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From the novel *Women of Karanitna*

Business. Hagga Itemad introduced her to Madame Nadia, a Karmouz grandee with a couple of pennies to rub together and a desire to invest them. Hagga Itemad advised Inji to open an English and computer center. Where? The two floors beneath hers in the hagga's building. The running of it would be left to Inji: she knew about things like that. Inji embraced the idea. She had not forgotten her past as a member of the intelligentsia and she saw in this a chance to return to her roots. And Madame Nadia had heard about this woman, a newcomer to Karmouz and to Alexandria, and rising fast, whom people spoke about from time to time. She decided to sit with her in person. And Inji spontaneously reverted to her original manner, mixing Arabic and American-accented English and careful, at the same time, not to seem too green. Inji impressed Madame Nadia. She recited the Fatiha and said mabrouk.

Madame Nadia only had one reservation: the niqab. She spoke to Inji about it, who smiled and told her she had no problem with other girls, whether they were in niqab or not, or even totally naked, so long as it was their own *free choice* (in English). As far as I'm concerned, Madame Nadia, it doesn't bother me what others wear. Honestly, *it doesn't matter*. What really matters is that people are happy with what they're wearing, that they're okay with it deep down. Believe me, anyone can get away with their style and their clothes, anywhere they like, so long as they've got *self-confidence*. Inji was able to impose her logic on Madame Nadia because her logic was loaded with a great deal of *self-confidence*.

Inji took over the running of the center and her presence brought young men and women flocking to study there. This impressed Madame Nadia, who realized that she knew hardly anything about Inji, and so she asked about. A few people told her a few things, but the important detail was relatively late in arriving: Inji's a killer, Madame Nadia. Inji killed in Cairo, she killed in Camp Cesar, and she killed in Karmouz. God knows if that's the lot. There was no intention to slander her here, quite the opposite: it was pride, pride in a daughter of Karmouz. And it was in this spirit that the news reached Madame Nadia.

Inji paid her a visit at her office. It was daytime, in Ramadan. She lit a cigarette. Inji made no comment. It was Madame Nadia who commented: Cigarettes don't break the fast, Inji. Were there cigarettes in the Prophet's day, to break his fast? Inji was silent. Madame Nadia stood up. I want you to come with me on a quick errand, Inji. We'll be back before you know it, don't worry.

Madame Nadia drove Inji to her home in Gheit al-Enab. An apartment she owned on the ground floor. In they went.

Utter darkness. Madame Nadia walks ahead and Inji follows. The room within is darker still. Inji can barely see a thing for all that it is day outside. She hears the scrape of Madame Nadia's footsteps on the right side of the room. She hears her whimpering. Then the sound cuts out. Inji wants to call out to her but her voice is gone. Then the scattered facts string together in her mind. Sheikh Khaled's murder. Madame Nadia's taking her revenge. She's cut off completely, in a darkened room, no one knowing where she is.

Suddenly, on her left hand, she hears her voice. Maybe you don't know much about me, Inshi, but I know every little thing about you. Don't think you're working with me because I like the way you talk to me. You work with me because of what people say about you. She's the one, I said to myself. I want her with me. But you need to know something first.

"You never ask for anything, Inji. My girl, you should have. I'd have helped you. There's many before you have tried to do what you're doing but they've all failed. These things are in God's hands. He's the one Who sees His servant through or sees him fail. And take care: there could be hard times on the way.

"See here, my girl, you're young. The tale I'm going to tell you took place twenty years ago now. You were just a child when it happened. And no one knows a thing about it. The papers never wrote about it, and never a peep on TV.

"The Hagga Itemad you know, the one you see me such good friends with, she was my husband's second wife once upon a time, and we couldn't stand each other. But the wheel turns, Inji my girl, the wheel turns. Could you imagine a couple of wise old birds like us still fighting over a man? Of course not.

"The man's no stranger to you. He's been dead fifteen years. Maybe you won't know him, but you know his brother. Sheikh Hassan. The man who set you up when you first came to Alexandria. A good man, right? And his brother's the one who, twenty years ago, set Alexandria alight."

A mysterious figure, his roots most likely in the South. He appeared one day in the sky over Kom al-Shuqafa. Mohamed Harbi was his name, but he was only ever known as Harbi. He wasn't known to have a trade. It was said that he was insane, and it's true he did do strange things. He started with perfectly reasonable stuff: holding a guy up with a sword and taking everything he had on him, fighting with a store owner and coming back at night with his friends to burn the store down, assaulting underage girls (and legal girls). All par for the course. Most of us have gotten up to one or the other in our tender years. What was new was the unreasonable stuff. Such as? In '92, Harbi stood in the middle of the Corniche Road in Miami holding a deckchair, which he set up and sat down on, staring scornfully at the advancing cars. By some miracle, the cars managed to miss him. Two cops came up and tried to drag him to the pavement. In an instant he'd pulled a sword from out under his robe (where he'd strapped it to his waist) and thrashed it about in the air, wounding one cop in the arm. They both backed off, enough for Harbi to take off running—despite his slight limp—and catch a ferry on the seaside lane heading for Chatby. Where he unfolded his chair, smack-dab in the center of the road as before. Five minutes and he was bored. He folded up the chair and went home.

