about revenge, pounced on the ampoule, and started calling each other filthy names. Suddenly we no longer existed.

One of them tried to run with the ampoule, but another one stuck his leg out in his path and he fell. He leaped on the ampoule and wrenched it away, only to have someone else stick his finger in his eye. At that, another one pounced, biting the rear end of the one who had done the eye-poking. Meanwhile, the one who had fallen had got up on his feet and kicked the face of the one who was biting the other’s behind. A mass of bodies wrestled, and you couldn’t tell where one of them began and the other one ended. Who was losing and who was winning?

None of them asked me how I’d got hold of that amount. You’d have to try some before you’d understand: faced with phlogistine, only idiots stop to ask where it comes from.

If they’d stopped for a moment, they’d have realised that the fact that I had phlogistine on me confirmed their suspicions about me.

Gaber shouted at the group, which was no longer hearing or seeing, ‘They’re thieves! They stole this phlogistine from those Utopia bastards!’

With that, it was as if he was giving us a get-out-of-jail-free card!

At that point, I saw the giant pimp approaching from a distance, brandishing his machete, sending imaginary heads flying as he launched a barrage of curses.

He was coming towards us, foaming and frothing at the mouth, and then, before he could say anything, the young guy shouted, ‘Phlogistine, el-Sirgani! Flog! Flog!’

The man didn’t slow down, but altered his trajectory; he had been heading directly towards me, now he rushed towards the brawlers. I didn’t understand what happened, but I was certain that he brought his machete down on them. These people seem to have a very quick grasp of things and their hesitation is nonexistent. They’re the hawk that doesn’t have time to understand what is taking place, but attacks first and understands later.

The young guy, our rescuer, furtively gave us a signal to take off, so we ran behind him.

If we couldn’t trust him, then who could we trust?

Soon we were somewhere in these ruined buildings, then we were at a small shack made from scrap wood, disassembled parts of car frames, newspapers and a very odd assortment of things. He pulled back a piece of tarpaulin so we could enter and, feeling compelled to, we did so.

The condition of the hut was worse inside. There were two car tyres being used as seats, and there was a small kerosene stove and a mound of books, the likes of which I had never seen in my life.

The only evidence for the presence of electricity came from a feeble lamp connected to an ancient car battery. The lamp cord had been hung on a stick jutting out from the wood. Darkness would have probably been better and brighter than this light. This measly light was what you would expect over your last words before white foam-flecks dribbled out of your mouth and you died.

For the first time, I was able to get a good look at the features of this rescuer. He was around thirty years old and skinny, with tousled hair. He showed clear signs of malnutrition, but he had a strong physique, like a wolf. On his nose were glasses that had been soldered together hundreds of times, and under them was a face that was filled with stitches, like the face of the monster in the Frankenstein movies. I also noticed that he had one cornea that had melted and turned into white paste.

‘Thanks for rescuing us,’ I told him,

‘My name is Gaber,’ he replied, as he pushed away some junk to give us room to sit down. ‘No thanks needed. I hate killing of any kind, although you two came, of course, to acquire a unique souvenir! You’re from Utopia, of course!’

‘No, we’re not from—’

He gave me a sharp look with his eye that had turned to paste, saying, ‘Don’t try to fool me. We all know what thieves do when they sneak up on us. And when they’ve finished their mission, the Marines’ helicopters come to rescue them with their quarry. What does your father say to you when you come back to him with one of us? “Dirty!” “Shame on you!” “Oh how cruel!”’

I looked at Germinal and she looked at me.

An uncomfortable feeling washed over us. We didn’t fool anyone. The Others would have torn us apart on the spot: as for this guy, he had a fate in store for us. I didn’t know what it would be, but it was slow in coming, slow, and everything that is slow is cruel.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Alaa,’ I told him indifferently.

He smiled maliciously and said, ‘Of course, if you thought that I’d believe for one moment that you are Alaa, then you take me for an idiot. But it’s not

important. The only value in names is in letting you know that I'm talking to you. We'll assume that you're Alaa, and she can be Maha. Alaa and Maha. Nice. Are you two brother and sister? I'll assume that too. But if you're not brother and sister, then you should know that I won't allow any funny business under my roof, or rather, under the tarpaulin over my shack, because I didn't bring you here for that, and I don't live by myself.

We heard movement, and a teenage girl entered the shack. She seemed pretty, even if the filthiness of her tattered clothes concealed any beauty. The filth stiffened her dress so that it neither fluttered nor moved, as if it were tanned leather. When she saw us, her eyes had the look of a timid animal withdrawing into the thicket. Later I learned that those two eyes could say everything, as if they were communicating directly with the soul.

'This is my sister,' he said, smiling at her. 'Come here, Safiya. You were asking me about how those rich people who live in their private settlements – look, here's two of them!'

She gave us a look of incomprehension. We appeared to be in a worse state than she was.

'They had to look like this as a disguise,' he explained. 'It's a kind of grease that actors put on their faces. They came to grab one of us to amuse themselves.'

Gradually he began to grow more agitated, as though he were spitting out the hatred that had built up in his soul. 'Why don't you leave us alone? You stole the past, the present and the future from us, but you hate to let us live our lives.'

Before I could understand where it was coming from or when it appeared, I found a giant machete blade under my chin.

'I wonder if I should take a souvenir from you, the way you do with us?' he said between yellow teeth. 'A girl's ear would be an excellent souvenir. A delicate, clean, red ear. Everyone will envy me over it – maybe they'll borrow it from me.'

Then he burst out in savage laughter. Savage laughter. Savage.

We remained silent. I was torn between showing fear, which would inflame his sadism further and showing indifference, which would provoke his insane fury. In the end, I continued to look into his face with my own face like a hawk, expressionlessly. I looked at Germinal out of the corner of my eye, and found that she had decided on the same thing.

Eventually, he calmed down. 'Make us something to eat,' he said to the girl.

Gaber told us of his friend who was called Azuz.

He had a large body and a left eye that constantly fluttered. As if he had been expecting bad luck since birth.

Azuz entered the ruined buildings to relieve himself one night, when three guys from Utopia seized him. They were forced to kill him when they were unable to abduct him. Three powerfully built young men with cruelty, coldness and condescension in their eyes.

People here only found out what had happened to him when they saw the Marines' helicopter circling over the ruins, its bright searchlights sweeping over the place. At that point, they knew that one of them had fallen.

People began pelting the helicopter with stones, and Mursi pulled out the pistol he had manufactured himself in a metal shop and fired off two shots at the helicopter.

The noisy beast rose higher as it pointed its searchlights in every direction, and then descended a little, making it possible for them to see a Marine sitting by helicopter's open door. He had placed the machine gun between his thighs and began firing bullets indiscriminately at the angry crowd.

A lot of them fell dead. Mursi himself fell dead.

The helicopter entered the ruins, then a rope-ladder dangled from it. The three young guys climbed up the ladder, shouting wildly, and then the machine ascended. The sons of bitches thought they were acting in a Hollywood movie about the Vietnam War. The boys got inside the helicopter and they looked down on the angry crowds. One of them brandished something bloody in his hand as he let out a stream of curses.

Gaber hurried to where Mursi's body was and picked up the pistol. He steadied his right hand with his left and aimed carefully, but the shot that rang out didn't injure anyone. He only seriously hurt his arm, and its echo reverberated for ages.

The helicopter moved off into the distance.

The crowd hurried to the ruins by torchlight. And there, beside a wall, they found Azuz's body, riddled with stab-wounds. He had only one arm. The guys from Utopia had worked hard at it until they could tear it off, and they clearly didn't have a butcher's expertise at dismemberment. But if they hadn't taken a souvenir, then no one in Utopia would have believed them when they got back.

The helicopter moved off into the distance.

But it left behind more blind, black hatred that could find no outlet to pour itself into.

Azuz's brother, who couldn't stand his brother when he was alive, swore that he would cut off the forearm of anyone from Utopia if they fell into his hands.

But this time, he would do it with his teeth, not with a knife.

The opportunity never arose, even though the crowd kept waiting expectantly to see how that could happen.

They knew that he would carry out his revenge to the letter, but with any unfortunate one of the Others who fell into his hands in the next fight. There is someone who will lose his arm because he vied with Azuz over a crust of bread. That’s for sure.

This was the story Gaber told us, and more than anyone else, I knew it was true.

2

Look at me, little girl, say your final prayer
As I crush your ribs and leave you there
I squeeze out your soul with my burning flame
So it goes to heaven broken and lame
When the angels ask how it got that way
It'll say, I slept with the Devil today
It was the Devil himself who gets so high
On the screams of virgins before they die

– Orgasm Songs

The food this girl Safiya prepared for us was a mix of broad beans and falafel, the sacred food of the Others. Sometimes we eat these things, of course, for variety's sake, but not like this: they were almost-spoiled leftovers from several earlier meals, which she mixed together and heated on the stove. Then she poured oil over the mixture, took a handful of spices and scattered them over the pan.

'We use a lot of spices because they can hide the taste of anything,' Gaber explained. 'They hide the taste of spoiled chicken, sour beans and rotten eggs. Spices are the one commodity whose price hasn't gone up, because we need them to stay alive.'

He handed me a plate and another one to Germinal. Then the girl handed him a piece of blackened bread, and he kept it for himself.

I had eaten broad beans before; it helps to change things when you're bored of your usual meals. But our digestive systems couldn't put up with it any more. So I refrained from eating because I didn't know what condition their toilet would be in. I don't mean that I didn't know: it's just that I didn't want to know.

Putting his spoon down on his plate, he said, 'Of course, you don't understand a thing about the situation we've got into. But I'd hate not to tell you everything. The picture you're seeing now was there from the start, but unfocused. Then, little by little, it expanded. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer, and then came the moment when the collapse occurred. It seems to me that it happened in

the first decade of this century.

‘Suddenly, the dam broke: tourism was no longer capable of feeding these mouths. Israel opened its own canal, which became a ready substitute for the Suez Canal. As for the Gulf countries, their oil petered out or was not needed after the appearance of biroil, and they kicked out their imported labour force. So the economy became burdened by a crushing weight, and services for the poor disappeared because the state wiped its hands completely of its responsibility for them, and privatised everything. There was no longer a government, or no longer a government that cared about us. Eventually, salaries were halted, and services were halted, and the police melted away. Consequently, we are no longer taxed.

‘Your parents were from a class that could use its influence to get rich: bank accounts abroad, loans from banks, monopolies. Everything played into the hands of your fathers and against us, all down the line. So your class was able to stick together, and its wealth expanded, while we fell into the abyss.

‘Then living with us became an impossible matter, so your class was forced to isolate itself, seeking safety in those settlements along the North Coast. They employed Marines because they could guarantee their loyalty, unlike the loyalty of their wretched bodyguards. The idea that this ocean of poverty would rise up used to keep them awake at night. Since the dawn of time, all popular revolts have begun with slaughtering the rich.

‘And now two societies have formed: one of them owns everything and the other owns nothing. The second society is only important as a consumer market, nothing more. Even if it suffers poverty, the density of its population makes everything possible. If each one of us buys one olive, then the olive-seller will become a millionaire.’

Then he stopped eating, and asked me, ‘Do you have Israelis in Utopia?’

