

Khaled ALBERRY

Extract from the novel *Life is More Beautiful Than Paradise*
(Cairo: AUP, 2009)

[...]

It was just a poke in my shoulder. Sure, he followed it up by pushing his face up close to mine, but the beginning was just a poke in the shoulder. It made my brain stop working. What could I do against him? Should I poke him back? If I did so, he'd beat me ignominiously for sure. Should I walk away? That would be an unforgivable sign of weakness and I'd never be able to stop my friends from laughing at me.

It was broad daylight, and there was nowhere to hide from the ordeal, or the scrutiny. My other friends were standing round but no one intervened to hold him back—which would, at least, have been a way to get me out of it with dignity. None of them said a word as they stood there, waiting to see what I would do. He stuck his nose against mine and kept up with his threats. I raised one hand but he struck it down hard. He wanted me to stand as stiff as a soldier at attention while he spoke to me. I raised my other hand and he hit that hard too. I had to do something. I ran away and picked up a rock and came back toward him, looking mad and threatening. He didn't move. He just looked me steadily in the eye; all I could think of as an excuse was to pretend that my knees had given way and to fall to the ground at some distance from him. It was obvious, laughable, pitiful cowardice, no doubt about it, but I had no other option when faced by this youth who was older than us. Unlike the rest of my childhood friends, he had appeared only about three years ago. He had gone out into the big world before us, and was ahead of us in his experience. He had had sex and of teenage life; he smoked and drank alcohol and told us about the major fights he got into along with his friends, or his gang, against anyone who got in their way in that world of which we knew nothing. He and his friends were capable of tracking their rivals to a café or hashish den, giving them a good thrashing, and pulling the place down over their heads. Or so he said. It wasn't to be expected of me that that I'd stand up to the youth, even if the price was that I'd have to avoid going down to play with my friends so that I wouldn't have to put up with his mockery of me. I stayed at home for several days, for this hardened veteran of the streets beat up on the guard of our building, who was two years my senior but much shorter than I. This guard used to say that those whom God had created dwarves built up stronger muscles to make up for what they'd been denied on height. The well-known Egyptian proverb "I'll thrash you and I'll thrash anyone who dares to defend you" had come true.

I was almost fourteen. My voice had begun to change, becoming deeper. I had outgrown the embrace of childhood that permitted weakness and indulged crying. It was impossible, for me as much as for my friends who'd witnessed to scene, to forget about the knee pain that I'd faked. My sense of myself and of my relationship to the world could no longer ignore the society in which I lived. I was now like that society. It too was a society with a rough voice, and a mustache. It too was a society that had no time for weak knees. That same year, it became apparent that I wasn't the only one to reach that conclusion.

That year, the events known in Egypt as the “Central Security Incidents” took place. We were in school that day and were surprised to hear the administration asking us to return directly to our homes. The area in front of the school gate filled with the cars of hundreds of families waiting for their children. My family wasn’t waiting for me, however. The Opel 68 that was all that had been left of the estate of my grandfather, who had died when I was two, had been sold the year before, and I was forced to go home on foot, totally unaware of what was going on. On my journey back to the house, I was accompanied by a youth whom I knew through a distant family connection. He told me that what had happened might be a repetition of what had taken place in Asyut five years before, when, two days after the killing of Egypt’s president, Anwar Sadat, the Jama’a Islamiya had attacked the city’s police headquarters with the intention of taking it over. Those were events I’d lived through myself, when I was nine, and they had ruined the Feast of the Sacrifice for me, for which I criticized the Jama’a bitterly. When I got home, however, I discovered that what had occurred was simply a mutiny by police recruits throughout Egypt, and that the sole point of resemblance between it and the earlier events was that anger had been translated into violence, shooting, and burning of cars, nothing more. The Central Security Incidents were not the doing of an organization that aimed to overthrow the regime or possessed ideological goals. It was anger, pure and simple. What was important was that this event opened the way for me to a closer acquaintance with the youth who kept me company on my way home, because we met again a few months later and he reminded me of what I’d said about the Jama’a Islamiya when I’d thought it was behind the violent incidents. I repeated my opinion to him, in a few words that I’d memorized from my father: “Abdel Nasser understood them and imprisoned them. If he’d let them alone, they’d have killed him the way they did Sadat.” We had some friends with us. Some agreed and some disagreed.

The gathering broke up and I was left alone with the boy I’d gone home with. He asked me if I knew any members of the Jama’a Islamiya and I said no, even though a few years before I had known one—the one who had become, in fact, their first “martyr.” My friend condemned me for expressing such harsh opinions when I didn’t know them and gave a different account of them. He was dazzled by their acts, by their “heroism,” and by the “glory” they’d earned by their commitment to their religion, for “glory belongs unto God, and unto His Messenger and the believers” as it says in the Qur’an. Then he promised to make me a gift of a bicycle chain that could be used to hit people during fights. He himself had been taught how to use it by the Jama’a and possessed a number of such chains that had been adapted to use as weapons by disconnecting one of the links of the chain to make it straight, not circular, and by wrapping one of its ends in adhesive plastic.

