

Hamdy El-GAZZAR

Extract from the novel *Black Magic*

(Cairo: AUC Press, 2007)

Black Magic

[...]

4

That night I saw her for the second time, saw her with the eyes in my head, not through a camera. I wasn't working. I'd been invited to watch, drink, have a good time, dance, and join Nu'man and Claudia in the celebration of their new relationship. She had an ordinary face, like any I might see in the street without giving it any further thought, passing it by as though it had never existed, but I stared at her, at her face, at the half of her body that was visible to me, at her arms and at her hands. I was searching for whatever it was that had made my camera dwell on her so long that day when we were filming the Third Millennium conference. Nu'man had jabbed me in the belly with his elbow and at the time I'd felt no pain: I was too absorbed in my own astonishment, in my concentration on the details of her face.

Tonight I could watch her at length, observing her from my position between Nu'man and Claudia, who were deep in a conversation about the ancient Egyptians. The most notable feature of her face was the straight, thin nose, which sloped down, simply and elegantly, from just below the point between her eyes to the top of her upper lip, a pink, slightly full upper lip, with a lower lip that was plump and bright red. Her mouth was conspicuous and somewhat large but always attractive, whether she was speaking or silent or showing annoyance by sticking out her lower lip. She took her glasses off and started fiddling with them, putting one arm in the corner of her mouth, which made her look ill at ease and unhappy with the company of her friends. She raised her face, then looked toward the dance floor, and I discovered something I hadn't taken in properly the first time: all the powers of attraction and repulsion, of connection and rejection, of betrayal, irony, and passion that this woman possessed lay in her eyes, which were wide and black and shone with a quiet brilliance—an equivocal flux of weakness, voracity, and seduction. I averted my gaze well away from them, though this time too they had failed to see me.

Her movements shrieked with boredom as she sat between two men of around forty and two women who were familiar to me (I would sometimes see them at the Swiss Restaurant, around Downtown, or at the Greek Club). She fidgeted, her mind apparently far away, pretended to listen to their talk, tossed down her drink, nodded her head. She shot quick looks of appraisal at the dancers as though sketching a general view of everyone for her own private purposes.

The venerable Greek Club was crowded and noisy, an exploding bombshell of music, movement, and speech. It was the final night of the music festival put on by the remnants of the various foreign communities—Greek, French, Italian—that remained in Egypt and the staff of European embassies. The Brazilian group which was performing that night blasted out its music in total self-absorption, indifferent to the strange mix of people, that international audience united in its love of song, dance, and drink. It consisted of five youths, their bronze faces shining beneath the spot lights, their long hair, curly and agitated, hanging down their backs, their chests and shoulders naked, their strong, well-knit muscles as clearly defined as those of body builders. Four of them hugged guitars to their chests while the fifth was seated among the drums and percussion instruments, moving gracefully and rapidly from one to another. They played for themselves, for their own private delight in the music, and in homage to their singer—a huge, light-footed, vivacious woman who flirted and joked with her players, teasing them with unexpected transitions from one song to another, then stopping suddenly, letting out

a terrible wild laugh as though she had remembered something that would upset them and starting on a new song; then, once they were absorbed in following the new tune, they'd find she'd suddenly gone off on a crazy new tangent and launched her powerful voice into some other song they weren't expecting, making them yell and cry out and stop playing, at which she'd laugh even more bawdily, to the cries of the reanimated audience, and gesture with her hand as though to convince them that she would stick with the new tune, though as soon as she began again she'd go back to playing around. In this fashion, she fed them and us jazz, rock and roll, samba, and pop, playing with her musicians and the audience till everyone who was dancing—male and female, young, middle-aged, and old, white, yellow, black, and brown—went wild.

Bodies light, heavy, and middleweight were going crazy, moving and inventing chaotic dances, swayings, and shakings in an attempt to keep up with the swoops, dives, and transitions of the belligerent singer's amazing Brazilian musical ladder and saluting her and the players alternately with whistles of enthusiasm, applause, and laughter. They danced and caterwauled like wild animals just released from their cages and were at their happiest when the group showed their gratitude for their extraordinary response with an encore of the noisiest numbers. But the only one whose large body moved with grace and harmony, as though she were a solid block of music, was she, the plump brown singer with the large breasts and the sensual lips.