‘A lot,’ I replied. ‘Some of my best friends are.’

‘That’s an important characteristic with your people,’ he said, as he resumed chewing. ‘They’ve assumed their position in the new Middle East they used to talk about. The triangle that Israel dreamed so much about – Gulf money (before it dried up), Israeli know-how, and cheap Egyptian manual labour. We, the poor, haven’t stopped thinking of Israel as an enemy.’

Angry from all this lecturing, I said: ‘Why would I consider Israel an enemy? Just to make you happy?’

He looked at the girl, exchanging a feeble smile, and said, ‘Go to sleep now. Sleep. You don’t know the half of what I know. And the other half you aren’t interested in knowing. Sleep, and in the morning we’ll see how you can get out

of here with your ears still on.’

Then he said urgently, ‘I’m not kidding. They know where I live, and they will come back here when the effect of the phlogistine wears off. When that happens, I have to be here to protect you, otherwise—’

He drew his finger across his neck in an unmistakable gesture.

So we couldn’t escape. It wasn’t on the cards, not to mention that we were really exhausted. It was the most abominable night of our lives, sitting there stuck to each other in that foul-smelling shack. We didn’t dare stretch out or touch any part of the wall. Would we remain this way until morning? And then what? Everything rested on this guy’s plan.

I don’t understand him: I think he’s a cultured type in an environment that isn’t his own. The sheep that thinks becomes a danger to itself and others. I’m considered a cultured person in Utopia. I’m one of the few who’s read everything that’s fallen into my hands, but that doesn’t make me feel one iota of sympathy for him. Culture isn’t a religion that links hearts and joins them together. In fact, it probably divides them because it informs those who have been wronged about the horror of the injustice they are suffering and tells the lucky ones what they can lose. It makes you nervous and wary. Not to mention that your cultural convictions can be transformed into a new religion that merits your death, and leads you to consider others as unbelievers.

Gaber’s snoring had begun to grow loud as he lay in the corner, curled up in a ball.

What does he want from life? Why does he go on living?

If I threatened him with a knife, he would shout and kick my hand. Why?

In the faint light, his sister, half-asleep, lay beside Germinal, looking at her.

Germinal was sleeping like a child. Her lips moved. She whispered from her tormented spirit, ‘Layla, Layla.’ Layla was her mother, of course (no one in Utopia liked to use the words Mama and Papa). For the first time, I saw her simply as a tormented child who wanted to return to her mother. I had only seen Germinal excited, bored and arrogant. It took sleeping on the ground to reveal her true self.

For several minutes, Safiya continued looking, then she cautiously put out her hand to Germinal’s hair and started feeling a lock of it. There was something bestial and strange in that touch, which I had only seen once before in a monkey who put out his hand once to feel my fingertip out of curiosity when I was at our zoo. Germinal woke up, startled and moved her head away a little, and then she sank back into slumber.

But the girl did exactly what I expected: she leapt back a metre, in a way that further convinced me of that monkey theory. Those non-human movements. Those movements connected to innate animal reflexes that have nothing to do with the rational brain.

‘Her hair is beautiful,’ the girl said in a hoarse voice. ‘Very beautiful and clean. I don’t know how you could ever have imagined you would fool us. Not with hair like this!’

Then she stretched out her hand to mine and grabbed my fingers in a friendly way, saying, ‘Do you see the difference?’

Yes, I see the difference. A soft, clean, manicured hand and a rough, filthy hand with broken nails. The strange thing is that the former is a man’s hand, and the latter a woman’s.

‘We were in the dark,’ I said indifferently. ‘You can fool anyone in the dark, and we were going to return quickly.’

Then I pointed to her sleeping brother and said, ‘Where does he know all this from?’

‘He insists on reading. He sifts through the rubbish for every old book he can find, since such things are no longer sold. That’s the advantage of being interested in things that no longer interest anyone else. At least other people won’t rob you. These books were tossed out here years ago, while you can’t leave a matchstick without anyone taking it. It’s—’

Then she began coughing so heavily that I expected she would cough her lungs out. I waited until she had finished as I looked at her in amazement. She said with a little bit of pride, ‘It’s tuberculosis. It’s come back since the nineties of the last century. We don’t have a treatment for it, and it’s no use in any case.’

Then she pointed to her sleeping brother. ‘He’s one of the graduates,’ she said. ‘They’re the ones who entered colleges or universities ten years ago and then couldn’t find jobs. They couldn’t do anything productive with what they learned. But their relationship with books continues. There have been no opportunities for anyone at all in the past twenty years. If your father isn’t a high-ranking police officer or a businessman or merchant who’ll pass on his business to you, then you have no chances, and you’ll join those who sniff glue in ruined buildings.’

Then she yawned like a bull and closed her eyes. I began to watch her as I sat there. Pretty, no doubt, but how could you find that beauty underneath all that roughness and filth? Or eliminate all those years of suffering, poverty and hunger? Impossible. This girl will marry one of these men who will beat her, and she will die during one of his rages. There seemed to be no other future before

her.

I don’t think I slept.

If you ask me, I’ll tell you that I didn’t sleep.

But there was that fog that surrounds you, and swings back and forth between solidity and lightness. Consciousness sinks into a swamp and comes out of it. That’s what my sleep was like.

3

Morning: no breakfast because one meal is enough for a person here. Besides, we were completely abstaining from the food.

Morning, and Gaber was outside the house.

Morning, and Safiya was doing all sorts of strange things.

She ripped sheets from a pile of old school notebooks.

She cut some cardboard boxes into long strips.

She poured some black liquid into a cooking pot.

She collected broken matchsticks into a bag.

She mended a piece of plastic.

She scraped off bits of leftover soap and added some lye to them.

She poured some water into a battery.

She tore a piece of sponge to bits.

The household chores of these people's women were really strange. Gaber said that it wouldn't interest me to know everything, which I would agree with. Following the activities of cockroaches is only interesting to entomologists.

I wouldn't ask her about anything. I wouldn't ask her why she ripped up old school notebooks or why she cut up cardboard boxes. I wouldn't ask her about the black liquid or why she collected broken matchsticks. I wouldn't ask her about mending plastic or scraping pieces of soap. I wouldn't ask about the water in the battery or tearing the sponge.

Cockroaches.

Germinal watched me curiously watching Safiya. Germinal whispered in my ear, 'Don't tell me you want her.'

I said I wouldn't object. There was a special, unique appeal to her that was different from the appeal of the girls I was used to: girls who had the same fragrance, silken hair, tattoo and nose ring or ring in the lower lip. I knew them by heart in the way that you know the taste of chicken by heart. No chicken is different from any other and you can feel that you have eaten this chicken before. As for her, she had to be a different experience. But I wouldn't risk flirting with her while we were at the mercy of Gaber.

I wouldn't risk flirting with her while layers of filth covered her – perhaps covering her soul.

I wouldn’t risk flirting with her when she coughed up blood every five minutes.

Gaber didn’t do anything all that day. When I asked him about what he was planning to do with us, he said mysteriously, ‘Wait until the appropriate time.’

‘Why haven’t you got rid of us?’

‘Because I detest tit-for-tat violence, and because you two don’t know any better, that’s all. You only did what the rat does who tries to steal some bread – because he doesn’t know anything else. It’s his instinct and his nature. But you two aren’t rats. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.’

Then he took out a container with some grease in and put some on his fingers. Then he said, as he put his hand up to my cheek, ‘If I may?’

‘By all means.’

So he smeared my face and Germinal’s – carefully and precisely. He got our hands dirty, and then selected some filthier clothing for us. He had a master’s touch, no doubt about it, and finally Germinal looked like beggars do, and I think I looked even worse. Then he explained to me how we should walk and talk.

‘These people have seen everything and know everything, so they almost don’t talk. Speak as little as possible. For example, if you want to buy something fancy for yourself, don’t ask about the price like a schoolboy. Grab the thing roughly and look in the seller’s eye with a questioning look. Don’t say anything. He will look you in the eye grumpily and tell you, “A hundred,” for example, and nothing more. At that point, you give him a rude gesture with your finger, and maybe let out a short grunt. Then toss him fifty and don’t speak.’

Then he thought for a time, adding, ‘Good habits will get you killed here. You have to spit on the ground from time to time. Grab your crotch occasionally. She should scratch her chest and head, as if the first is swarming with fleas and the other with lice. These are important touches and they’ll reduce the number of curious glances directed at you.’

He told me we were about to begin a tour in which he would show us a world I was completely ignorant about. He said we were free to escape, if we wanted, but he couldn’t guarantee our lives for another moment after that.

‘You’ll make a ton of mistakes and, at that exact moment, they’ll tear you apart.’

So we left the wretched little shack, and walked out onto streets that were extremely crowded and extremely poor. There were traces indicating that there had once been a government, and that it had then totally abandoned everything.

In the alleyways and side streets fights occurred at the drop of a hat and with no justification.

‘It’s the morality of crowds. Put six hens in a confined coop and watch how well-behaved they end up being. If one hen doesn’t gouge out her neighbour’s eye or gobble up her guts, then I’m mistaken.’

Germinal had gone pale with fear. As I clutched her hand, I asked him, ‘So then, why do they continue to multiply?’

‘Because multiplying is a poor person’s only luxury. Besides, all these people believe that one of their sons will change everything. While waiting for this unknown, they multiply, and the boy scratches around for his daily bread, like a chicken. No one knows whether he’s died, eaten or slept. At the age of eleven, he learns to sniff glue, and after that, he has to commit crimes in order to get high on something better. Of course, he only robs those who are as poor as he is, because no one can steal from you. It’s a bright future, as you can see.’

Then he scratched his head and smiled: ‘In spite of that, our fertility rate has declined a lot. Two full generations have eaten tainted food, laden with hormones. So it’s become normal for married people not to have children, but the upshot is that our numbers are ceaselessly growing in any case. There were castration crews, then the need for them fell off.’

‘Castration crews?’ Germinal said in dazed astonishment.

‘Yes. You haven’t heard about them? Groups of masked policemen would attack young men. With surgical precision and swiftness, they would anaesthetise their victim, give him the snip and then sew up the incision and flee. That way he would become permanently incapable of having children. On average, three guys would be sterilised in one night.’

‘What happened after that?’

‘A lot of religious people in Utopia said that was sinful. Instead, we rely on tainted food, so he can sterilise himself, instead of our government ministers taking responsibility for it! So the practice of tainting food grew more widespread, and the dose of the male oral contraceptive gossypol – a substance extremely effective in killing sperm and destroying the tissue of the testicles – was increased to the highest possible rate in the oils we consume. In spite of that, we multiply like bacteria. There is no way in the world to kill bacteria, no matter how effective the antibiotics you use are. They always find a way.’

I asked him the question that had been pestering me during the night, ‘So why don’t you revolt?’

He laughed until tears ran down his cheeks, and replied, ‘This is something that is repeated from time to time. But the revolutions of the twentieth century

that satisfied the aims of the masses are now old history. Those at the top have learned from the mistakes of others. No one will ever see again the Shah of Iran, who circled the air in his plane looking for a country that would give him shelter, and you won't see the corpse of Ceau escu or Mussolini left hanging in a public square. The security apparatus is complex and evolved today. There are six security systems observing each other and the mission of each of them is to protect the rulers. Revolutions today are more like riots, then helicopters hover in the air, launch some grenades and fire several shots, and the crowds disperse.'