A few years before, I’d got to know Antar. He worked in a small restaurant that sold beans and falafel close to our house, and in the vacations I’d see him every morning. He’d joke with me and my sister and ask me about the soccer league match results. “Watch!” he used to say, challengingly, and set about rapidly chopping tomatoes, or squeezing out from the ring formed by his thumb and index finger a ball of bean paste ready to drop into the oil; if he noticed me in the midst of the throng, he’d serve me quickly so that I didn’t have to wait. One night in 1979, I was doing homework with one of the neighbor boys in his apartment upstairs, and the sound of demonstrations against the Camp David Accords came to us from the outside, though we couldn’t see anything. The grown-ups talked of the Accords as treason; this was the indisputable consensus in both my neighbors’ households and my own,

and it was not to be questioned. What the grown-ups said was not open to debate: they knew things we didn't and they listened to the news and could recall events we had neither lived through nor could find in the history books. That wasn't all, though, for the following day we learned that Antar had been killed in the demonstrations. So it definitely was treason. The day Sadat was killed was one of the happiest of my childhood, along with the day when Ahli football club—fielding only youth players and substitutes—beat Zamalek's first team by three to two, and the day when my parents bought me a bicycle as a reward for getting a score of 97.5 per cent in the Elementary Certificate exam. I asked by uncle on my mother's side, who was a recent graduate of the Police College, if the police really had gone into a mosque without taking off their shoes during these demonstrations, and he smiled and didn't answer. I asked him about Antar too. He was talking to my mother and his sister and to him my queries were just "kid's talk." I was very fond of that uncle, but I didn't like the police, because they were "unjust people."

Antar was in the Jama'a Islamiya and against the regime, but "Uncle" Ahmad, the newspaper seller, was different. Ever since we were little, waking to his cries of "Akhbar! Ahram! Gumhuriya!" had been one of the characteristic markers of a vacation. He would cut a bit off a cigarette packet to form a ring, which he'd wrap around the paper before throwing it up onto our balcony. If I woke up before he came, I'd wait for his arrival and go out onto the balcony and throw him a clothespin to use in place of the paper ring, especially during cigarette shortages. Sometimes I'd go down to the street and ask him if I could throw the paper up onto the balcony. Either way, doing so guaranteed that I'd be the first to read the sports page, and to find out the name of the Arabic film that would be on TV during the afternoon. I'd also discover whether an episode of *The Six Million Dollar Man* would be on the *We Have Chosen for You* program that evening. If it was a Thursday or a Sunday, I'd make sure he didn't forget to deliver Mickey Mouse and Samir with the paper. If I was lucky, I'd run into Uncle Ahmad on his donkey cart, either very early in the morning or after he'd finished his rounds, and be given a ride. Once this cart, or rather the donkey that pulled it, didn't stop when a police car was crossing an intersection in front of it, like cars did when they had the bad fortune happen on a passing police car. The officer got out of the car and, violating every rule of Upper Egyptian manners, slapped the man, who was old enough to be his father, on the face. From then on I was too embarrassed to joke around with Uncle Ahmad. I felt that I ought to make myself look sad whenever I saw him, out of respect for his feelings.

I spent the night dreaming of the chain, just the way as I used to dream that I was Bruce Lee, after seeing a movie of his, or Muhammad Ali Clay, after seeing a movie about him. The next day went by, and the day after, and the boy with the chain didn't come back. In such small towns, however, people's fates walk a strait passage. We owned two buildings in Asyut that stood opposite one another and rented out the basements to students. In one of these lived two bearded students whom I'd met at the soccer pitch. Once I'd gone down to say hello to them and found one of them trying to remove the nail of his abscessed big toe with a switch blade, during which operation he went on talking to me and laughing as though it was nothing. His capacity to withstand pain was amazing. I mentioned him to my friend who'd gone home with me that day and whom I shall call from now on "the Chain Boy," and he confirmed what I'd said, describing the student I was talking about as a "first-rate brother." He followed this with tales of his bravery, which he employed in the defense of religion and the disciplining of wrong-doers, and which, as a result, was unsullied by pride or

arrogance—was, indeed, part of his kindly and modest nature. Such were the things that distinguished the observant, courageous brother from the low-life tough who used force to lord it over God’s creatures.

It is difficult for a person to know why he loves what he loves, or even to know what it is he loves. Till that time, I’d been a boy of weak physique, outstanding at his studies. I differed from the friends I mixed with on the street in that I went to a private school, that of the Soeurs Franciscaines, which meant, as far as I was concerned, that I had to wear a shirt and pants while they wore government-school smocks, and that I could challenge them to spell the name of my school, which they couldn’t. My general interests were reading and the cinema, which I started going to regularly on my own every week from the time I was ten. I was a “patriotic” adolescent who, as was natural for his age, knew little of the Great, or Small, Powers, or the balances and calculations of politics. I parroted such common expressions of the day as “the One Arab People” and “the Arabs are a people known for their glory, pride, and generosity,” and blah blah blah-de-blah. I listened often to the speeches of Abdel Nasser and the patriotic songs of Abdel Haleem Hafez and I hated Sadat, “Camp David,” and Israel, without bothering myself with the details. The previous school year, new maps had turned up in our classroom showing “Israel” where “Palestine” had been. We protested to the school administration and refused to hang up the maps, and in the end the administration gave in and took them away. The same year, I fell behind while marching to the classroom in the morning line-up to the rhythmic strains of the school band, and an angry teacher stopped me and slapped my face. That day I decided this was no place for me and that the noblest thing I could do in life would be to leave school and join a group training fedayeen for operations against Israel. I didn’t know any such groups, assuming that they in fact existed, but the idea obsessed me for two whole days and I spent much time teaching my younger brother, who was six, to repeat the sentence “We must fight Israel to the last man.”

Naturally, I forgot all about it when I stopped being angry.