Seated, I moved to the music in an attempt to feel like part of the crush of joyful, clamorous bodies. Little white whisky clouds started appearing in my mind's eye. I drank three glasses from Claudia's bottle and the old symptoms of daring emerged. When I want a woman, I feel as though my body is stretched tight, tense, alert. It had been a while since all these symptoms had seized me together that way.

Nu'man came staggering over, his hand round Claudia's waist. They were sweaty and laughing, drunk on the liquor, the dancing, and the music. Claudia picked her bag up off the table with a slightly shaky hand and kissed me on the cheek. Nu'man said that they were going to go now, and, as I said to Nu'man, they were right to go do it then, or what would have been the point of their having given themselves such a workout? He slapped my head, his body swaying like a pendulum. Swiss Claudia, who was studying Arabic and Egyptology, didn't understand.

Their departure was a relief and I remained alone, turned into a great eye trained on her. Then the opportunity, which I knew would not easily recur, presented itself. She had leant to one side and rested her back against the large open wooden door that divided the spacious dance hall from the dining-room and was watching everyone with a distracted and indifferent air. I formed my lips into the smile of an intelligent, gentlemanly sort of person and in a few large steps was in front of her, confronting her, my head above her black hair with its slightly reddish shine. She looked up, surprised by my presence, and I let her stare into my face for a few seconds before saying, without preliminaries, "How about a dance?"

She was a bit taken aback. I had thought she'd be used to invitations of this type. She shrugged her shoulders, took off her glasses and stared at me with a mysterious, puzzled expression. I looked straight into her eyes and didn't drop my gaze. She did the same and didn't flinch as I wanted her to, while a light pink blush suffused her face. There was only a hand's breadth between us and I could see myself reflected in the pupils of her large eyes. I saw myself inside them as an unfamiliar, agonized face.

A movement passed through my lips and a subtle electricity tickled my limbs. What had happened to me? I had made up my mind years ago that the best way to get to the bottom of someone was look directly into them, to knock directly at the doorway of their eyes and not flinch, not fear them until you had seen them and known them and stripped them bare. This, I'd always thought, was my little secret, but it seemed I wasn't the only idiot in the world to believe the myth, since she appeared to hold precisely the same delusion. What was it that hurt so much and turned my joke to ashes—the discovery of my secret and its exposure, or the unexpected pleasure of sharing it? This woman understood my silly illusion, as though she had known me for years.

I found that I was scared of myself and of her—entranced, terrified of this wonderful pleasure that had seized my whole body as I stood rooted to the spot in front of her, speechless, tamed, familiar. I didn't know what to do, how to get myself out of my stupid game, which I'd wanted to play on her but of which I was now

the standing, silent, waiting victim.

...

14

I dozed for I don't know how long and woke to find myself still on my bed. In front of me I found a tray of food placed on my thighs, with cheese, egg, and pastrami sandwiches, and Fatin sitting on the edge of the bed eating greedily and saying, "I'm dying of hunger."

She put a cheese sandwich in my hand.

"So tell me," she said, "where did you learn all that? And how?"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning . . . that you drive me wild, totally. And now it's too late. I've flipped, totally."

I let out a great laugh.

"What's the big deal?"

"Are you going to make fun of me?"

"Okay, come here. Lie down next to me."

I took her in my arms and started to murmur to her, saying endless things that came from some unknown place deep inside me.

Sex. In this age of ours sex has become an icon—the only remaining icon, and one that has been made holy, holier perhaps than anything else humans have sanctified in all their long history. Sex, with all its images, languages, forms, and conditions, is overwhelming us like a terrible mighty flood—in the murmurings of women sitting on their doorsteps in poor neighborhoods, in the clubs of the elite and the wealthy, in the conversations, small talk, and jokes swapped by workers and government servants and doctors and peasants and journalists and politicians and artists and businessmen and the members of all the other professions, in the houses and on the streets, in the cafés and the offices and the bars. Hardly ever do two people meet without one of them steering the conversation in the direction of some sexual topic—a private scandal, a public scandal. The whole society floats over a forest of naked bodies, women's bodies, queers' bodies, the bodies of chaste women and of lovers, of wives and prostitutes and artistes and new business women. Sex is on our national TV, satellite TV, computer, Internet, and cinema screens, in clandestine porno magazines and the mainstream press, whether yellow or black and white, in good books and in bad books. It's like a river, a huge mountain, Khufu's Pyramid. And yet we know nothing whatsoever about it. We don't touch it, we don't feel it, we don't understand it, and we get no pleasure out of it. We are ashamed and afraid and it terrifies us as much as if we'd been thrown into the fires of some hell of the Hereafter. We're satisfied just to use it like some wild plant to treat our cuts and bruises, our sicknesses, our total ruin. And the only reason that sex can impose its authority is because it is the most complete and perfect expression of the ruin of our lives, the lives we live here and now and which make it impossible for one to say anything, anything whatsoever, about sex.