At that moment, a shabby-looking man with an unshaven beard approached us, wearing clothes that suggested an unkempt official uniform. He stretched out his hand to us.

'Do you have anything to eat?'

Gaber shook his head and continued walking. 'They're everywhere,' he said. 'There are no jobs. Unless he finds work in your settlements on the North Coast, then no one needs him for anything. He'll spend his life looking for bits of food thrown in the rubbish heaps. Then he'll die of tuberculosis one day and they'll find him beside the wall. That's his life.'

At that point, my disgust and astonishment had reached their limits. I thought of Utopia and my house, and the dollars I fling around. I remembered my group of friends, and the phlogistine I burned with desire for. I remembered my dog that gobbled down enough food to satiate five of these people every day. I wasn't prepared for a moment to abandon all that but, at the same time, I couldn't stomach the idea of all this poverty existing. Only then did I understand the reason for those high walls and the Marines and the internal airport. If we abandoned all that, this flood would pour in to drown us and kill us. I didn't know how things had got to this point, but I knew it had to continue.

Germinal began to shudder. She started muttering to herself: 'Oh God! I want to go back! I want to go back!'

I gave her a hand a squeeze to shut her up.

There was a man standing in the middle of a crowd, selling bottles with coloured liquid in them and claiming they could cure tuberculosis and cancer. They were a mixture of herbs that he'd concocted, and the 'thieves in Utopia' – as he put it – didn't know their secret: they spent their money on garbage they bought at the highest prices, while everything there was to know was here.

We have everything there is to know …

We have everything there is to know …

We have everything there is to know …

These medicines were of no value, except for the fact that they were cheap! In other words, they provided you with the benefit of taking something rather than just waiting helplessly for death.

There was a man standing in front of an overturned wooden crate with small appliances on it.

‘The best equipment we’ve stolen from Utopia!’ he shouted. ‘Step right up!’

My eyes paused on something and I looked at Germinal, only to find that she was avidly looking at the same thing.

There was a small mobile phone on that crate, one metre away from us!

This wasn’t just a mobile: this was a clean bed and a hot meal and a bath and sex and phlogistine and glasses of wine and home and friends …

I couldn’t get the mesmerising image of the mobile out of my mind.

We left the crowd, and Germinal lingered a bit beside an alley, saying that she needed to relieve herself. Gaber said indifferently that she could. Any place would do. Public toilets no longer existed because the sewage system was history now.

Germinal disappeared into the alley for half a second, then she came back, shaking and yelling, ‘It’s full of guys sleeping!’

‘They’re under the influence of glue and ground-up Parkinol pills,’ Gaber said with a laugh. ‘Don’t be afraid. Even if Ms Universe was naked in front of them, they wouldn’t move an inch. They stopped being men a long time ago. Maybe they’ve stopped being human too!’

So she went back in the alley filled with young guys who were no longer men.

Suddenly I heard a commotion.

Suddenly I saw a scene like the mob when they attacked the Bastille. Around ten men carrying machetes and sticks were rushing towards us. One of them shouted as he pointed at us, ‘They’re the ones who stole the mobile! I saw the girl put it in her pocket!’

4

So she'd done it!

When and how? I never noticed it at all!

Some of them rushed into the alley and I hurried to join them, only to find Germinal with her back against the wall, clutching the mobile as if she were trying to dial a number – her mother's number in Utopia, of course. She was shaking and on her face was the most abject look of terror I've seen in my life. Sometimes cats show that level of alarm when they are cornered in an alley.

In her overemotional state, she began scratching her chest and hair crudely in a ridiculous manner, as if she were telling them, *I'm not who you think I am – I'm infested with fleas! Look!*

'You idiots,' Gaber hissed in my ear. 'Who sells mobiles with SIM cards in them? That makes them easy to trace!'

The men came out of the alley, grabbing Germinal. One of them swore that she had to be punished there and then, in that awful, humiliating way that men harm women. These people had turned into creatures as far removed as possible from humans. The cerebral cortex no longer plays any role with them. They are only driven by sex or violence. Rape gives them both together.

'Listen!' Gaber said as he stood in the middle of these madmen. 'This girl is hungry. Hungrier than we are. All of you have stolen at some point because of hunger. You've taken back what she stole, so leave her alone!'

Then he landed a slap on her cheek that knocked her back two metres.

'A beggar robs a beggar! The idiot was dreaming of calling her brother who was snatched to Utopia!'

Only at that did they all grow quiet. 'He won't come back,' one of them said, as he raised his hand in a gesture meaning, *Break it up, men*. 'They will have fun with him, then they'll cut his hand off and throw him into the desert. Then they'll make the pilgrimage to Mecca, asking God to forgive them.'

Germinal was really crying, and her crying grew more anguished. That came at the right time, because they scattered, shaking each other's hands.

When they all moved off, Gaber went up to her and kicked her in the side so hard that she fell to the ground. 'You bitch,' he said. 'I swear to God that's the last time I try to protect you two. I told you, you're on your own if you don't

follow my orders.’

Ashamed, we stood up and walked behind Gaber, with our imaginary tails between our legs. So the moment had come when one of these people slapped and kicked us. It’s true that he did that so that other people wouldn’t rip us apart, but I don’t accept anyone laying his hand on me. Even Mourad and Larine. Once I slapped Mourad back. Larine had a hysterical fit because I had laid a hand on my father. So I told her that since he had brought me into the world, he had to bear the consequences bravely.

‘If you think we’re staying here for ever, then you’re mistaken,’ I told Gaber in disgust.

‘I wasn’t expecting that,’ he said without looking at me. ‘As I said, you two are free to do as you like or take off, but I know what will happen a minute later. If you want to stay with me, then you have to comply with everything I say. I’m the one who lays out the plans and chooses the right moment.

His ears are filled with wax.

His toes are ulcerous and stick out of his pathetic sandals.

His glasses are soldered together.

His eye is ruined.

His future is bleak.

His sister is an animal with consumption.

His food is rotten.

His books are out of date.

His dreams are smothered in their cradle.

His ideas are obsolete.

His fingernails are black.

His hair is gone curly and matted with dirt.

His name is Gaber.

His people are riffraff.

His friends are scum.

In spite of all of that, he walked like a human being and talked like a human being.

In spite of all of that, he didn’t throw himself at my feet begging me to cut his arm off.

In spite of all of that, he had slapped Germinal and threatened us.

How stupid these people are, and how extremely naive!

There was an old woman vendor putting out a pile of newspapers: new, unread newspapers. She seemed to be selling them by the kilo; five kilos for an egg, she said.

He bought some newspapers from her for a box of matches, then he came back to us as he leafed through those things. He handed one of them to us, saying, ‘This is the only newspaper in circulation today. A strange, sick mix of sex, religion, fairy tales and conspiracy theories. The front page is full of the phrases “Revealing the Hidden”, “Behind Closed Doors”, “Magic” and “Rape”, etc., with a general insinuation that all women are whores and all men are pimps. There have to be several nude photos from foreign magazines, with a black bar over their eyes, as if they don’t want to expose the innocent who are the subjects of these photos. Despite the general air of sexual libertinism, poor prostitutes are as ugly as devils, so young men buy these newspapers, looking for beautiful, clean girls who aren’t coughing up blood. As for the other kind of journalism …’

He opened another newspaper, and continued, ‘It consists of love letters to the rulers. It’s published by people from Utopia and other places – people who were once of us, but who were then allowed by the rulers to live there; they are filled with gratitude, a sense of obligation and awe that is almost like worship. These are feelings that surpass what a dog feels when his master puts grilled lamb with grease dripping from it in front of him. So they write articles that don’t mean anything, words that no one reads except the rulers. In fact, even the rulers don’t read them, because they are confident of their content. These articles are a kind of intellectual tail-wagging. In the past, there was an opposition and they would attack these writers, then they understood that their intervention in these love letters was in poor taste, as if you were reading someone else’s mail!’

Then he added, as he threw the newspaper away, ‘These newspapers are excellent for wrapping fish in.’

I was in no mood for joking, so I asked, ‘What do you plan on doing with us?’

‘I’ll take you back to Utopia, of course. I don’t intend to kill you.’

‘How?’

He looked at me oddly and he didn’t speak.

Part Four

Prey

1

My beloved cornea – and a dream of something beyond sex …

I know I'm going to die one day from now, no more – don't tell me otherwise. Don't repeat this bullshit or else I'll stab you with my knife. Let me dream one last time.

I used to hate the two of them like cockroaches. It's a beautiful thing to hate truly and passionately. It's been ages since I hated anything this sincerely. I encounter everything with a profound feeling of disgust, but not hatred. You don't hate spittle. You're only disgusted by it.

The Egyptian character has suffered a lot of damage in the last hundred years; it's like a wife whose husband treated her brutally for several years until she ended up closer to brutishness and viciousness. The more ignorance grew, the less the cerebral cortex dominated behaviour, making the crimes committed by the lower classes bestial, in the literal meaning of the word. Eventually, the murderer stands looking at the camera lenses of the insatiable press with doltish, wandering eyes, and he's content to repeat: 'The devil made me do it.'

It's a beautiful thing to hate.

Despite this hatred of mine – or maybe because of it – I don't intend to kill them.

They are completely at my mercy: I'd only have to say the word, and it wouldn't be long before they'd be minced-up meat to be eaten by dogs – if there were any dogs.

But in fact, I don't want bloodshed. I don't want people killed.

That's the sticking point for everything: the sole proof I have that I am still human, and haven't turned into a hyena. In that regard, I'm superior to them. I'm superior to my family and neighbours. I'm superior to what I was yesterday.

I don't want bloodshed. I don't want people killed.

The most important thing is that every moment makes me feel that the points of similarity between us are quite strong.

Here and there, we're both in love with violence.

Here and there, we both love drugs.

Here and there, we both avidly watch movies about rape.

Here and there, we both talk about religion all the time.

There they take drugs to escape boredom.

There they practise their religion because they are afraid of losing all of that, and they don't know why or how they deserved it.

Here we take drugs to forget the agony of the moment.

Here we practise our religion because we can't stand the thought that our efforts are nothing but scattered dust with no value. The human mind can't endure a terrifying idea like that, otherwise it would go mad.

So I don't want bloodshed. I don't want people killed.

But how do I do that while Somaya is snapping like an angry wolf?

Somaya came to my shack at five in the afternoon.

She was drunk, or so I surmised from her staggering gait and her slurred speech. She crouched down by the door, squatting with her legs apart to avoid a small, putrid puddle of water there, and she began fiercely scratching her hair.

'You're a liar, you lying son of a bitch,' she said, looking at me with her small, stern eyes.

I knew what she meant, but I feigned stupidity, and asked her what the matter was.

'You know that guy hit me on the neck,' she replied. 'After that I couldn't feel a thing. But I do know that he hit me. You're a liar, and the son of a liar. You said I fell down without him laying a hand on me, and if it weren't for you, the men would have torn him to pieces.