My small family, consisting of a father, mother, a sister four years older than me and a brother eight years younger, lived in a quiet neighborhood of Asyut called Qulta Company. Traditionally, this neighborhood had been the well-off part of that southern city. Other parts of town had now, however, overtaken it in terms of property prices and, like any other older neighborhood, the nature of its residents was changing, as time passed and social paralysis took over. Despite this, its streets remained busy because of its proximity to the university, whose presence when in session caused the number of Asyut’s inhabitants to more or less double. For older buildings, such as the two that belonged to us, renting out to students brought in a reasonable income that compensated for the meager yield from the apartments. In the basements of both our buildings, and on the roof of one of them, in cheap, badly ventilated, poorly appointed rooms, lived students from the countryside who were unable to pay the rent of a furnished apartment. From time to time, the students from the basement apartments would come to my father to complain that the drains had flooded their rooms and soaked their books and bedding, while the students from the roof would come during the rare rainfalls to complain that their rooms had been turned into pools of water by the water coming in through the wooden ceilings. It was from students such as these, and those in the other buildings near the university, that the majority of the younger

members of the Jama'a Islamiya was drawn.

Some of these students shared my love of soccer. Soccer lovers among the Jama'a Islamiya were careful to include others in this team sport that was impossible to play properly when there were only one or two, or even three, players in a corner of a big pitch. I took to playing regularly with them in spite of the inconvenient time that they had chosen—after the dawn prayer on Fridays. I knew many of them by name and from time to time would run into these when they went down our street on leaving the university and would go with them to the mosque to pray. From chatting with them, I came to learn much about their personal lives. Brother Ashraf, the handsome one, had once loved to gamble and would walk around the Imbaba quarter of Cairo with a pack of cards poking out of the pocket of his shirt as an invitation to others who might want to play; now, however, he was one of the Jama'a's most promising preachers. Ala', an engineering student, had been unable to enter the university for the past year and had abandoned his hopes of a degree because the security forces were after him. Tal'at's parents were big-time merchants in el-Minya but he had sacrificed their wealth and his life of ease with them to engage in Islamist activity. And there was Mahmud, whose father was supposed to enter the prosecutor general's office but who died in a motorcycle accident the very day he was appointed.

One month after I had got to know these "virtuous people" and become a regular attendant at prayer with them, I went to Cairo, where my uncles on my mother's side lived and which, for me, bore no resemblance to the city in which I lived. Before leaving for Cairo, I informed one of the brothers that I was going there because it was the only place where you could get training in kung-fu. He advised me not to go. Up to that point, the Jama'a had been associated above all else in my mind with the image of the strong Muslim, of the fedayeen band made up of strong people who prayed and fasted. I asked the same brother why he didn't want me to go to Cairo to get trained when he himself was very good at kung-fu and had been trained in it. He told me that if I went to Cairo I would lose my commitment to the brothers and that, "To be a committed brother and not good at kung-fu is much better than to be good at kung-fu and not a committed brother." All the same, I wanted to learn kung-fu, and also to work during the summer vacation so that I could be more independent. I went to Cairo.

I didn't get kung-fu training there because I was too lazy to look for a place where I could get it. There was the ESCO Club, close to Shubra el-Mazallat where the uncle I was staying with lived but I was . . . plain lazy. I didn't have any real motivation. Soccer aside, I was always like that with sports. I'd get training in a sport for two weeks, then abandon it. That was how it had been with swimming, table tennis, hand ball, and even weight lifting.

As far as the other side of things—work—was concerned, my uncle took me to a cheap café and introduced me to the owner, telling him that I wanted to work for him, "even though his father owns two apartment buildings in Asyut." Naturally, this wasn't exactly true; it would have been more accurate to say that my father and his fifteen brothers owned those two buildings. All the same, I liked his way of putting it because I felt it would be useful in determining the kind of work the café owner chose for me. In fact, at that period, I loved to hear others refer to my family as a family of distinction, which it was, though only by certain standards. My paternal grandfather was a rich countryman. My father had often told me of

the telephone directory that bore his father's name at a time, in the fifties, when few people owned telephones, and of the electricity generator that provided light for his father's houses and those of the rest of my family at a time when the villages of Egypt were without electricity. My father was himself only the second person in the village to obtain a university degree. All this was true. However, when my grandfather died in 1974, the not insignificant amount of money and real estate that he left was quickly spent and all that remained to us were some buildings and land that couldn't be sold because of the shame attached to the sale of property. Also remaining were the memories related to us by the generation that had witnessed and had had the pleasure of enjoying these things. We too committed these stories to memory as they were told to us and believed in them faithfully.

Only two years previously, my best friend had been a boy named Ahmad, whose father was dean of the College of Medicine at the University of Asyut. Ahmad lived in the classy housing set aside for the university professors, where the buildings were surrounded by greenery and playgrounds, and where there was a swimming pool. I used to go every week and play with him in this faculty housing area, and I continued doing so for three months or more. One Thursday evening in summer, I was there when a youth some years older than me came along and told me that he'd seen me often at "the Housing" and that he didn't want to see me again. Ahmad wasn't far away, and he must have known what the youth was going to tell me, but he didn't interfere or do anything to stop him. Indeed, he didn't even ask me, as I left the place in tears, why I was leaving and not waiting so that we could play together as we usually did. From that day until I joined the Jama'a Islamiya, I didn't exchange with him more than such passing words as were necessitated by our being in the same class. The sole acknowledgment of distinction I received was from the nuns at my elementary school when they collected contributions every Thursday and would ask me to pay more. I never enjoyed any of the special treatment that some of my colleagues, especially those who were sons of police officers, university teachers, or doctors, received. On one occasion, I obtained the highest marks in Arabic Language in the monthly all-school exam, and the teacher reduced my score because it wasn't right that I should get better marks than the student who was both best in the class (in everything except Arabic Language) and the son of a professor at the university.