For those who don't know, for those who don't remember, this was the period when Egypt was under assault from terrorism, and so it was possible to pin a charge of terrorism on Mohamed Harbi. This was because Mohamed Harbi had another specialty: releasing livestock from quarantine. He did this on two occasions, at the head of a mob from Kom al-Shuqafa. They released the beasts and passed them on to traders, who led them, in turn, to Amiriya where they sold them. It was claimed the animals were infected, but Harbi took a different view, that the animals enter quarantine in good shape and come out sick, and so it was to save them from this fate that he mounted his operation. In any case, that was the moment that Harbi became a terrorist in the government's eyes, and no greater sin can man commit than terrorism.

It was then that he met his first wife and married her, Inji: the same Itemad you know. But he wasn't happy with her. And I knew who he was. From a distance. Between ourselves, Inji, I had my eye on him. And he had his on me. He'd give me a wink from time to time. But I didn't like to get between him and his wife.

He was at the end of his rope with his wife and I told him to leave her so she wouldn't suffer either, but he said, No. I'll marry you and stay married to her too. Between ourselves, I was young. Life was still a game and everyone was talking about Harbi. He was like the big boss in Kom al-Shuafaqa. Anyway, I agreed. Mohamed, I told him, Promise me you'll divorce her. And he said, I promise.

Was Mohamed Harbi insane? No one ever said so out loud, though many thought it. Whatever the case, the time for that reckoning had not come. What mattered were the many people who believed in him and followed him; was that for years (not many, true, but they made their mark) he had created and sustained a myth for Alexandria: the myth of the city's conception of itself. The man who defied the government and led one of the largest spontaneous protest movements ever to be formed by a single individual (single and also unlettered, disorganized and with no experience of protest movements); the man whose primary motivation was not wealth of women or revenge, but to stand up to the authorities, to challenge their settled ideas about themselves . . . this is the true history of Alexandria.

And that, my girl, is what you need to know. You can march around with your tits in everybody's face, but if you don't know anything, it won't get you anywhere. If you want to finish what old Harbi started you have to first understand what it is he did. Am I right? You're an educated girl and speak languages and, God willing, it'll be through you that God delivers us. And that is why, Madame Nadia explains, Inji is here, in Harbi's old den, surrounded by his things: his swords and switchblades. "God willing, this room and everything in it will go to you, or rather, to those close to you. But only if you live up to my expectations, Inji, and I know you won't let me down."

Mohammad Harbi's death had been one of the most influential scenes in the film reel of Alexandrian history:

"So the government, as they say, was looking for him and he was staying with a friend of his, a guy in the Young Muslims who later became an informer. I'll tell you who I got this from in a minute. I never say a false word about anyone. This friend of his was winding him up. He sat there filling him with poison and telling him, You aren't the Harbi I used to know, sitting inside like a woman because you're scared of the government. Harbi was hot-blooded. He couldn't take it. He straps a sword to his side and goes out. Soon as he steps outside he sees the street full of cops and officers. It was a trap, see, and they'd made a deal with this friend of his. The man runs and keeps running until he reaches Fouad Street and crosses over, still running. And guess what? They've got a car waiting for him. The car drives up and smacks into him."

For a minute she is silent.

"You know, Inji my girl, it was like his body was pasted onto the car. And the car keeps going until it reaches this pickup truck coming out of a side street and they crash one another."

She is silent for a long time. The memory is painful. More than anyone could bear. The sight of Mohamed Harbi's body, jammed and folded between the two vehicles. Madame

Nadia remembers something else. A cry, lingering and dramatic, like the mourner's wail—, "Harbi!"—the *bi* drawn out until the sound began to fade: Harbbbiiii! And as it died, Harbi heard it and saw his death before him. Who cried out? The driver of the Peugeot? Of the pickup? One of the soldiers waiting for him outside the house? And at what precise instant did it ring out? And, more important, how was it she recalled its very tone, to this day, when she had not witnessed the incident herself, but only heard about it? Harbi! Warning. Harbi! Deadly, fatal. Harbi! Mysterious, cut off from every possible context. Harbi! With the *bi* drawn out, drawn out to no purpose.