'I saw you fall,' I said as I squatted down beside her, 'but I didn't see him hit you, as you say.'

She was stupid and animal-like. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd relieved herself as she sat there: a stupid animal that sits at the entrance of my house, continuously scratching its head.

'I couldn't work for two full days. Sometimes I feel as if he drove me out of my mind. My uncle beats me constantly.'

Then she said determinedly, her ugly face growing serious, 'I will tell my uncle that the man hit me. El-Sirgani will take revenge for his niece.'

Yes, el-Sirgani has no mercy on the person who damages his goods. I know that. It's all part of the tools of the trade for him. El-Sirgani was jealous of Azza's love for me. He carried a gazelle's horn knife that he could stick into the lens of my glasses. The burly el-Sirgani desired Azza. El-Sirgani took my cornea from me.

I leaned toward Somaya and said in a whisper, 'Somaya, I know this guy.

Between you and me, he has a special kind of character. There are men who don't get their full pleasure unless they hit a woman.'

'All men don't get their full pleasure without hitting a woman,' she said in amazement. 'The reason is that they are filthy perverts and children.'

'Not every slap is the same. The slap you get from clients is different from that powerful hit to the base of the neck. That guy has an inner nature that loves to hit a girl until she blacks out and she becomes putty in his hands. He was clear about that to me, and he's ready to pay. Like they say, "You pay dearly for your heart's desire."'

I did a small calculation on my fingers. 'You didn't work for two days. Let's say that means two hundred a day for two days. Four hundred Egyptian pounds altogether. We'll add a hundred for your pain. So, it's five hundred pounds for you alone. Since your uncle won't know anything about it, he won't take anything.'

She let out an uncouth, stupid guffaw, and asked, 'Five hundred pounds for me alone?'

'Yes.'

'And you?'

'I'm benefiting, of course. That's why I'm defending him. It's my job to humour his nature as long as he pays. Between you and me, he robs people who live in Utopia. That's why he has a lot of money and phlogistine on him.'

'Flog?'

She said it with a dreamy look, floating in heavens of chemical contemplation.

'Yes, flog. Can you imagine that?'

'Heh heh.'

I left her where she was and hurried back inside the shack.

The guy was sitting on the ground absent-mindedly looking at the roof, while the girl sat beside him. She was resting her head on his shoulder.

'Listen,' I told him nervously. 'Do you have any phlogistine on you?'

'You know that you took everything I had on me.'

'Do you have any cash?'

'I have some,' the girl said as she fumbled around in her shoes. 'How much do you want?'

'Give me five hundred pounds – quickly!'

She handed me a five-hundred-pound note. I crumpled it up in my hand and went out to where Somaya was crouching, continually repeating, as if there

hadn’t just been a conversation, ‘He hit me – hit me. You lied. If it weren’t for you, el-Sirgani would have torn him apart.’

I put the note in her hand and said, ‘It’s for you alone. I told you the guy has a certain character. Only don’t get el-Sirgani involved in this. The guy may ask for your services again today or tomorrow, and he’ll pay what you want.’

‘I’ll stick my neck out for you!’

She felt her neck and this superficial, foolish joke seemed to delight her, and she began to laugh without interruption. Then she blew the contents of her nose onto the ground and departed.

Don’t deny that I’m good at dealing with difficult matters. She’ll come back, asking for more; blackmail is a game for anyone whose soul has gone rotten, but I hope the guy and his girl will have returned to their world before then.

2

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the last census to be held, there were thirty-five million Egyptians living below the poverty line. Unemployment, which reached its highest global levels, stood at ten million. Note that 78 percent of those committing rape were unemployed: that is to say, the crime of rape is really a crime by an entire class of society. Not to mention, of course, the dissolution of the middle class that, in any society, plays the role of graphite rods in nuclear reactors: they slow down the reaction and, if it weren't for them, the reactor would explode. A society without a middle class is a society primed for explosion.

That is exactly what happened, but the explosion didn't do away with the wealthy class. It decimated what remained of the middle class, and turned society into two poles and two peoples.

Only the wealthy class realised that there was no life for it unless it became completely isolated, following the same logic behind medieval castles, when rulers would hold decadent parties while pestilence decimated the sea of poverty outside. *The Masque of the Red Death* – where did I read a story with that title, and when? And who wrote it? I don't remember…

I've read a whole lot. I've read everything. Until the letters dissolved into each other, and until I ended up not belonging to the Others and not belonging to Utopia. In every situation, I am strange, different, peculiar, foolish, uncomfortable and unintegrated.

Was any one of them capable of preventing this?

I don't know. I'm not an economist or a politician. Besides, I haven't received a formal education, since I enrolled at the free university of life.

But there had been some terrifying indicators, and everyone should have taken notice of them. When you smell smoke and you don't warn the people around you, then in some way you've participated in lighting the fire.

When I look over the newspapers of the first decade of the century, I smell a whole lot of smoke. The newspaper pages reek of smoke. So why didn't anyone do anything?

Because everyone colluded against us.

Everyone colluded against me.

One day, I will die, and I'll come back to haunt them in the guise of a demon or a ghost, and I'll make their lives hell. None of them will be safe, no matter how much they try to hide from me.

But I won't kill these two.

The guy from Utopia was sitting down, not doing anything.

'You're here eating my food and sleeping under my roof,' I said to him in an imperious tone. 'So you have to try to earn your daily bread.'

He gave me a challenging look. I could tell he wanted to tear me apart, but he was completely at my mercy. That's why he was staying silent. If he possessed one respectable quality, it was intelligence.

'We've got money,' he told me. 'Is that what you want?'

'I don't want any of your money,' I told him in disgust. 'I want you to help me.'

There was a lot of work in the network of subway tunnels, but I wouldn't tell him anything about it. If these two managed to return to their world, I didn't want to find the authorities completely blocking up the subway system with concrete. That would mean we would be choked off.

That network was my private world: I knew every inch of it, and I was a king down there.

I handed Safiya a bottle containing a mixture of cough medicine and Parkinol with opium, and whispered, 'As I told you, don't use a lot of it, and don't try it yourself.'

I left the shack with the guy, walking among tons of refuse and sewage, among the young men who fight and hurl rubbish at each other. We walked for about fifteen minutes through this ruined city, and we finally reached El-Moallem Taha Square, which is fenced in. At the gate we were met by an enforcer whose job is not wholly clear to me. All he usually does is intimidate people as they arrive.

He handed a knife to each of us. Within was an expanse of ground almost the size of a small city square, and there were around fifty people like us, constantly working.

There was a pile of dead chickens in the corner. A pile almost five metres tall. There was no smell because they'd died that day on some farm outside Cairo.

At the second pile stood a group of women plucking feathers. There were vats of hot water with steam rising from them. You had to be careful in this section because of the risk of getting burned.

The third pile of bare chicken carcasses rose high. It grew higher with each moment. If people were chickens, then this place would be a mass grave.

‘Clean or de-bone?’ I asked the guy from Utopia, as I pulled out my knife.

He looked at me in confusion, his face contorted with disgust, so I explained, ‘Are you going to cut the stomach and pull out the innards, or are you going to strip the bones from the meat?’

‘I can’t do either.’

I looked around me to make sure no one would hear me. ‘No one lives here without working. Filthy work. Taboo work. Illegal work. It is what it is. The important thing is that you work. I won’t spend a single pound on you from now on.’

‘You’re talking about spending money on me as if we’re sleeping in a palace and bathing in rosewater and eating caviar,’ he said angrily. ‘How much do those sour beans and our sleeping in a chicken coop cost you?’

‘Quiet!’ I raised my finger to my lips in warning. ‘If they heard that spoiled tone of yours and the way you pronounce your letters, they’d skin you instead of the chickens. You’re giving yourself away all the time!’

He shook his head with the stubbornness of a mule, and then headed to the nearby pile where four people were working: the ‘de-boning’ pile. They placed entire chickens on a smooth stone and, with their knives, tore the meat from the bones. Then they tossed the meat on a neighbouring pile and the bones on another pile.

It was an assembly line that would have delighted Mr Henry Ford, whose genius in inventing automobile assembly lines in the last century was endlessly praised.

‘Here,’ I told him as I grabbed the first chicken and cut open its stomach. ‘When we’re done, we’ll go out the back door and we’ll get our wages. About one chicken for each of us. Where do you think we get meat? This party isn’t held every day. There are days when they have enough people, and we aren’t allowed to work at all.’

‘Dead chickens?’ he asked in disgust.

I let out an ugly snort and replied, ‘Do you people really care about animal slaughter according to Islamic law, you fraud?’

Then I told myself they probably do care. They are very particular about slaughtering chickens but they aren’t so particular about slaughtering us. They don’t invoke God’s name over us, and they don’t expertly cut the jugular vein.

He began working in misery, disgust, wretchedness, grumpiness, exasperation and resentment.

Nothing wrong with that! Some kinds of revenge don’t include murder, but in spite of that, they are deliciously pleasant.

He cut himself a thousand times, and the blood that covered his hand became a mix of chicken blood and his own. Let him experience it. Let him learn. Let him suffer.

There was a world-famous actor called Charlie Chaplin. I know him, but I’m not sure you do. That artist made his fame by showing his poor, downtrodden hero triumph over the rich and the police. He once said, ‘People like to see the rich get the worst of things. The reason is that nine-tenths of the people in the world are poor, and secretly resent the wealth of the other tenth.’

More than once, the guy slowed his pace, so I warned him, ‘They’re watching. If they see you loafing about, they would kick you out without a second glance, and you won’t get anything.’

So we kept working for around an hour. But I wasn’t prepared to spend the whole day here.

3

When it grew more crowded, and the faces multiplied, I could no longer see the guy from Utopia.

Maybe he was there beside me, but he was immersed in blood and sweat, so not a trace of him appeared.

Only at that point could I hurry to the back door to the square. Khalil was standing by it as usual. He looked at me in astonishment, saying, ‘Again? I can’t protect you for ever.’

‘But you do,’ I said, as I handed him the bloody knife, which you’re never allowed to take back to your house. ‘It’s only a half-hour.’

‘Flog.’

‘No problem. I’m good for it.’

So he cleared the way for me to pass. He knows I will come back the very same way, and he will let me come in and work some time before I get my full wages. He stands here to prevent this exact thing.

This time, I ran, so I reached my house within fifteen minutes. I only needed ten minutes and then I’d be back in another fifteen minutes.

Safiya was inside waiting for me.

I quickly washed the traces of chicken blood from my face and hands. I can stand dirt, but I can never stand blood.

The girl from Utopia had passed out, of course, because of the mix of cough medicine and Parkinol with opium that Safiya had given her to drink from the bottle. No one can withstand this abominable cocktail, unless he has already tried it at least five times before. She wasn’t a lifeless corpse, since I didn’t want to have sex with a dead body, but she was in a state of complete, submissive stupor.

Loyal Safiya had done as I ordered. She’d washed the girl’s dirty face and her filthy feet, which had begun to look like our women’s feet.

‘Thank you, Safiya,’ I told her. ‘And now, get out of here. I won’t take more than ten minutes.’