The owner of the restaurant looked at me for a while and then called over one of his workers and asked him to show me what to do. The worker waited until a customer got up from his table, then picked up a cloth and wiped the table, removing the dishes and saying at the same time, "This is what I want you to do." He looked at me when he'd completed his demonstration and said, "There's a customer about to finish over there. Show me what you're going to do." I informed him that I had to make a quick trip to the nearby mosque to get my copy of the Qur'an, which I'd left behind there by mistake when I was performing the ablutions before prayer. I went to the mosque and didn't find my Qur'an, but of course I didn't go back to the restaurant. I contented myself throughout the entire month that I spent in Cairo by sitting at home and listening to music. I even stopped going to Friday prayers, preferring to stand on the balcony watching the girl in the apartment opposite dancing to the song "On the Way" by Muhammad Fu'ad.

When I returned to Asyut, I was met by the same brother who had warned me against going to Cairo and he asked me why I wasn't going to the mosque. I stammered out some general excuses. He looked me in the eye and said, "Tell me honestly, old friend, do you still pray?" I couldn't answer. Up to that moment, I'd never told a lie, this being one of the strict moral principles that my mother had taken great care to instill in me. She had had sole responsibility for raising me during my early years, up to the age of six, because my father had gone to Yemen to teach on secondment. The same principles had been further instilled in me at my school, which was run by nuns.

Following this incident, I became more regular in my attendance at prayers, which thenceforth I only postponed if there was a soccer match on television. I began going more often to the mosque for the communal prayer that is "twenty-seven times better than individual prayer." At the mosque, I got to know Sheikh Tareq, one of the kindest and most sincere people I have ever known. He agreed with us that he would organize daily lessons at the mosque at which we would learn the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, the sunna, and the life story of the Prophet. The lessons were concerned exclusively with general principles and made no reference to the specific thinking of the Jama'a Islamiya. Sheikh Tareq had a small restaurant where he sold the round sides of bread covered with hashed spiced meat and onions known as hawawshi. There we'd eat sandwiches that he made especially for us and spend the evenings in long conversations from which we learned even more than we did from the formal lessons. Sheikh Tareq had so much love and affection for others that his every word seemed meaningful, and he made you love him and love every word he uttered and every idea he believed in. He bore a scar on his chest from an operation he'd had on his heart. When I first met him he was in his mid-twenties. I don't know when he'd had the operation, though I believe it may have been performed while he was in prison for three years following the events of 1981. What I do know is that he continued to practice his religion faithfully and didn't use his condition as a way of claiming that he was incapable of undertaking the activities in support of the Islamist cause that his commitment entailed. Similarly, though his restaurant was well known and the security forces could have arrested him easily and cut off his source of livelihood, he never used this as an excuse for abandoning his activities. He was an exemplary man—bold and unflinching despite the vulnerability of his livelihood and health. And on top of that, he was from the same town as the eminent Islamist thinker Sayed Qutb.

Sometimes I would fail to appear at Sheikh Tareq's lessons because of a movie or soccer match that was being shown on television at a time that conflicted with one of the prayers, most often the late afternoon prayer. Sheikh Tareq seemed to have understood this, so he asked me to prepare a presentation on the Islamist position with regard to music to deliver to my colleagues in the study circle. I told Sheikh Tareq quite frankly that I would find this unpleasant to do as I loved music so much and couldn't imagine myself stopping listening to it. "Who said you should stop listening to it?" asked Sheikh Tareq. "Just research the sayings of the Prophet and the verses of the Qur'an that talk about music, see how the scholars of religion have interpreted them, and set it all out for us." Then he gave me, to help me in my task, a copy of *The Insinuations of Iblis (Talbis Iblis)*, a book that deals with the stratagems that Iblis, the Devil, resorts to to seduce humankind. The word Iblis sounded pleasant to my ear; I couldn't describe it as beautiful, because it described the Devil, but it was musical, poetic. It had been engraved on my mind by the incredible delivery of one of the preachers at

Friday prayers when he declaimed the Salafist verses that go

Iblis, the world, my self, and desire –
What road can I take, when all are mine enemy?

I shut myself up in my room to listen to the songs of Mayada el-Hennawi while I leafed through the book, noting the various scholars' opinions on a piece of paper. I emerged with a summary that said that music was forbidden by religion and that anyone who listened to a female singer would find that "on the Day of Resurrection, anuk—which means molten lead—would be poured into his ears." I also discovered that the most that Islam permitted by the way of music was the beating of the duff, or large tambourine. I wrote this down and went with it to the mosque. There, I sat in the circle of students, holding the paper with trembling hands, and read to my friends what I had written. After the lesson, Sheikh Tareq congratulated me on the quality of what I'd written and praised the effort I'd made. He put me on notice, however, that now that I had become aware of the issue, I bore a greater responsibility, and that God's reckoning with me would be tougher if I persisted in disobedience while well aware of His judgment on the issue.

As I wiped clean all my music tapes (except for the one with Abd el-Halim Hafiz singing patriotic songs), I gave no thought whatsoever to singing itself, or to its importance to me. As far as I was concerned, listening to music was just an act, a simple act, the abandonment of which would permit me to prove to myself my sincerity and determination to obey the divine prohibition. This was the first real lesson that I learned with the Jama'a Islamiya—what was permitted and what was forbidden. What was forbidden was everything God had prohibited, and what was permitted was everything else. This was the view adopted by those who supported the idea that religion should be "lenient." At the same time, if something new was compared to something old that some text prohibited, then the new thing was forbidden by analogy, even if no clear text prohibiting it existed. This simple step in reasoning was followed by another that I could never have imagined. The next time I failed to attend afternoon prayer it was to watch a soap that I liked. This time, Sheikh Tareq himself undertook to explain the position of religious law with regard to those who looked on a woman whose body was not adequately covered, whether in real life or in a picture. It followed that television, with all its images of indecently dressed women, was forbidden. At this point, I took my decision.