...

21

You know, Fatin, I'm no narrator or storyteller. Words are among my enemies—and genuine, strong, obstinate enemies at that. How can I say of you, for example, the way they do, "Listen. I love her. I'm crazy about her. Do you understand?"

The most hackneyed words, such as love, romance, infatuation, passion, and so on, are just sounds that emerge via the larynx, vocal cords, tongue, and lips. Cryptic, inadequate, powerless, repetitive sounds. They say nothing, have no meaning, no significance, no point. They are nothing sounds. But what am I to do, I who dislike books and stories for the same reasons and can see no call to express myself by talking?

What am I to do if I want to describe the state I'm in when I'm next to her, looking at her, thinking about her? She drives the car, talking and laughing as though she weren't next to me. And my thoughts wander. What's turning in my head is my fear of stupidity, idiocy, madness. My fear of fear. My fear of powerlessness. The powerlessness of my hand to take possession. My powerlessness to do what they call 'love.'

We, she and I, were stretched out on our backs, dividing up the large bed, our bodies a hand's breadth apart. We were tired, dozing fully clothed and with our shoes on, the way we'd entered the apartment. Our breathing followed the same rhythm, a long leisurely inhalation and a deep slow release—the one yoga exercise I'd succeeded in learning from her. I'd stopped exercising regularly before we'd met and I was feeling the delicious drowsiness of childhood. I was anticipating that special moment, the moment when that inner voice would come and still me, stupefy me, whenever I lay down next to her like this, feeling this way, very close to her breath, her skin, her flesh, her head, her bosom, her belly, her thighs, her feet, and the natural smell of her body—a delicate aroma of buttermilk, warm and pure. I moved and ended up lying on my right side and I hugged her to me in the darkness of the room and of my closed eyes and she gave me her breasts and body. I moved down slowly till my head was between her breasts. I felt the warmth and softness of her flesh, its heat and smoothness and suppleness. The whole of me turned into skin cells sensitized for touch. I opened wide the eyes of my fingers and sent them off to consume the softness of her skin, which tasted like white wine. I stayed a long while with my face buried between her full breasts. I licked her with my lips and my tongue, almost soundlessly, till I dozed off with her hand on my back; dozed serene and secure, borne away from my coarseness, my boorishness, my slowness, far far away from my grossness, my crudeness, my virility.

I don't know how much time passed. I woke, opened my eyes, and contemplated her face, pure and radiant in its delicious sleepiness. I saw that a long golden hair had fallen onto the shoulder of her white blouse, a hair dyed with henna. I picked it up with my fingertips and started to examine it. I took the leather wallet out of my back pants pocket, selected an empty compartment, carefully coiled the hair and was about to put it away when she opened her eyes and saw the hair in my fingers. She smiled, her eyes shining as they do when she smiles from her heart. Gently, choosing it carefully, she pulled another hair from her head and said as she handed it to me, "Take this one instead."

It was a short black hair with no trace of either henna or graying.

She said happily, "This one's still black. It hasn't been hennaed."

I put the two hairs together, next to one another in a compartment of my one and only wallet that is always in the back pocket of my pants, so that I could remind myself, whenever I felt exasperation at my stupid choice of a woman almost fifty years of age, remind myself over and over, that there was still a lot of hair on her head that didn't need henna or dye but that she had dyed a lot of her hair too and that the two together, her undyed hair and her dyed hair, were dear to me.

...