She ran her fingers over the girl’s soft hair and said, ‘Take your time. Her skin is smooth like children’s skin. You deserve to enjoy yourself, poor thing. You need clean hair and smooth skin. Enjoy yourself. Let her beauty wash away the

filth of your soul.’

The strange thing is that she was touched on my account, with moist eyes, her behaviour akin to a mother’s affection. It seemed to me as if she wanted to wait to see what I would do, and to make certain that I was happy, but I absolutely would not allow anything like that. Safiya will remain unsullied. She knows but she doesn’t hear. She hears but she doesn’t see. She sees but she doesn’t touch.

Safiya left, and I was alone with the girl from Utopia.

She’s helpless. Unconscious. She’s incapable of doing anything.

Victory!

This is the only victory I can achieve. Humiliating this girl isn’t humiliating a woman, but it is humiliating a class as a whole. Humiliating circumstances …

Through me, she will see what she’s never seen before. Aren’t the guys of Utopia just girls with facial hair? Aren’t we the studs that their women tremble for in fear and desire? Don’t their women wish, as they lie in the arms of their husbands or lovers, that one of us would ravish them? Aren’t we the nightmare of the men of Utopia, and their permanent source of anxiety? Isn’t virility wheat that ripens in the sun of daily suffering?

The guy from Utopia is splattered with blood in El-Moallem Taha Square amid the chickens, and his woman is here at my mercy.

I was trembling from the enormity of the idea. Azza receded. Awatif. Nagat. The dream of something beyond sex receded.

My revenge will be dreadful. My revenge will be worthy of being revenge.

It will be …

It will be …

What is happening to me?

Whenever I looked at her face, I only saw Safiya’s brown face. The spoiled girl from Utopia vanished, and I no longer saw anything but Safiya’s beautiful, yet distressed face.

My desire shrivelled up completely and my body became a block of ice.

So I began slapping her cheeks roughly as she moaned and didn’t open her eyes. I shook her violently by the shoulders. I pulled a lock of her hair here and there, but still nothing. That’s all I’ve got.

I can’t and I don’t want to.

What came over you? Is Utopia’s power over you so absolute? Has Utopia come to dominate your hormones, your adrenal gland, your pituitary, your penile corpus cavernosum, and your sympathetic apparatus? Has it sunk so far into you?

Is it the dominance of Utopia, or is it the power of a sweeping conscience that makes you see every fragile, guileless girl as another Safiya?

You won't know. You'll never know.

You are only sure of one thing: let this girl sleep in peace, and go back to the slaughterhouse to continue tearing out chicken guts.

When I returned to El-Moallem Taha Square, I didn't look for the guy from Utopia; he could go to hell.

I continued my exhausting work cleaning out chicken guts and, hours later, the first, second, third and fourth piles had disappeared, and nothing was left except some piles that were being taken to the markets.

As soon as you finish your pile, you head to the back door of the square, where Khalil is standing. He hands everyone who goes out his share of chicken. A jumble of severed parts that, I think, are enough to make a whole chicken.

I walked a few steps and found the guy standing and waiting for me, with his share in his hand.

He was soaked in blood and sweat. Some of the blood was his. He handed me what was in his hand as if to say, 'Here's what you wanted. So take it and shut up.'

'Today, you'll be eating by the sweat of your brow for the first time,' I told him, trying to make it sound like a joke.

'First, lay off the life lessons,' he said, between clenched teeth. 'I've heard enough of them. Second, I won't taste this thing. It's turned me off chicken for ever.'

So we went back in silence to my house.

He won't know what happened, because the girl will be stoned, and she'll think that anything she saw or felt was just confused dreams.

I don't want him to know. It's not because I'm afraid of him: I'm afraid that he'll know that I was incapable of hurting him when it was in my power to.

I seem to be incapable of killing the two of them, too.

Napoleon once stood in front of the soldiers who came to arrest him and, baring his chest, said, 'I am your emperor, so kill me!' But the soldiers couldn't do it. Respect for the emperor made them get down on their knees before him and weep.

But this young guy isn't Napoleon. Hell, no! He's merely a lecherous animal from Utopia who commands not an iota of awe. The problem is that a psychological barrier, an internalised servility has been created inside me. The problem is that I myself am convinced that he is better, more amazing, more

complete, and perhaps more pious.

I am incapable of killing them.

The only question is whether it is because Utopia is stronger than me, or because I am stronger than me.

4

We are two peoples … two peoples … two peoples
Look where the first is, and where’s the other
Draw the line between them, brother
You sold the land with plough and axe – on her people’s backs
Before the eyes of the world, you undid her clothes
Stark naked she was, from head to toes
Front and back, knees to nose
You could smell her breath a mile away
We the people are sons of dogs
We belong to the Beautiful One
And his way is hard
With the kick of a boot and the whack of a cane
Then we die in the war, all in vain

– Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi

El-Sirgani was the first one who approached me about the matter.

I don’t like el-Sirgani, since he’s the one who cost me my cornea. It’s true that life went on after that, because the next step would have been for one of us to have killed the other. And I wouldn’t have been able to kill him. So the next step would have been my own death. So that’s where things stopped.

It’s true. All that is true, but you can’t like the person who destroyed your cornea, no matter how much you try. He doesn’t like me either, because Azza preferred me.

El-Sirgani came to me as I was sitting outside the house, smoking hashish, squatting and thinking.

He stuck the machete he was carrying into the dry mud and sat down beside me.

‘Good morning, Gaber,’ he said as he nonchalantly took the joint from my hand.

He let out a thick cloud of smoke, contemplated the ash that clung to it in the shape of a long cigarette-butt, and said, as if he were a man who was concerned with grave matters, ‘This girl who lives in your house. I’m not talking about Safiya, of course. Safiya has our utmost respect.’

‘What about the girl?’

I said it with disgust, although I knew what he would say, to the letter.

‘She belongs to you?’ he asked as he gave me back the joint, taking care not to let the ash fall.

‘And what if she doesn’t?’

‘Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.’

‘Speak clearly, Sirgani.’

The subject was important, so using the shorthand language we’d been using for the past ten years was out of the question. It’s the language of those who have seen everything and who are no longer amazed by anything. Now was the time for explanation and elaboration.

‘That girl can make you a lot of money instead of being a burden on you,’ he told me quietly. ‘Goods like her are scarce, and the available stock is of poor quality. You’ve seen Somaya’s face – as ugly as the devil’s. But that girl of yours can make money for us both.’

‘You took Azza,’ I said irritably. ‘Isn’t she enough for you?’

‘It’s a tough profession. A filthy profession that completely wears out a woman’s looks and body. You need to get new blood.’

I smiled inwardly. If I wanted revenge, then what revenge would be nastier than that? A girl from Utopia finds herself in the middle of this, among these men. But I don’t want that. Call it a victory over myself or a victory of Utopia over me. I only know that I will protect the two of them as long as I’m alive, and as long as they are among us.

‘She doesn’t like that line of work,’ I said as I handed him the joint.

‘Up to you.’

Then he thought a little bit, and added the threat that I knew was inevitable, ‘Between you and me, we don’t know who those two really are. You said something and threw us some flog so we could fight over it like dogs. Somaya tells a different story. Those two have an air of wealth about them. You can cut my arm off if they’ve lived through a single day of hunger before they got here. Where did they get all that flog? You know as well as I do that those two are from Utopia. Don’t tell me they were working there – they’re from the people who own homes there. In the days when there were dogs, I had a dog that

guarded me. He would eat my food and sleep under my roof, but let me assure you that he didn't look like me for a moment! He lived as a dog and died as a dog. The real idiot is the one who mistakes the dog for his owner. Those two aren't dogs – they *own* dogs. So why did they come here? We can imagine why!'

'Get to the point!' I said without looking at him.

'I will get to the point. You work with Abd el-Zahir. If he knew that two people from Utopia were living under your roof, what would he do? And what about Bayoumi and his men? They'll all dance for joy, and the whole neighbourhood will come to get what they've got coming to them. Believe me, my friend, no one wants any harm to come to you, and no one would allow a hair on Safiya's head to be touched. Safiya is as dear to me as – as Somaya, the daughter of my dear, departed brother.'

'Yes,' I replied in angry derision. 'You watch over Somaya and protect her really well. We all know that.'

He looked at me and didn't speak, then turned away without giving me back the joint.

I wasn't worried about Bayoumi. I was worried about Abd el-Zahir.

Bayoumi and his gang were the enemy and they always represented a danger, while Abd el-Zahir and his gang were the source of my protection and prestige. If they turned against me, then I'd be done for.

Abd el-Zahir was there in the subway tunnels, discussing the biroil plan for the millionth time. For years, he hadn't stopped discussing this idea, while I'd tell him he was crazy.

'These people may mock everything, but there's no joking around with biroil. That's what makes the plan so excellent and puts us in a really strong position.'

'The drugs have addled your brain, you son of a bitch,' I told him sarcastically. 'You think you're fighting the English in one of those old black-and-white movies. Cut the crap and think about how we can find a new dog.'

Abd el-Zahir was a thug, but he was a good guy, if hot-blooded. He wasn't just a hyena provoked by the smell of blood like Bayoumi. So I preferred to be with him from the start.

Some of the gang were sitting on top of a subway carriage playing *barghouta* and others were sitting in a corner of the station sniffing glue. It was midday, but the subway tunnels were a permanent, eternal night. Maybe that was why they gave us a feeling of intimacy.

It was comforting to know that all these guys were with you. They could rush

to your aid if you were in danger. That was why I knew that Safiya would marry one of them. There was no other way for her to live.

It would be terrifying beyond description if they turned against you.

Abd el-Zahir scrutinised my face with his wide, honey-brown eyes that made him appear mad. He told me, ‘Lately there’s been a lot of talk about you, my friend.’

I raised my head nervously and looked at his face flickering in the torchlight. ‘What talk?’

‘First, you ran off from our last fight with Bayoumi,’ he said firmly.

‘You know I’m a weakling, and I can’t get the better of them. You were losing, and I could have stayed, but you’d be mourning me now as a fallen hero. Would you prefer that? At least I’m here and alive, and getting grief from you. Don’t forget that Suleiman died and you couldn’t defend him.’

It wasn’t the first time I’d run away and it wouldn’t be the last, so why was he so concerned?

‘And those two in your house?’ he resumed. ‘There’s a lot of talk about them. They say that they’re from Utopia and that you insist on denying it. What are you up to?’

There were no secrets in this neighbourhood. That was clear.

The thing I was most afraid of was happening.

I held up my hand and took an oath, ‘I swear to God. I swear to God I don’t know where those two came from. They were going to kill them, and I didn’t—’

He interrupted. ‘Stop the swearing. Everyone takes oaths all the time. Listen. We want them. We’ll find out all about them. If it’s clear that they are from Utopia, then we’ll play an excellent game with them. Not even flies will find their bodies, and maybe we’ll bargain over them. And if it turns out that they’re poor like us, then we’ll find them a job and a life.’

He saw me hesitating. ‘Gaber,’ he said firmly. ‘Think hard. Don’t lose everything for the sake of a couple of dogs. I don’t know what their importance to you is, but they definitely aren’t more valuable than Safiya!’