The study circle and the mosque became the axes of my new life and the starting point for my activities with my new friends, who from then become known to me on as my "brothers." I arranged with some of the brothers of my own age to bring a soccer team from my street to play a team from theirs. I arrived a little late at the pitch and ran into one of the members of our team going home in tears. He told me that the team from the other street had refused to let him play against them because he was a Christian. The team from our street then refused to play out of solidarity with our friend. When I met Sheikh Tareq, I complained to him about the behavior of these colleagues of mine from the study circle. Sheikh Tareq told me that God hated to share the heart of the believer with anyone, which is why He says, "Thou shalt not find any people who believe in God and the Last Day who are loving to those who oppose His Messenger, not though they were their fathers, or their sons, or their brothers, or their clan. Those—He has written faith upon their hearts, and He has

confirmed them with a Spirit from Himself . . . They are the prosperers.” Likewise, he noted that the Prophet said in his Sermon of Farewell, “All things that pertain to the Days of Ignorance are placed beneath this foot of mine.” Similarly, the Companion of the Prophet Mus‘ab ibn Umayr, after he made the migration from Mecca to Medina, had received a visit from someone who told him, “Your mother will neither eat nor drink until you return to her” and he replied by telling the man to tell her that “Mus‘ab says, ‘Mother, should you have seventy lives and should you depart each life one after the other, I would not abandon this matter.’” I had, therefore, to cut off all relationships with those who did not believe with true faith in God and His Messenger and disdain them, for this was a characteristic of the believers who loved God and whom God loved. If we did not do so, God would “assuredly bring a people He loves and who love Him, humble towards the believers, disdainful towards the unbelievers,” as the Almighty says.

If learning how to distinguish between what was forbidden and what was permitted was my first lesson in faith, learning how to distinguish oneself from the unbeliever was my first lesson in its practical application. For “Umar came to the Prophet, God bless him and give him peace, and said, ‘O Messenger of God, I went to visit a brother of mine from the tribe of Qurayza and he wrote down for me some concise excerpts from the Torah. Shall I not read them out to you?’ At this, the face of the Messenger, God bless him and give him peace, darkened, so Umar said, ‘We are content with God as our lord, with Islam as our religion, and with Muhammad as a messenger.’ Then the good spirits of the Messenger, God bless him and give him peace, were restored, and he said, ‘By Him in whose hand the soul of Muhammad is held, should Musa find himself amongst you and you should follow him, you would go astray! You are my lot amongst the nations, and I am your lot amongst the prophets.’” And in his book *Ma‘alim fi al-Tariq* (Landmarks on the Road), Sayed Qutb takes this saying of the Prophet’s as his starting point in order to demonstrate that there are to be no compromises and no accommodations between Islam and other beliefs—“either Islam or Ignorance”—and to make the claim that this concept of the clear distinction between Islam and Ignorance, insisted upon by the Messenger, was what created that unique, Qur’anic generation of the first Companions.

When anyone takes his first steps in the Jama‘a, he cannot tell where the path begins or at what point he will find himself fully committed; everything flows seamlessly. The study circles do not discuss how to confront society, or how the state should be governed. They discuss what is forbidden and what is permitted, they discuss prayer, the rules governing fasting, the rules governing how to look at a woman and listen to music, the limits to be placed on the exposure of the body, the acts that render ritual ablutions void and those that require the ritual purification of the whole body, the proprieties to be observed when bathing and when eating. These are all uncontroversial matters that neither stir suspicion nor sow the seeds of unease. One may respond to any member of one’s family who asks, “What did you study today at the mosque?” with complete honesty. In your hand you have a sticker that you put up in the bathroom that says, “I seek refuge with God from all things offensive,” this being the prayer to be uttered on entering the bathroom. You also have in your hand another sticker that you put on the front door: “Dear God, let me enter in truthfulness and leave in truthfulness.” “Glory be to God who subjected this to us, and we ourselves were not equal to it; surely unto our Lord we are turning” is the prayer for mounting a dabba, which is the

Islamic term for anything that is ridden, from a donkey to a space rocket via motorcycles and cars. I stuck mine on my bike.

These are little things, which, however, when placed one on top of the other, turn into a structure that can stand on its own. On the one hand, there were customs I'd been familiar with and raised in. On the other, a new person who, each time he opened his mouth to utter a prayer, felt that he was growing closer to God and that a fine silken thread connected him to the sublime—a fine silken thread that tugged at his heart whenever he forgot a prayer, making him remember and say it. Then that tug would disappear and the remembrance would disappear and everything would turn into a mechanical activity. I'd enter the mosque and remove my shoes and leave it and put them on again. I'd say the prayer for leaving the mosque and when I got home, I'd say the prayer for entering the house, and it was the same when I entered the bathroom, where I would use my left hand only to clean myself and not say a word, even if someone called to me. Nor would I forget the prayer when I came out. I ate sitting on the ground using three fingers and not two like the overly dainty or five like those with revolting manners. I didn't ask—especially when eating with the brothers—for a spoon, like someone who put on airs. Even when walking in the street, I would try to walk as the Best of Creation (pbuh) was described as having walked, it being said that he did so “as though descending from a high mountain,” which led me to saunter along slowly. When I thanked someone, I would say, “God bless you” or “God reward you,” not “Thanks,” as I had been used to doing, or “Merci,” as they sometimes do in Egypt. When I spoke, I would articulate the letters clearly, as I had been taught to do when reciting the Qur'an. Instead of pronouncing the name of my friend Diya' with the stress on the first syllable (Díya), I took to pronouncing it on two levels (Diyá'), giving the “Di” a round, full sound, and the “yá” a narrow, thin sound, and ending up with a glottal stop that was given its full value and didn't disappear as it had done in my old way of speaking.

