

Mona Prince

Three Suitcases for Departure

~ a novel ~

To my father,

Because he bought me stories more often than chocolates

[...]

prelude

“munira, is traveling going, really, to help you?”

“i can’t stay here any longer, suha. I’m slowly suffocating. I need some air to breathe.”

“and you think you’ll find in India what you couldn’t find here?”

“i don’t know. I haven’t accomplished anything here. I may not there either, but perhaps. . . .”

“ perhaps what?”

“enough, suha. i don’t want to go into it. i don’t want to think about it. i’m leaving. that’s final. tonight.”

suha couldn’t think of anything new--or old--to add, so she left saying, “i’ll call you this evening.” she left munira sitting on the floor of her room, surrounded by books and photo albums. she opened the university album, her eyes fell on a picture that showed her with the gang . . . the university gang. they were standing in the shade of

an ancient tree whose roots sank deep into the earth. In the background was Qasr al-Za‘faran: colors, laughter, sunny poses and latent angst.

No one remained. usama, sayed, and adel left without achieving anything here. they went to europe to hang around the streets, claiming this an experience. And safa, the pure pearl . . . where is she now? working as a schoolteacher in the gulf, not out of financial need but because she too had not achieved anything here. . . .

Is “here” which I insist on using means that there aren’t any more chances for life here? Is there something in the soil of Egypt blocking us, crippling us, killing us....or is the flaw in us..

She held the picture out in front of her and sighed deeply as she gazed at her friends.

Samira got married and got no children. She cherished her first love even though she had discovered, perhaps a bit late, that it was a big illusion, and that she had wasted the sweetest years of her life chasing a mirage. Now she had adjusted herself to the role of spouse and housewife, paying social calls and lounging at sporting clubs . . . after a revolutionary youth, when she led demonstrations at the university. Where have her dreams and hopes for change gone?

And Suha . . . another revolutionary girl who faded away and left behind another girl whose life centered on nothing but hopes of changing a man she loved. A man who is using her without loving her.

Hussain, the querulous student who was advocating socialism and social justice... how different he is now! He had gone into business and made a big fortune, you see him nowadays, you scarcely recognize him. He wears the most expensive clothes, has a magnificent automobile with a car-phone, and parties in the evenings at five-star hotels. How he has changed. . . .

Yusef and Ali are squandering their lives in the university in a desperate attempt to cling to some sort of identity, any identity... *Yusef told me once, "At the university, I'm a student. Once I set foot outside it, I don't know who I am."*

He would laugh with bitterness dissolving his laughter and would say, "I'm not from the haves, so why should I be in a hurry to graduate from the university?"

Where is the flaw?

Whence spring the thorns that bloody our spirits and impede our course?

Why don't the questions die, the way everything else dies? These recurring persistent questions... from where do they obtain the elixir of life...from where do they draw power of surviving when everything else has perished?

Death no longer stirs me or arouses in me the questions that used to keep me anxiously awake for long nights. Death is mowing down my family and assassinating my dreams, whatever they may be...

She rose to take the suitcases down from the top of the wardrobe, just two: the large one for clothes and shoes and some books, the small one for personal things and cassettes. She stood gazing at these two empty suitcases. She would have liked to travel without any bags . . . without any luggage, but can traveling really be traveling without suitcases? Can she really go away without any weights, burdens...

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