Then he stood up and, in his loud voice, he shouted at the men scattered around the station, ‘Let’s go! I want these torches in one place. One of Bayoumi’s men is here in the tunnels and he’s got hashish with him. Which of you will bring him to me and get half of what he’s got on him?

When I left the station, I knew for sure that I had to act that night. The bees were gathering around the honey, if you could call what I was sheltering in my house honey.

If I wanted them to live, then they'd have to escape tonight.

Let them escape, so the only blame placed on me would be foolishness and stupidity.

Tonight, before anything else happens.

I told them they would be setting out that night, and I went out to organise things. There were a lot of arrangements that had to be made. I came back to them two hours later and they were ready, as I had advised them to be. They had done a careful job smearing their faces with filth, and their clothes had ended up even filthier. The strange thing is that my sister Safiya seemed sparkling and clean and shiny, although she didn't seem very happy; it occurred to me that she perhaps had taken a liking to the guy.

No. Maybe she likes the girl, considering that they are almost the same age. She will lose the one friend she has made in her life.

My beloved cornea – and dream of something beyond sex …

I know that I will die tonight, so don't annoy me, please.

Let me live out the final moments of my life.

Let me try to dream …

Part Five

Predator

1

We would set out that night.

Gaber told us about this. He said that suspicions were increasing, bees were circling, questions were being asked, gossip was getting louder and – and – and so on with endless nonsense.

And we'd set off tonight.

Set off?

Maybe to the top. Maybe to the bottom. Maybe to Utopia.

If we don't move in a vertical direction, then there's hope that we'll stay alive.

We'd set off tonight.

In the first hours of the evening, he told us that we needed to get everything ready. He'd be away for two hours, then he'd return to find us ready. Were we preparing ourselves? Did we have anything to prepare? Of course not.

But Safiya told us that getting ready here meant more filth. She brought some black grease and began to smudge it onto our faces with expert strokes. She gave us clothes that were even worse than the rags we wore.

I asked her as she smeared my face with mud, 'What are you going to do about this tuberculosis?'

'I'll take the infusion of herbs which Abir's mother prepares,' she replied, as if the matter didn't concern her. 'And I'll warm my chest. Eventually, I'll die in a puddle of blood. That's it. But Gaber doesn't believe that. He thinks that I will recover.'

'There are medicines for tuberculosis.'

'Yes. And they're all with your kind. What do you expect me to do?'

I wanted to lie, to tell her that I would return and bring her some medicine from my father. It's impossible to take an aspirin anywhere in Egypt without going through him, but I realised that it would have been the silliest lie possible. I could leave her a souvenir, but it wouldn't be a box of medicine.

When Safiya turned her back, I whispered to Germinal, 'Listen. I want you to leave the shack for ten minutes.'

She looked at me, confused, then her face contracted into a grimace and she yelled in disgust, 'Are you joking?! Is *this* the right time?!'

‘I have to have a souvenir. I told you that she has a different, arousing appeal. This is the last chance in my life to experience this appeal. If we set out, that’s the end of it.’

Her face looked its ugliest, combining wildness, disgust and ferocity. The ugliest, angriest tiger I’d ever seen in my life.

‘We’re at their mercy, you pig!’

‘I know how to keep her quiet. Now get out!’

She looked at me with blind hatred. I hadn’t known before this that she was capable of such jealously. I think it has more to do with female pride than jealousy. In Utopia, she knows that I am with another girl almost every other day, but she doesn’t talk about it. But she finds this situation insulting, especially as I haven’t touched her since we arrived.

I was alone with Safiya by torchlight, and from the first moment she knew what I wanted.

No.

That isn’t true!

She put up a fierce and vicious fight. She resisted like a wild, agitated bull. She scratched. She hit. She kicked. She spat. She screamed. She howled. She stiffened. She cried. She called me names. She cursed. She bit. I had assumed the thing would be a lot easier than this. She was supposed to melt at the mere thought that I desired her. Among the Others, the men aren’t really men. Hunger, rotten food, and gossypol have killed off their manhood, and we easily make conquests of their women all the time in Utopia, while their men are content to feign virility and potency. Isn’t virility an animal that needs good nourishment, exercise and radiant sunlight? So they’re nothing, nothing …

But she put up a fierce and noble fight. I was used to violence, in any case, so I tied her up with strips I ripped off the old shirt I’d taken off. I gagged her and she fell quiet. In any case, this also protected me from the flood of tuberculosis bacteria she exhaled.

Raping a woman who is sick with tuberculosis! This event would go down in history. Maybe I’d tell it sometimes to my friends in phlogistine sessions, if I got back safe and sound.

I wrapped a piece of cloth around my hand, and dipped it into a bucket of water she had filled. I soaked the cloth, and cleaned her face and feet, so that she appeared somewhat human. In fact, I didn’t touch any part of her body before washing it carefully.

As I finished, I began to repeat, in a mix of rapture and hatred, ‘You’re so dirty! You’re so dirty! Unhh, unhh—’

A muffled scream – sobs …

‘Your poverty isn’t our fault – unhh – don’t you understand yet that you’re paying the price for your foolishness, your stupidity, and your submissiveness? Unhh, unhh—’

A wail – weeps …

‘While our fathers were taking advantage of opportunities, your fathers were queuing to get their salaries from government agencies. Then there were no more government agencies. There were no more salaries. Unhh, unhh—’

Sobs – groans …

‘You didn’t catch on to the game early on, so you fell from high up into a bottomless pit – unhh, unhh. How is that *our* fault?’

Tears – sniffs …

‘When everyone rose up in rebellion in every country on earth, you shook your heads and shielded yourself with faith and contentment at what you had been allotted. Unhh, unhh. Your false piety is used to justify your weakness. Unhh, unhh—’

Howls – cries …

‘You are less than us in every way. That’s how life is. You should just accept it. No one is capable of changing a thing … thing … thing … thing … thing … thing – unhh, unhh – thing – unhh, unhh – thing!’

Muffled pleading – hysteria …

I was done. My body became like a deflated balloon, and at that very moment, I heard Germinal saying from behind my back, ‘Have you finished, you pig? Her brother will be back at any moment.’

I threw myself down on the ground, exhausted, beside the girl, collapsed in a heap.

‘Right. Her brother,’ I panted.

I pulled the knife out of my pocket – the knife I had stolen from the slaughterhouse when we were cleaning the chicken. I put it against her throat and said, looking into her wide, bulging eyes: ‘Listen, not a word about what happened here. If a word is said, then—’

‘You’re not going to kill her!’ Germinal shouted. ‘She’s just a child!’

‘Who said anything about killing her? I’ll kill Gaber, little girl. You’ll see the knife ripping his guts out before he realises what you’re talking about. You’ll be living alone for ever, and your whole life will become a tedious repetition of what just happened, because Gaber won’t be bringing you food after today. Gaber won’t protect you.’

She stayed quiet, so I repeated the question, ‘Do you understand?’

Calmly, I undid the gag from her mouth and untied her.I told Germinal to take as much care as possible to make her appear human.

‘Did you enjoy yourself, you bastard?’ Germinal asked, spitting on the ground.

‘Keep it up,’ I said coldly. ‘You’re picking up their language and habits with every passing day. That’s useful for us, as you know.’

2

Except for the sadness and silence: you can get rid of the evidence of your crime, but the sadness and silence remain.

That was why Gaber kept glancing at his sister curiously as he prepared for our escape. But the girl didn't talk. She was really honourable. Besides, she had genuinely resisted me, and I'd never seen a girl who was genuine in her resistance. There is always a trace of hypocrisy and pretence. But this girl really hated me. She hated my guts, as the Americans say.

A little later, Gaber said, with a serious look on his face, 'I don't trust any oath you people take since you deal with us as if we were subhuman. And you lie to us with the ease of someone lying to sheep, but I will try this one time: what you will see is to remain a secret.'

'I've been forced to make a lot of deals,' he added as he got up. 'That has cost me money.'

'My father—' I started to say in annoyance.

He raised his hand dismissively. 'I don't want to hear a word about your father or about his life,' he said. 'Now come with me.'

He reached for a strange tool that consisted of two wooden sticks propped against each other like a cross.

We walked amid the darkness in the filthy alleyways and back streets, unlit except for a torch here and there.

Amid the people selling rotten fish.

Amid the people selling cheap drugs.

Amid the people selling bodies.

Amid the young men who rip each other apart in endless brawls.

Amid the vagrants and conmen and herbalists.

Amid the pools of putrid water and puddles of petrol.

Amid the open sewers that haven't been cleaned out for months.

Amid the dead dogs that have been stripped of meat.

Amid the people selling stolen goods.

Amid the teenagers sitting and gambling on an overturned chicken coop.

Amid all of that, we departed.

Three ghosts, not frightening, but frightened.

Germinal didn't stop scratching her head and chest, as if that were an SOS signal. *I'm one of you. I swear to God I'm one of you*!

There we sat on the collapsed wall.

Gaber told me, as he lit a roll-up, 'I think there are a lot of eyes on us. So, it'll go like this: you go around the wall as if you want to relieve yourself, then run across the ruins head down, bent double. Do you know how an ostrich runs? No? This is your chance to learn. When you reach the other side of the ruins, wait for us. We will join you the same way.'

We were sitting in the darkness and I saw Gaber take my dirty jacket off my shoulders and place it on the two pieces of wood, so it seemed as though someone else were wearing it. I understood. Between the darkness and the distance, whoever was watching us would think there were still three of us there. So I jumped down to go around the wall the moment he raised his strange flapping scarecrow.

I began running across the ruins, stumbling and short of breath. At least rabid dogs wouldn't chase after me, because there weren't any. I ran in the dark, not knowing if what I was stepping on were rocks, human waste, rotting corpses or merely earth.

I reached the end and found another collapsed wall. I stood beside it, gasping for breath.

A little later, I heard the sound of someone else panting. I saw Germinal running, bent, to join me.

She stood beside me, unable to catch her breath.

Soon Gaber appeared, running in his turn. He had left the jacket hanging there, as if two people were relieving themselves while the third waited for them.

We looked at him heading towards a filthy nest and followed him down demolished stairs.

At the far end of the square there were ancient buses, leaking oil and gas, rumbling constantly.

'North Coast this way! Utopia this way!'

Those words made my heart stick in my throat.

The homeland. In spite of everything, it is the homeland. I'm someone who doesn't belong to a place or to an individual or a principle.

My heart sank. That meant that there was a way to return, but what about the guards? What about the Marines and reaching Utopia? Oh God!

It’s tough to get close to Utopia without permission. The Marines will unload their ammunition into you.

They won’t listen to you as you tell them complicated stories about testing your manhood and all that crap.

If I don’t talk to my father, it’s no use.

The ride had begun and I watched Gaber, silently sitting in the darkness in front of me. Everything in the bus groans, creaks and shakes. The smell of petrol is suffocating. I sneak a glance towards Germinal, then at all the weary faces of the workers going to work in the settlements on the coast. Bakers, rubbish collectors, rat-hunters. All of them badly nourished and pale-faced. All of them defeated. All of them spent. All of them …

Their work began with the night-shift. They worked ten hours straight and then came back. That meant that they had less than seven hours in the day to themselves.

The best thing for them would be to die right here and now.