All this was acceptable. I prayed, I fasted, and I learned the Qur'an. Who could object to that? I did all these things without thinking of myself as a member of the Jama'a Islamiya. I didn't believe that I'd already started down the road.

We hadn't been playing soccer in the street where my house stood for long when one of the players kicked the ball and hit a man who was passing. The man, who was a Christian, picked up the ball and refused to give it back. The player who'd kicked the ball went over to him, apologizing, and asking for it back, but the man swore at him, saying, “God damn your religion!” I don't know how the story reached Brother Husni but on the evening of the same day he invited me over and asked me to tell him what had happened. He wanted to make sure he had got the facts straight by hearing them from more than one source. The next day, another brother invited me over again and asked me to go with three of the brothers and point out to them the house of the man who had insulted our colleague's religion, and I did so. He then asked me to go up to the man's apartment, which was on the third floor, and inform him that some people wanted to talk to him. I did so and then came down again. I heard the brother who was the leader talking to the man from the ground floor and I continued my way out of the building onto the street and stopped some distance away. This brother was waiting for the man at the entrance to the building while the other two stood in front of the building opposite. One of them was the same brother whom I had seen earlier

removing the nail of his whitelowed toe with a knife. When the man came down, he looked suspiciously and expectantly at the three individuals, who were all wearing the same type of beard and the same white jalabiya, and immediately, with a show of warmth, shook the first by the hand, insisting that he get them all something cold to drink. The residents of the man's building and his relatives started coming out onto their balconies. Then two of his male relatives came down to him, the brothers maintaining their refusal of the offer of a cold drink, the three bottles of Coca-Cola being left quietly on the roof of a car next to which the leading brother was talking to the man. From where I was standing, I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying but the conversation was tense and vehement on the part of the leader, while the other man made calming and placatory gestures accompanied by unsuccessful attempts to kiss the brother's head.

The lead brother yelled, "God is great!", the Coca-Cola bottles fell off the top of the car, and the other two brothers rushed over from the opposite building, each carrying his bicycle and each in a split second penning one of the man's two relatives between wall and bicycle. The man at the center of the quarrel was taken care of by the lead brother.

The cry of "God is great!", the sound of the breaking glass, and the screams of the women from the balconies forced me forward and I ran and kept running in the opposite direction till I reached our house, which was about a hundred meters away, and went up to the roof and hid myself there in an empty room. I thought that to hide in the apartment would be a mistake, as the police would, without a doubt, be coming to arrest me. I was the one who'd gone up to the man's apartment and then stood in the street during the moments preceding the fight. Lots of people must have seen me and lots of people must know who I was since I lived close to the field of battle. I stayed on the roof for hours, monitoring the street and watching for the arrival of the police cars. I didn't come down for the sunset or the evening prayers. Then I went to our apartment, which I didn't leave for two days.

I felt repulsion and disgust at what had happened, or perhaps at myself. I had never practiced physical violence, and I was sure in my heart of hearts that the man hadn't given any thought to what my friends' religion was before he cursed it—it was just habit. Even when I was questioned by the brothers about what had happened I had wanted to say that, though I hadn't done so. Maybe I'd never expected that things would go so far, or perhaps I'd wanted to watch, the way one does a scene in a movie. In any case, something within me couldn't accept what had taken place. I'd gone to a school the vast majority of whose students were Christians. Until a few weeks before, most of them had been my friends. Ma Soeur Eugenie had even run into me a very short while before and said hello to me, holding my hand in hers while she told other sisters whom I didn't know about me. There was nothing about my external appearance to suggest to her that there was anything different about me, and I couldn't bring myself to tell her that there was anything different. How, though, could she not feel it? The very same woman had come to our classroom once when the Islamic Religion teacher was away and taught us in his place; she had made us recite the chapter of the Qur'an called al-Hadid (Iron), insisting that we pronounce every word correctly down to the last vowel. There were Muslims in the same school with me but all my friends, without exception, were Christians. Along with them I'd memorized, and can still remember, a few hymns, and they'd made fun of me for not being able to sing them properly to the right tune. My father too was one of the few people willing to rent to tenants of another religion; at

that time, renting out only to those of the same religion was a recent practice in Asyut, one that the Christians landlords were the more careful to observe.

These were the feelings that I described to Sheikh Tareq when we met. It was easier than talking about the fact that I was a coward, as proved by my running away in fear, my terror that the police would come for me, and my wishing that I'd never got to know the Jama'a Islamiya or gone to that place, in case any harm might come to me as a result. Or that I wasn't like the two brothers who'd picked up their bicycles with great nimbleness and pounced on the two men. I hadn't even possessed the courage to stand and watch the events, or to bear the sound of the screaming and the atmosphere of battle. Was I really such a weak-hearted coward?

During our debate, I told him too that when I was in the Fifth Elementary Class (which was after the events of 1981), my Christian friends had started to avoid me and even deliberately insulted me, and when I asked one of them the reason, he'd told me that it was because of the events in Asyut instigated by the Jama'a Islamiya. I asked him what fault of mine was that, and he answered, "You're all Muslims."