30

Gum'a has killed an old man he didn't know. Gum'a has lost his mind. After he'd mopped the tiles of the kushari restaurant, cleaned the black, marble-topped metal tables and the white plastic chairs, and washed the wall tiles with water, soap, and detergent till the small rectangular premises radiated smartness and cleanliness, Gum'a entered the little toilet at the back. There he removed his brown pants and the brown jacket with the name 'Mas'ud' written in white thread on its breast pocket, put on the clothes that he'd worn to work that morning (a large, ill-fitting blue shirt and black jeans) and combed his hair with a black comb that he took care to push well down into the back pocket of his pants. Then he went out, got his wages for the day from Boss Mas'ud, and prepared to leave for home, as he did every night.

Boss Mas'ud had just put out his third joint and extracted the fourth, ready rolled, from his wallet, placing it between his lips and lighting it with a powerful drag that made him cough till the lighter in his hand started jerking about and he put it into the pocket of his cashmere gallabiya. At that moment Gum'a was bent over, tying the laces of his disintegrating shoes, and the boss's eye fell on his huge backside. He laughed with a

repeated snorting sound.

“Hikh, hikh, hikh, hikh. Heh, heh, heh, heh.”

Gum‘a, embarrassed, shot up straight without tying his left shoelace while Mas‘ud’s huge body rocked where he sat at the dais from which he handed the customers their tokens, his great wide mouth open as far as it could go, his upper jaw protruding, displaying his blackened teeth.

“Hikh, hikh. Heh, heh, heh, heh.”

Master Salman the cook, Ahmad the boss’s apprentice and personal servant, and Mahrus the waiter had gathered at the back of the shop and were sitting on the large metal bench looking at one another and following things. Salman’s great pot belly shook spasmodically as he laughed, his voice weak and debilitated by the sickness in his intestines. Mahrus looked on sullenly and kept his lips pressed together, repeatedly swallowing his saliva to stifle the choking sensation rising in his throat. Sometimes he was successful in deflecting the boss’s taunting of Gum‘a but when the boss was this high he wouldn’t hesitate to slap or kick Mahrus too. Ahmad (whom the boss called “Ahmad-baby”) was looking at him and Gum‘a distractedly, silent and indifferent.

“Hikh, hikh, hikh. Heh, heh. Professor . . . Professor . . . !”

The boss was pointing at him with his large, thick right hand and had put his other to his head to steady it so that the terrible fit of laughter that echoed off the walls of the shop in repeated short metallic bursts wouldn’t shake it off. Finally Gum‘a managed to get out in a low, flat voice:

“Excuse me, boss . . . Excuse me, bo”

The boss’s guffawing reached a new height.

“Boss . . . boss Hikh, hikh. Heh, heh.”

Mahrus said, “The boss is pushing it a bit. He’ll burst if he goes on that way.”

Salman replied, “He looks so great when he’s having a good time.”

Gum‘a looked around and his eyes caught those of Mahrus, finding in them a hateful pity. He moved closer to the boss’s desk.

“That’s not nice, boss. I want you to be happy all the time, but that’s not nice.”

The boss stopped laughing, took a deep drag on his joint, and, pursing his lips so that his mouth looked like the hole at the end of a wide pipe, ejected into Gum‘a’s face a stream of smoke that caused Gum‘a to sneeze and jerk involuntarily backward, his eyes reddening and tearing, and to scream, “You asshole!”

Ample gallabiya gathered in his right hand and joint in the other, the boss leapt out from behind his dais and stood facing Gum‘a. Mahrus rushed over, Ahmad behind him, and they interposed themselves between the two.

“Insult me, would you, you trash, you son of a bitch? Me? Me who took you in off the street?”

Ahmad had ended up close to the boss’s chest, and the boss put his fat right hand on the back of his neck and started caressing its smooth surface just as Mahrus raised his hands in an attempt to shield Gum‘a. The boss shoved Mahrus to the left and Mahrus did little to resist. Then the boss looked Gum‘a over from top to bottom contemptuously, pouting his lips, and, noticing that Gum‘a’s knees were shaking, exploded once more into laughter.

“Hikh, hikh. Professor . . . heh, heh . . . Professor . . . *Professor* Gum‘a.”

Mahrus and Ahmad could no longer contain themselves and burst out laughing too, their eyes fixed on Gum‘a’s knocking knees, which he struggled to stop and hold still.