Oh my God! Phlogistine! I’m burning with lust for it! If things go as I hope, then I’ll be enjoying some again in three hours or less.

I watched the road signs as we headed towards Alexandria. Even in this metal tinderbox, we were moving along.

Signs for the North Coast: Gaber’s rigid face was silhouetted against the signs along the dark highway. The streetlights illuminated him from time to time.

What was his plan?

The most dangerous possibility was that he was plotting against us. Maybe he wanted to get rid of us, far from his territory. Two dead bodies in the desert, and no one would know who had done it. Unfortunately, I had no choice but to put my full trust in him.

Why was he now getting up? Why was he whispering back and forth with the driver?

He came back to sit down beside us, but he seemed to be waiting for something.

Suddenly, the bus stopped and I heard him say in the darkness, ‘Come on, let’s go!’

What was he planning?

We were in the middle of nowhere, literally.

3

The bus started up, taking its passengers with it. The spot of light faded into the darkness: a ship of hope ploughing into the sea as it grew distant, abandoning us on an arid island where we would die.

The darkness of night and the desert; the darkness of possibilities and ideas. I knew I could overpower Gaber if he attacked us. Poverty and malnourishment can't triumph over wealth and exercise since childhood.

But he possessed the element of initiative and surprise and knew the territory.

If I'm too hasty in attacking him, then we might lose our chance of returning.

Gaber walked into the middle of the desert, between thorny plants and the remains of prickly pears. He circled behind a small hill and asked us to join him, so Germinal and I complied, expecting the worst.

The worst was there, in fact, in the shape of two men who bore the marks of viciousness and brute strength, and they were armed. Germinal and I exchanged looks. Had the time come at last?

But the three men were kneeling in the sand, digging it up with their fingernails and a small knife by the feeble light of a torch. One of them looked at us maliciously, the way a dog does when you surprise him as he's digging up a bone. Then he went back to work.

'Can you vouch for these two, Gaber?' one of the two men said, without looking at us.

'Like I vouch for myself.'

Then he put out his hand and slipped something into the man's hand. I think it was drugs, since it didn't seem like money. I opened my mouth to speak, but Gaber shouted in my face, 'Shut up, Hanafi! When you get in there, try to steal us some phlogistine. Hibara and Shiha have never tried it.'

One of the two men smacked his lips in anticipation when the thing they were looking for appeared: a small iron gate buried under layers of sand. The one called Hibara revealed it and we saw wooden steps fixed into a vertical wall.

'Hanafi and Nafisa, get down there' Gaber said as he shone the torch into this pit.

I'm Hanafi and she's Nafisa? I didn't like the names, but I didn't think this was the appropriate time. In any case, we crept into the opening and began to

descend the wooden stairs in the darkness, not knowing where they would lead us. I heard Gaber tell the two men, ‘I’ll take them to the closest point, then I’ll come back. Wait for me.’

Then I heard his body and saw his light descending behind us. As soon as he caught up with us at the bottom of the pit I shouted, ‘What’s going on here?’

‘Tunnels!’ he replied as he walked ahead of us through the dark passageway. ‘From the beginning there were secret tunnels by which we could enter Utopia to steal what we wanted. It’s easy to leave Utopia, but it’s impossible to get in to it without a “slavery card”. Those thugs took it upon themselves to dig these tunnels, and they rent them out to whoever pays. The fee is either money or drugs. Of course, it’s obvious that I persuaded them that you two are poor like us and that you want to try stealing. If I said that you were from Utopia, then they would have torn you to shreds on the spot.

‘Where does this tunnel lead to?’ Germinal shouted.

‘To the heart of Utopia. Next to that big mall, whose name I’ve forgotten.’

‘Elite Mall.’

‘Yes. Where people like you prowl about like hyenas looking for a victim. Thrilled by consumption, drooling onto the slippery, glittering ground. While the slaves and serving-girls from our people stand waiting to obey your commands. A slave fetches juice for you. A serving-girl helps you pick out a dress. A eunuch stands at the door to the nightclub. Everything is available and for sale, even the slaves themselves.’

‘Your metaphors are poetic,’ I told him coldly.

‘You will come out there, and I think that you won’t have any trouble reaching your homes.’

‘Why are you doing all this?’ I asked him, agitated.

To me he seemed to be going to great lengths in what he was doing.

Maybe his good deed hid a negative side that he wasn’t telling us about. That would be easy. But his action’s positive side had definitely exceeded any boundaries. Tunnels and thugs and bribes and sneaking in at night.

No one does anything without a price. The price may be money. It may be a job. It may be a body. It may be a feeling of superiority. It may be a story you tell your friends, your eyes gleaming with pride. It may be undeserved self-esteem.

There’s always a price.

I don’t accept anything before I know its price.

He thought for some time. I expected an eloquent, resounding response, along

the lines of, ‘Because we are better than you,’ or, ‘Because I don’t like bloodshed,’ etc. But he was content to shake his head and say, ‘Because I want to do it.’

Then he smiled and muttered something in the darkness, and I asked him what he said. In a louder voice, he said, as he continued on his way, ‘We had a poet named –Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi. Have you heard of him?’

‘No.’

‘Of course you haven’t heard of him. This poet used to say, “We are two peoples, two peoples, two peoples. Look where the first is and where’s the other. Draw the line between them, brother.”’

I didn’t understand a thing. I only understood that he was brimming with social resentment.

‘In spite of everything,’ I told him in the darkness, ‘you’re a noble human being.’

He didn’t answer and we continued our progress. We walked for around ten minutes.

A pinpoint of light moved across the tunnel. It dispelled the dark, and then vanished into a new darkness.

The sound of steps.

The sound of heavy breathing.

The sound of drops of water dripping onto rock.

Eventually I realised that we were at the bottom of another shaft and that steps going up were leading us to the surface. There were rocks piled up to make it easy to clamber onto the bottom rung. With difficulty, I stopped myself from shouting for joy, and Germinal’s chest began to heave.

‘For obvious reasons, I won’t be joining you,’ Gaber said as he pointed the torch up above. ‘You two are safe now. Goodbye. Only don’t come back and don’t try to hunt another one of us. I won’t be around the next time.’

‘You’re incredible, Gaber,’ Germinal said with emotion. ‘Thank you.’

He didn’t respond, but turned around to head back, the light of the torch surrounding him like a halo.

He must have been emotional until the last moment.

His faint smile must not have left his lips as his face fell and rolled in the dust.

He must not have tasted the blood that flowed from the corners of his mouth.

He must not have realised that I’d picked up a rock and brought it down on the back of his head as hard as I could.

I had to turn him over on his back and the blood flowed like a river from the bloody opening I had made a second ago.

His ruined eye looked steadily at me, but his glasses had shattered.

I got out the knife – the knife I had stolen from the slaughterhouse. It was strange: another knife was sticking out of his belt. He must have been as afraid of us as we were of him, and had wanted to keep himself safe.

‘Why did you do that?’ Germinal screamed hysterically. ‘He helped us!’

‘His task was complete,’ I replied, as I did what I had to do. ‘He was an idiot, and he had to pay the price. I didn’t take all this risk to go back without a souvenir.’

Unfortunately, I wouldn’t be able to carry his body up the stairs. In any case, he was probably dead, and wouldn’t provide a source of amusement. So, nothing about him concerned me any longer except this thing that I took and wrapped in the dirty jacket he’d given me.

I left him where he was and climbed up the stairs. It would be a disaster if he had tricked us.

4

But it’s your nature to be king of the world
Ready to rule
Your hands are nice and soft from what we wove all through the pitch-black night
Arrest me, mister policeman
Beat the crap out of me and ruin my life
We’ve seen beyond our differences
Arrest me or let me go and tread all over me
We’ve seen beyond our differences

–Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi

There’s an opening in the grass that is difficult to see if a person isn’t looking for it.

The opening was deliberately covered by branches that someone had carefully woven together. But when we moved the branches and stuck our heads out, we smelled the scent of sea air. We smelled the night mixed with perfume, human flesh and phlogistine.

We smelled the scent of dollars, credit cards and expensive liquor.

We saw the lights of Utopia surrounding us. A few steps away from Elite Mall, my favourite. I saw its colourful sign and the cars thronging around it. So we were in the garden behind the mall. Yes. I could see the statue of the naked female bather that I had so often dreamed of having sex with when I was young.

Thank God! We were saved!

It would be difficult for us to explain to any onlookers that we were not poor beggars who had sneaked in. The hardest thing would be to hide this arm, which had begun to drip blood. But we’d be meeting Egyptians or Israelis, and we’d be able to reason with them; unlike the Marines, who shot first and asked questions later.

I helped Germinal out of the hole, and we stood there in the chill of the sea air, amid the colourful evening lights, and we embraced each other.

The adventure is over and we're saved!

We had been to hell and back. We had stuck our heads between the crocodile's jaws and emerged.

I told her as we cut through Utopia's streets, half-empty at this hour, 'You could say we didn't lose anything.'

'Except for some rough moments,' she replied, out of breath with emotion.

'They must have searched high and low for us.'

'They'll understand and forgive.'

As she shivered, she said some words I couldn't make out, so I asked her to raise her voice. She repeated, "We are two peoples, two peoples, two peoples. Look where the first is, and where's the other. Draw the line between them, brother." Wasn't it his poet who said that?'

'Oh yeah, and he was totally right about that!'

There were noisy parties to celebrate our return.

At first, there was a thin layer of reproach and scolding: a layer that melted instantly.

Then the real celebration began for the two returning heroes.

Rivers of booze and phlogistine flowed. I told our story a million times, and each time I added new details that provoked the imagination. I had become a man. I had gone there and returned, with someone's severed arm.

I told them about that stupid Gaber. Naive Gaber, who couldn't understand the rules of the game.

I told them about Safiya with tuberculosis who had fought as if she was Cleopatra. The amount of resistance should match the value of what that person is defending. In her situation, there was no call for putting up a fight of any kind.

'It depends on how each person values what he's defending,' said Rasim as he let out a puff of smoke. 'There's no absolute standard. If you saw my mother defending her small pet mouse when my father wanted to toss it down the drain, you would have thought she was defending a holy icon. As far as that girl was concerned, she was defending the most important thing she had.'

'Her virginity?'

'Her will, actually. Her freedom of choice. That's her own mouse.'

I treated him to some foul language. To hell with you when marijuana's playing with your brain cells. It makes some people seem cleverer, but it just makes you show-off and mouth-off. It really turns you into a son of a bitch. Every one of us has his mouse that we consider the most precious thing in the

world. Maybe others see it as only a wretched little mouse, but as far as you're concerned, it's the most important thing in the universe. I wonder what my own pampered pet mouse is.

I'm my own pampered pet mouse!

I brandished the arm that I'd had embalmed and dried.

'Here's to Gaber's health!'

'And Safiya's!'

'And el-Sirgani's!'

'Let's give them a hand!'

From the stereo equipment pounded a new orgasm song:

> Put your neck on the sacred stone!
> Put your life on the sacred stone!
> Watch the blade of the knife come down on the vein
> Afraid, little girl? I love that, baby
> You're even stronger than nature, baby
> 'Cause you've got my blood pumping again like crazy
> It gets me high!
> I bleed rivers!
> That's the moment I really love you
> Put your neck, my little one
> Put your neck on the sacred stone

Mahi gets up, kicks her shoes off and flails about wildly. She bends her neck as if she's stretching it out on a rock. She tosses her hair left and right.