"Yes, we're all Muslims," Sheikh Tareq reaffirmed to me. He also told me that when my friend told me that, he was repeating what he'd heard from his parents or at church. Sheikh Tareq added that the "community of unbelievers" was one: the Christian West supported Jewish Israel because it wanted to destroy the Muslims before they became too strong to break or returned to their religion, thus restoring to themselves their glory and power. He reinforced these words with the unanswerable statement of the Lord of the Worlds, "Never will the Jews be satisfied with thee, neither the Christians, not till thou followest their religion." Then He informed me that the Christian whom the brothers had disciplined for insulting the religion of the Muslims had come and apologized and sought a truce, and offered to apologize personally to the boy who'd kicked the ball. "Observe," said Sheikh Tareq, "how God exalts the Muslims and humiliates the unbelievers!"

Umar ibn al-Khattab said, "Teach your children swimming, archery, and the riding of horses." Despite having started lessons as a child, I had totally failed to learn how to swim. Even then, and despite going to the swimming pool with the brothers at least once a week, I was still unable to learn. I was thin and sank like a needle. On the other hand, I had been a skilled bike-rider since I was a child, and hoped to learn to ride a motorcycle, and this took the place of learning to ride horses, which was not a skill that was currently taught.

For thirty-two pounds, I bought an air rifle from the Umar Effendi department store and took it with me to the soccer pitch for our weekly match following the dawn prayer on Friday. I tried it a number of times and couldn't hit a thing. One of the brothers who was an outstanding shot, the same one who was good at Kung Fu, discovered that the barrel was bent, only slightly but still enough to send the pellets off course, and another brother took it upon himself to go with me to Umar Effendi's. Behind the employee from whom I'd bought the rifle was the white notice with its heavy black lettering, celebrated throughout Egypt, that states, "Goods Once Sold Cannot Be Returned or Exchanged." This was meaningless, however, given the presence of a brother at my side; indeed, he didn't even point to it but

exchanged the gun for another, which the brother made sure was straight by placing the barrel on the glass pane of the counter in all positions to check that it lay completely flush on it, without any gaps. I tried it out for real a number of times from the balcony of our apartment on the second story, firing the pellet toward the lighting post and hearing the sound—tiffin!—that told me I had hit it.

I was standing on the same balcony when I saw, in our other building, opposite, some boys and girls from the three apartments that made up the ground floor— one of which was occupied by a Muslim family, the other two by Christians. They were playing “fishing.” In this game, two players standing opposite one another throw the ball and try to hit the players in the space between them, the players in the middle having to try to avoid the ball. In order to do this, the girls—two of whom were Muslims and two Christians—would raise their skirts above their knees, which would allow them to jump over the balls that were aimed at them. I knew from past conversations that the intentions of the boys, who were all Christians, were not honorable. They had told me, when we had been friends, about their attempts to make the neighbor girls fall over, and I used to wait for further details from one evening to the next, waiting for their attempts to succeed, which would have helped me do the same with the girls. At such time, I would have “had something over” the girls and they would have been unable to refuse my advances.

That had been during the days of preparation for the shift to manhood, of plans and traps as we awaited the arrival of puberty. By the time it did so, however, I and all these neighbors of mine had arrived at totally different positions. To that point, I still hadn’t ejaculated while sleeping, hadn’t seen the thick white fluid. All I’d been able to summon up had been a thin substitute. In fact, part of the nonchalance with which I regarded my commitment to the Jama’a was due to the fact that I wasn’t yet mukallaf, or obligated to obey the precepts of religion, because I had yet to attain puberty, even if, like my peers, my mind itself swam in sea of semen. My body was changing and those who had gone before brought glad tidings of the signs: “One day you’ll start feeling pain in your nipples”; “You’ll feel a desire to smoke.” And all this was in addition to the comments of my relatives on my swelling nose and my changing voice. Whenever my photograph was taken for some family occasion, I would scrutinize the area between my legs to find out how it must look these days to others. Was there anything to show I’d become a man?

Manhood, in my new situation, didn’t bring with it a desire to smoke. Such things were signs of the Jahiliya, or “days of ignorance,” a part of the Satanic culture that was luring the Muslims further and further away from the Straight Path. To me, as a committed, scripturalist Muslim, puberty was the dividing line between one’s being a fully responsible human being and a child whom even God exempted from judgment and who, if he died, would go straight to Heaven. On reaching puberty, not only would I enter the world of men, I would also enter that of those to each of whom God had assigned an angel on his right shoulder, who recorded in writing his good deeds both great and small, and another on his left, who recorded his bad. What a time for the angel of the left to begin his work! I feel for the exhaustion he must have experienced; it was like a policeman starting work on the feast day of Saint Sin. What is it that happens with ejaculation that merits so much attention? I mean, what is it that happens in our bodies, minds, and understanding that merits our transfer to real life in God’s eyes? Those boys and girls in the opposite building who were

pretending to be simply passing the time playing “fishing” knew as well as I did, that they were in fact preoccupied with the roles they were destined to play. I could feel it as I looked at the legs of the girls that were revealed when their household frocks rode up. Indeed, I wanted it the way the worms wants the apple, the way that a ticklish throat wants something velvety and moist to spread over itself. Now, however, what offended God had to offend me too. True, I might like it, I might long for it. The difference between me and them, however, was that I could gain ascendancy over my body and force theirs to submit to my authority, thus preventing everyone from committing sin and protecting—at the very least—the cleanliness of the bodies of Muslim women and their purity, the purity with which they were born. We were taught, from the time we were small children, that looking at girls’ bodies was wrong, and that dealings with women in general were subject to limits, and that in Upper Egypt they describe a well-mannered man by saying that “he never looks a woman in the face.” At home, my mother would turn the television off during scenes in which there was kissing, even though we were not an especially, at that period, hard-line household in matters of purity of religion. And even when my friends and I would get together in childhood and look at one another’s sexual organs, or hit one another as a pretext for touching what shouldn’t be touched—even then we knew that what we were doing was shameful and we’d hide it. When, at age eleven, I learned that we come into the world as a result of sexual intercourse, I was smitten by a bout of disgust and revulsion against my parents, and I got into a fight with an older neighbour boy who had told me about it and accused him of wanting to insult me. I had, therefore, to put an end to this blameworthy behaviour. I took hold of my rifle and aimed it at the entrance to the building. The second the ball appeared there, I fired off a shot at it. Tirrin! It hit the iron door. Everyone stood rooted to the spot, baffled and bewildered. No one dared to go forward and take the ball till the mother of the Muslim girls arrived. She came forward slowly, looking at me, so I lowered my gun as a sign that I’d let her get the ball out of respect. They’d got the message.