Suddenly, the breeze claps the shutters. The shutters swing open. From between the slats a dust cloud storms the room, and more important than the dust: the light. The room fills with sunlight. Its features materialize. Inji coughs lightly, then opens her eyes. Two long swords hanging on the wall, and a machine gun, and a ~~nine-millimeter~~ automatic, and a collection of knives embedded in the desk's cracked surface. Madame Nadia is over on the far left-hand side of the room, seated, weeping, wiping at her tears with her fingers, wiping her snot, which she flicks to the ground with forefinger and thumb. The floor's awash with snot and tears.

The Inji Center pulled in new customers every day, customers who came to study, customers who came to play games, customers who came for online chat in the small cybercafé, and customers who came for love. A small room on the center's second floor had started life as a cafeteria, at first relatively laid-back when it came to certain maneuvers—certain postures—between young men and their girlfriends, then openly laid-back, then unreservedly laid-back, until it ended life as a spacious apartment set aside for sex. Inji never took a single unpremeditated step, and all with the full knowledge of Hagga Itemad and Madame Nadia. Planning on the project started at around the time Inji found out about Mohamed Harbi's story; in the middle of Ramadan, in other words. Hagga Itemad did not oppose it; she just asked that the whole thing be put off till after Ramadan, and Madame Nadia said the same. Inji was the only one dying to get started. She started mulling and calculating and going back over her time with Ali in Camp Cesar. To Madame Nadia she said that she wanted it to be something different, something respectable, not like the filthy holes elsewhere: Our customers are high-class and we've got to be high-class too. In response to this statement, Madame Nadia announced her wholehearted consent.

Madame Nadia's old dream had been to get out of Karmouz. The years went by, she accumulated her fortune, and she hadn't managed to get out, and so she replaced her old dream with another: to create a new Karmouz, with cybercafés and coffee shops on every corner. She gave all her sons and daughters lessons in English and computers. The fact is that much of Madame Nadia's personality becomes comprehensible to us if we would just recognize her obsession with modernization, and Inji did. She drew her out with the dream of the high-class customers who would frequent the center because of the new apartment: Gulfies, army officers, and cops. I know them from my Camp Cesar days. Madame Nadia smiled, and Hagga Itemad smiled, and Inji continued to rise.

Harbi was utterly forgotten. Madame Nadia didn't talk to Inji about him anymore. Hagga Itemad made one solitary reference to him: she asked if Nadia had spoken to her about anything. Inji said nothing. The hagga pressed her. She bluntly asked if Nadia had told her the story of Harbi and Inji inclined her head. The hagga went on. He was just her lover.

He wasn't her husband. He never married anyone but me or had any children apart from my girl, Mina. If you ask her she won't deny it. She's just ashamed to admit it.

For a long while this was the only reference made to the story of Harbi, but Inji did not forget.

One night she dreams of him. He is at the head of a strung-out column of humanity, with a black beard and thinning hair, screaming wildly, like Russell Crowe on posters for *Gladiator*. In amongst this straggling army is Ghada, one of the girls who work for her at the center. Ghada sees her and waves happily, then takes her by the hand to introduce her to Harbi. Inji wakes up, sweating. Her sweat dries and she smiles. She calls Ghada. She tells her that she misses her. Inji is always scrupulous when it comes to her relationships with her workers. She doesn't call them whores, but rather "teachers" or "waitresses," depending on the jobs they do, and these things make a difference. These things make a big difference.

Another recurring dream: ~~she and~~ Ali, sitting together in their old house in Camp Cesar. Ali is playing with Hamada, murmuring to the child and feeding him his finger, and he looks at her. And he smiles. So she smiles, and gets up and goes into the bedroom. He follows her. He fondles her and feels her up and she responds: she starts to get wet. She wakes before she comes. Consoles herself that the journey is often better than the destination and, drawing on the dream, turns to her secret habit.

The night after Harbi's murder, his wife Itemad had a nightmare. She was walking along a road, a road like a tunnel, a tunnel lined with sheikhs reciting the Quran. She looked at one of them. His eyes were fixed on his lap. Suddenly he lifted his face to hers. He was blind. His eye sockets were completely empty, so empty that he pushed his forefinger into his left socket and began to laugh. His mouth, devoid of teeth, gaped. Itemad tried to scamper off but the tunnel was narrow, or rather, it had become narrow, lowered. All of a sudden she realized she would have to crouch, so she crouched. Another sheikh was reciting: Say: I take refuge with the Lord of the Dawn, and hysterically repeating the word "Dawn" over and over, the low and narrow tunnel bouncing back the echo of his voice and the tunnel's walls transforming into a vast mural, a mural filled with human body parts, with arms and hanks of hair and blood and legs, with genitals, both male and female, the genitals spreading till they quite took it over, and the cry Harbi! echoing, echoing from every side, and it was then that Itemad knew she was dreaming and tried to wake and couldn't.