She falls to the ground in a submissive position, as if she's ready to be slaughtered.

The blonde priestess of Utopia.

The orgasm music gets louder and we space out amid the green flames.

'Put your neck, my little one.'

'Put your neck.'

5

Wait until you see the dancing green flame …

Let it drip out all the perfumes of existence. Let it drip out the fragrance of ferns in the swamps where dinosaurs walked millions of years ago. Let it drip out the scent of Cleopatra’s sweat and Julius Caesar’s blood. Let it drip out the incense the dervishes burned in the nights of Fatimid Cairo. Let it drip out the flames that consumed Cairo, or so they told us, and let it drip out the fragrance of all the *belles* of Paris dancing the can-can. Let it drip out all the musk of sperm whales and the breath of Asian tigers slinking through the jungle darkness. Let it drip out the jungles themselves. Let it drip out the fragrances of pansy, narcissus, lilac and iris. Let it drip out all these scents together, then – then what? I forget …

I wake up. I take a leak. Smoke a cigarette. Drink coffee. Shave. Fix the wound on my forehead to make it look terrible. Have sex with the African maid. Have breakfast. Pour some milk on the eggs and beat them with a fork. Throw the disgusting mixture in the trash. Yawn. Laugh. Spit. Wolf down some roasted meat. Stick my finger down my throat. Enter Larine’s bedroom to puke on the carpet. Laugh. Stick my finger in my ear. Grab a bottle of whiskey from the bar and take a swig. Dance. Stagger. Stand on the couch. Fall down on the carpet. Read the paper, which is nothing more than Utopia’s society pages. I take out a tube of phlogistine and pour some drops on my skin. I get high. See the green flames. Laugh. Walk naked in the living room. Put on my clothes. With a charcoal pencil, I draw slogans on the wall, saying: *Kill Whitey*. I put on some orgasm music.

In one hour, I’ve done everything, and there’s nothing left in life that interests me or that I want!

But the phone rang.

It was Rasim telling me some strange news.

‘Did you know that the planes are out of service?’

‘All of them? Why?’

He told me a strange story about an adventure the Others undertook two days ago. They attacked a huge convoy carrying biroil across the desert. You know they offload it from biroil tankers out west. The convoy was attacked and the

drivers were taken hostage. It was an unprecedented act, and completely unexpected. The result was general confusion. The drivers remained in captivity for several hours, and then were released. They said they were treated well.

No one understood the reason for this raid. There was nothing to gain from it.

Then, when the planes' fuel tanks were full again, Mustafa *bey*'s sports plane, *Bonanza*, tried to lift off and couldn't. Upon investigation, it became clear that what was in its tank wasn't fuel. Not one drop of biroil was in it. Someone had filled the biroil tanks with sewage!

The investigation concluded that this had happened when the drivers were kidnapped. The tanks had been completely emptied, and then those damned sewage collection trucks came and filled the tanks with their disgusting contents.

The result was that the planes' engines were all ruined.

Car engines were all ruined. That's what people who tried to fill the tanks of their cars with this false 'biroil' discovered.

'I would have been very surprised if the planes took off with shit for fuel!' I said to Rasim with a laugh.

We burst out laughing, and went back and forth with a thousand jokes on this theme.

'All well and good,' Rasim said, after he could laugh no more, 'but it's not a pleasant situation at all. Repairing the planes and cars will take time. You know what that means? It means we're really isolated.'

Really isolated.

The words continued to reverberate in my brain for some time.

The situation grew worse when Mourad sat down with us at the dinner table.

'There's no means of transport,' he told Larine. 'The smell of excrement rises from all the engines. The Marines are nervous and they've contacted units of the Sixth Fleet. There has to be an escape route, as you know, and that route was closed off by the planes' breakdown. They promised them they would send us some helicopters as soon as USS *Jefferson* is near our territorial waters. That will take two days.

The smell of excrement from all the engines? That seemed hilarious to me, even if I didn't take the trouble of laughing.

'Do you expect that something will happen within two days?' I asked him keenly.

'There's talk going around here and there,' Mourad replied. 'There's some movement going on in the territory of the Others. They're moving against us.'

‘What else is new? They do that twice a year and their enthusiasm quickly dies down.’

‘This time, they’re more violent, more determined, and more organised. They say that one of them helped rescue two people from Utopia from the territory of the Others, and kept them under his roof, but they killed him and cut off his arm after they raped his sister, who was a virgin! The Others found his corpse in a tunnel they use to sneak in here. The story has seeped into every shack and every alleyway there, and inflamed their passions. They have put up with a lot, but this was apparently the straw that broke the camel’s back.’

I began eating, trying not to give anything away. I rearranged my features to look like a man who hadn’t cut off the arm of one of the Others.

‘They’ve been robbed of everything and they’ve kept silent, so what difference does one death make?’ Larine said, downplaying the situation. ‘I don’t think revolutions happen because of things like that.’

‘Actually, they only happen because of things like that. As the saying goes, “The rock endured many blows, but only shattered at the fiftieth.” It’s not the fiftieth blow that did that, but all the previous ones.’

‘That’s from children’s stories.’

‘And are angry mobs anything but children?’

You sold the land with plough and axe – on her people’s backs
Before the eyes of the world, you undid her clothes
Stark naked she was, from head to toes,
Front and back, knees to nose
You could smell her breath a mile away
We the people are sons of dogs
We belong to the Beautiful One
And his way is hard
With the kick of a boot and the whack of a cane
Then we die in the war, all in vain

– Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi

His name was Gaber. He was an idiot who didn’t understand the rules of anything.

In some way, the poor deserve the circumstances they find themselves in.

They are less clever than our fathers. They are weak-willed and lazy. They let themselves be robbed all this time without lifting a finger. That's why they have sunk lower than animals. Even a bee stings you if you try to steal its honey, and the chicken pecks at your fingers if you try to steal its eggs; but they remained afraid and silent.

As long as life is possible, let's stay silent.

As long as tonight's dinner is on the table, let's stay silent.

That's why I can't stand any feelings of sympathy towards them; this adventure only made me despise them more. Even this Gaber – rest in peace – was nothing but a know-it-all who wouldn't stop yammering and didn't do anything.

Mike Rogers, the Marine, came to our house and he was in no mood to joke around. I knew that he was making the rounds of all the mansions here with his men in a military jeep that hadn't been ruined by sewage. He said we should not leave our homes unless it was necessary. He said that we shouldn't worry. Everything was under control.

That expression by itself ('we're not worried and everything is under control') meant that we needed to be very worried.

Mourad asked him what the matter was. He said that the poor were rising up. The rebels were advancing across the desert in organised throngs.

'I don't want to alarm anyone,' he added with a meaningful tone, 'but at any moment we may ask you to evacuate.'

'When?'

'When the helicopters we've asked for get here.'

Mourad said to him tensely, his lower lip beginning to quiver, 'You must protect me. I'll pay you a special reward.'

'I get paid to protect all of Utopia, and that's enough for me,' Mike replied in his American, imitation-cowboy manner, 'Don't worry.'

I almost yelled at Mourad: *Why are you shaking?*

Why don't you show some more pride?

Why aren't you more dignified?

What I expected from my father was anger, not fear. To show disdain, not quiver. To get furious, not nervous. To curse, not blame. Leaving?

Scattering in all directions?

That won't happen. This was my land and this was my world. I was born here. If my father stole these rights, then they had become my birthright, and I wouldn't give them up for the likes of Gaber, beggars and street whores.

I hurried to the entrance gates.

Larine called me.

Germinal called me.

Rogers warned me to keep away.

But I made my way between the soldiers who had taken up their battle-ready positions and had prepared the gas bombs and bazookas.

None of them dared to stop me because they knew who I was. But they tried to prevent me, without enthusiasm.

I raised my head to look outside the gates.

I gasped.

I saw them there, advancing along the horizon. They were carrying torches and shouting in anger.

They would be here in fifteen minutes.

They would be among us.

Bayoumi and Mitwalli and Abd el-Zahir and el-Sirgani and Safiya and Awatif and Azza and Mina and Zenhom and Shehata and Abbas and Safwat and Abdallah and Mursi and Adnan and Zalata and …

All of them here.

Mike told me, ‘Get away from here now. OK? A few rounds will quell their fervor. After the first five hundred casualties, they’ll see things differently.’

I wrenched the machine gun from the hands of a Marine standing beside me, and aimed it at the mass of humanity advancing on the horizon. I ignored the fact that I had never done this before, and the forceful slam I received in my upper arm from the recoil didn’t weaken my courage.

So I started to shoot.

I shoot.

I shoot.

That’s the moment I really love you

Put your neck, my little one

Put your neck on the sacred stone

I shoot

I shoot

Beat the crap out of me and ruin my life

We have seen beyond our differences
Arrest me or let me go and walk all over me
We have seen beyond our differences.

Glossary

abaya: a loose-fitting full-length robe, usually back, traditionally worn by some Muslims in the Middle East, particularly in the Arabian Gulf region

Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi (1938–): a very popular contemporary poet known for writing in the Egyptian dialect rather than in formal Arabic. Originally from Upper Egypt, he is frequently considered a spokesman for Egypt's poor and marginalised

Ataba Square: a busy square in central Cairo

Bab el-Shaareya: a poor urban neighbourhood in downtown Cairo, located near the northern wall of the medieval city

barghouta: a game often played by men on the streets of Cairo, involving a cup and a backgammon board. The game is associated with the urban poor, and has a slightly seedy reputation, like shooting craps in the US

bey: an Arabised Ottoman rank (formally *bek*) that has become a general term of respect

Hajj: the annual pilgrimage to Mecca prescribed as a religious duty for Muslims. Term also used for a man who has performed the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, or as a respectful form of address for elderly men

jinn: one of a class of spirits that according to Muslim demonology inhabit the earth, assume various forms, and exercise supernatural power

Gamal Hamdan (1928–1993): an Egyptian scholar and geographer, known for his books on Egypt's geography and its people

Hijaz: the western coastal region of the Arabian Peninsula; here referring to the cities of Mecca and Medina, site of the Hajj pilgrimage made annually by millions of Muslims

Kuthayyir Azza: an Arabic poet from the first century of Islam – he reputedly

died in the year 105 of the Islamic era (723 AD) – who was famous for his love poems addressed to a married woman named Azza

Saint Theresa: a neighbourhood in Shubra, north of downtown Cairo; also the name of a Cairo underground station in the same area

SAVAK: name of Iran's notorious state intelligence agency in the pre-revolutionary government of Shah Muhammad Pahlavi. SAVAK's reputation for the abuse and torture of suspects was a major source of anger among Iranians against the Shah's reign

Shubra: a large, working-class district north of downtown Cairo known for its rough character

Stefan Rosti (1891–1964): a star from Egypt's black-and-white film era. With his pencil-thin moustache, he was known for playing elegant villains

Yusuf bey Wahbi: an actor and director (1898–1982) from Egypt's 'golden age' of black-and-white cinema

A Note on the Translator

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