A little after that, there was a quarrel between one of the Christian girls and one of the Muslim girls. The first said something about the stupidity of the Muslims who’d killed one another in Mecca (in a reference to the events at the Sanctuary of Mecca in 1986 that started with the demonstrations by the Iranian pilgrims), so I fetched one of the brothers and pointed out the house of the Christian girl, knowing very well that she could see me. After a while, her father, who was an army officer, came to our house to complain. My father was furious at my behaviour, considering it troublemaking and altogether unacceptable, and he tried to stop me from going to the mosque, because it wasn’t a matter of “childish misbehavior” any more and because he thought it not unlikely that our neighbor would report the matter to the police. For my part, I said, with a rhetorical flourish, “No laxity when Islam is at stake!” However, I promised him I wouldn’t do it again. In fact, I too was worried about the possibility that my father mentioned. Manhood brought with it, however, both obligations and inconveniences.

Translated from the Arabic by Humphrey Davies

*

I descended the mosque steps calmly after the prayer, talking to a friend of mine. At the mosque of the Jam'iyah Shar'iyah—the Jama'ah's main mosque in Asyut—the number of worshippers was huge. The school year had started a few weeks earlier, the university students arriving from their home towns and the students at the schools returning from their vacations. The number was larger than any I'd seen throughout the summer vacation. This was also my first school year as a committed Muslim with the Jama'ah; it was First Year Secondary. The atmosphere in the city was tense, it being one of those times when the government had decided that Islamist activity had gone too far and had to be put a stop to. At such times, the mosque would be surrounded by thousands of Central Security troops, who would prevent some preacher or other from giving his sermon or terrorize those who frequented the mosque in the hope that they would decide not to take the risk of attending. The huge number of those attending the prayer could act either as a stimulus to the police to interfere in an attempt to prevent more people from attending, or as a deterrent. On this occasion, it had been a stimulus. For a moment, I was deprived of speech, as though some power had sucked the words out of my mouth. The buzz of people talking, the sound of their footfalls, the cries of the stall keepers, the attentive expression on my friend's face all froze, and then suddenly everything exploded. Two agitated hands pushed me from behind, feet stepped on the backs of my shoes, dragging them off my feet. Shots were fired in the air and people knocked into one another like nine-pins, moving together this way and that as though by previous agreement. Once again I yielded to my instincts and ran away from the shooting, but the roaring of the Central Security soldiers and the deafening sound of thousands of feet pounding the ground to an irregular rhythm started coming from all sides and I didn't know which way to turn. An acrid smoke that got into the nostrils was added to the other ingredients of the atmosphere. One's entire face was afflicted with a burning sensation that would stop at one knew not which layer of one's skin; indeed, it didn't seem as though it was going to stop at all, one's whole body apparently bursting into flame in an instant, just as every atom of the air around me had taken fire all at one go. I had the feeling that our house existed in a different world, one separated from me by frightful obstacles. I would run like a madman and enter a building, then retreat and flee again when the residents refused to open their doors and give us refuge. There seemed no escape from the torment that the police, who now filled the place, would inflict on us with their thick, electrified batons. I went on running from street to street and from thoroughfare to thoroughfare, forgetting that my age, which was still under fifteen, and my face, on which neither beard nor moustache had yet sprouted, would be enough to hide me from notice so long as I walked normally. The brother who had gone with me to change the shot gun stood, holding high in the air a crutch belonging to a brother who was a cripple and sold perfumes in front of the Jam'iyah mosque and yelling in the face of the fleeing people, "Stand firm: your religion is under attack! Defend your Islam!"

I saved the scene in my memory but wasn't strong enough to answer his call to stand firm. Indeed, I kept running till I reached our house, where the windows were closed tight to stop the tear gas from the grenades. Through the slanting wooden slats of the shutters I could see the final moments of the battle. The security forces dispersed the people and began chasing those who couldn't run fast enough to get away, beating them viciously while herding them toward the large security trucks. My tears weren't because of the gas now. I went to my bed and lay down on my back in the darkened room. I remembered the movies that depicted the first Muslims and their confrontations with the tyranny of the unbelievers. I

fell asleep before my tears had dried.

I found myself in a dark, deserted place divided equally into narrow paths that all came together at a circle in the middle. Precisely at the center stood a white dog, which was barking. I was extremely frightened of dogs, and this dog was barring my return route. I looked all around in the hope of finding a path that would allow me to avoid the dog but I couldn't. I felt a crippling fear in my legs. I couldn't move. I could see that the only light on that dark path was on the other side but I didn't have the courage to walk past the dog and get to it. I gathered all my strength and walked on, trembling, impelled only by the certainty that I would perish if I didn't do so. I walked toward the dog, hastening my steps as I said in a loud voice, recalling a song we sang at the mosque, "No, we shall not die cringing for fear of the dogs. No, we shall not die cringing for fear of the dogs."

I woke from dream still weeping.