“Cockroaches! Cockroaches! Does the College of Sciences graduate a lot of cockroaches like you, Professor Gum‘a? Heh, heh, heh.”

Mahrus and Ahmad fell silent. With an immense effort Gum‘a tried to pull himself together. Boss Mas‘ud kept on laughing as though he’d never stop. After a while, patting himself on his belly, he said, “But seriously, aren’t I better than the government? I *am* a government, you dogs! I’ve given you a job and I’ve put you to work, cockroach man. Cockroaches! Cockroaches! Hikh, hikh. Heh, heh.”

Mahrus said gently, “That’s enough, boss. Professor Gum”

“Hikh, hikh. *Professor*”

“Please, boss.”

“Boss! Boss! Hikh, hikh. Heh, heh, heh.”

Ahmad fixed his gaze on the joint in the boss’s hand and said in a wheedling tone, “Give us a drag, boss.”

The boss looked at him and seeing that his mouth was watering gave him a light slap on the back of the neck and said, “Here, boy. Go ahead. Have fun. And then do well in life so you can become a professor . . . like ours here.”

The boss exhaled and started bobbing up and down on the spot, spluttering and weeping and striking his

broad forehead with the palm of his hand.

“Hikh. Heh, heh. *Professor* . . . heh, heh . . . Gum‘a.”

Gum‘a walked slowly out of the shop. He crossed the vegetable market, most of whose stalls were closed. He walked with his eyes on the ground and his feet took him automatically back to the house.

An hour later, Gum‘a descended the stone stairs of the old house with slow, heavy footsteps, having cursed out and beaten his elder sister because she’d been standing in front of the mirror putting on rouge, powder, and eye-liner—putting them on and taking them off and then putting them on again and taking them off again: he’d caught her teaching her two sisters the basics for applying makeup.

Gum‘a didn’t eat anything at home that evening.

His sisters Asmaa’ and Warda said that he’d been good to them and that he hadn’t beaten Magda with as much venom and force as he usually did.

He crossed el-Rashidi Street and turned right to cross Qasr el-Aini Street, leaving el-Munira behind him and feeling on his face the cool breezes from the river, which lay hidden behind the old apartment houses, villas, and embassies of Garden City. Refreshed, he opened the buttons of his shirt and ran trembling fingers over the handle of the large kitchen knife that he’d stuck against his right side, between his pelvis and his stomach. It felt cold and its blade still had bits of onion on it that touched the skin of his belly, feeling like motionless fleas. He scratched himself beneath them a little and walked slowly along the new basalt sidewalk. The Nile before him was narrow, sluggish, and, in the night, dark brown in color, with the dispersed lights from towering hotels, cruise boats anchored along its edges, and small boats reflected here and there on its calm billows. The sky was a pure blue, its surface scattered with stars, and the night serene, with nothing to disturb its tranquility but the footfalls of the rare passersby, who strolled quietly along, neither hurrying nor loitering nor casting him a glance, though he examined them all, his eyes thirsty for the sight of a man on his own. He was out of luck: three youths passed, then a man and a woman, then an old man dragging an even older woman by the hand, then a gang of girls and boys. He jumped up onto the stone parapet of the river and sat. He lit a cigarette and took deep, slow puffs that filled him with pleasure. Suddenly his eyes fell on a man sitting alone in a dim light in front of the gate to a club and he smiled to himself. Jumping down, he walked with rapid steps in the direction of the seated man. He pulled the knife out quickly, put his hand behind his back, and approached the man, whistling happily. When he got to him, the man stood up. He turned out to be old, about sixty, with a slight body and a face that seemed familiar. The old man was bidding him welcome. Gum‘a didn’t think much. His hand was very fast. In a moment he had plunged his knife into the old man’s chest, directly into his heart, without trembling. The old man fell straight to the ground, the knife buried to the hilt in his chest. He fell without letting out a cry and in the meager light Gum‘a couldn’t see his face. Turning his back on the corpse, he walked calmly away, empty, his mind entirely devoid of thought, like a wise old man contemplating the river, shunning the world. Gum‘a was at peace and for a few minutes felt a secret happiness.

A kilometer further on he caught sight of the elegant police station building, an old villa in a large garden. Crossing the garden, he went in and told them, “I just killed a man I don’t know. That’s all.”

Translated from the Arabic by Humphrey Davies