She tries to stir her arm, her leg; her whole body's numb. Harbi! Harbi! A hand reaches out to her body. The hand of one of the sheikhs. She jerks up in terror. Her daughter Mina is waking her, shaking her by the shoulder. In desperation Mina cries, Mama, wake up!

The days that followed Harbi's murder were terrible for Itemad. She gave in to depression. She refused food and drink, just chopped nervously at her hair and snorted cocaine in a tiny apartment in Chatby. It was in these dire circumstances that she met Nadia. Thanks to the coke Itemad wasn't all there, and when this woman turned up and introduced herself and said she was her husband's wife, Itemad didn't get it. Nadia sat with her and laid it all out, from her first meeting with Harbi to their relationship and his promise that they'd be married. Itemad pounced: So you were his bit on the side! How does that make you his wife, you dirty bitch?

That was the first meeting. Later, a friendship would grow. They were bound together by memories of the departed and their dreams of him: rising up out of the ocean's depths; descending from the heavens; standing outside the bus station and opening fire on everyone coming into Alexandria; limping as he runs and yet, despite his limp, the government on his tail unable to catch him; pouring kerosene into the sea and igniting it with a match, the fire devouring the whole Corniche; Alexandria is a city aflame with fire and splendor; Harbi emerging from the flames' midst, gigantic, powerful, his leg healed, and suddenly: Harbi! They each awake, sweating. Each drinks a cup of water, says, *In the name of God, the Compassionate and the Merciful*, and goes back to sleep.

The night before Harbi's murder Nadia awoke at dawn. She was thirsty. She went to get a drink, picked up a glass, and it fell from her hand and shattered. She bent to gather the broken glass and cut her hand. She left the glass for the morning and washed her hand and went back to sleep. Asleep, she dreamed of broken glass: glass and spilled water and blood and an angry face, scowling and grim. The dream was a nightmare. What is it makes a dream a nightmare? Nothing, not its story nor its atmosphere nor its protagonists: it just becomes a nightmare. Some point, some critical moment, when the dream decides to transition, to make the sex change, to switch back on itself. Its inner eunuch surfaces, mocking and scornful, and the Devil's face leans out. Nadia screamed.

The next day she called Sheikh Hassan. She went to see him at the mosque. Told him about the dream. She told him that she was set on Harbi heart and soul, burned for him, yearned to go to him and see him, if only for one minute. A tear fell, single and solitary, then another. She did not wipe them away. She tried to fight it. In a voice that shook she said, If I could just touch his body. Her resistance crumbled. She sobbed, and her face darkened, frowned, grew ugly. Hideous. She fastened her eyes on the mosque's matting and the sheikh was at a loss. He wasn't sure if he should touch her in front of everybody or not. He brought his palm up, made as if he were patting her, then his hand came back to his side and all her defenses fell away. I couldn't take it anymore. I'd had enough, Inji.

"My heart was raw, my girl. I spoke to your Uncle Hassan and told him, but what to do? God had spoken." (A moment's silence. She gazes out of the window and moves her lips. She readies herself to utter something, rehearses it inaudibly three times, then turns to Inji and releases it in one go, no faltering, no stammer:.) "God had spoken and His sentence was being carried out and if you didn't like it there was nothing you could do."

At the time of Harbi's death all Alexandria was asleep. Alexandria had already forgotten its champion and was beginning to return to its daily routine. There was a universally held belief that Harbi's fire had gone out, that he was finished, that, as his friend put it, he wasn't the same. Three young bucks made ready to mount a raid on his symbolic legacy: Sayyid, Sika, and Sultan. The acts of petty gangsterism they engaged in here and there led them to think they were ready to take Harbi's place at the vanguard of Alexandrian history, but their exploits, aside from being petty, did not endure. Harbi's death came to put everything in its proper place. In no time Harbi's legend was abroad, setting Alexandria alight, and anyone who'd once dared, by word, or deed, or gesture, by even the slightest hint, to disrespect him, was cast out, cast into the trashcan of history. Alexandria entered a time of darkness. Black shirts and trousers and gallabiyas came out of closets, the stores and cafés doused their

lights at night, and fathers sent their sons to smash the streetlights with bricks. From that moment, Alexandria became a black city.

“The tale I’m going to tell you, you won’t find written in books or taught at school. It’s a tale only we know. If you ask around, there’s a thousand who’ll tell it to you, but no one will ever write it down.”

Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger