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A chapter from *The Law of Inheritance*  
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Cairo can be an inspirational city, especially in winter. I thought so as I was returning one evening. The microbus stopping where the bridge surrenders to the street, the rain pouring, and under it, street number 10. And the wet taste of a cigarette. Winter is still like religion; both of them suitable venues for a passing emotion, sadness especially. A whistle extends, then becomes intermittent, like a cinematic score for the scene. The structure of the melody evokes nostalgia for a scene that was produced thousands of times and has taken root in a memory that the tune will caress.

Since waking up this morning, I feel as if I am moving in a novel.

My feet tread the floor directly under the bed, fumbling for the slippers in a darkness following four hours' sleep. Then the march, stumbling, to the bathroom and the switching on of the light, though the morning is leaking through the window.

Above the faucet is a small cupboard for toothpaste and the like. Its two wings are mirrors that open inward so they face each other, and grant you the greatest opportunity of your life: to see yourself in one mirror by means of another.

To look at yourself in a mirror directly means to not see it. Instead you see your affection towards it, which in all cases bestows a beauty upon the image drawn in front of you.

But to look at yourself in one mirror by means of another means to see it while detached from it. You look at the right side of your face and see the left, and the opposite is true. You see it as something outside yourself. But beware not to spread out into the image's infinite repetitions in successive reflections, for that might give you delusions of eternity.

Be content with the second reflection, and you will learn not to love the self with that blind love. Grab it when it decorates itself, subjugate it to your whip so as to remove from it all that does not belong.

"You won't be crazy and you won't attempt suicide . . ."

"Why?"

"Because you've already done it before."

This was said to me by Françoise Mackay, a French-Canadian. We met by coincidence, and random encounters were repeated to the point that it became necessary for us to meet in a more intentional manner. It was a single meeting that lasted for five hours. I had just escaped, exhausted, from a romantic relationship and told her that, among the other things I told her about myself. With the intuition of a woman of thirty-four, she understood the role she would be able to play with me. But she didn't want to.

If I were speaking based on the first mirror, I would say she didn't want to. If, however, I remained true to the second mirror, I would say I wasn't tempting enough for her to play that role with me.

After that meeting, and despite its warmth, she began to evade my attempts to meet her until she disappeared completely.

". . . I lived in France with the simple, tranquil spirit characteristic of the people of Quebec, and was always behind the mainstream. Then, just when I began to acclimatise myself to the Parisian tempo, I had to return to Canada. I couldn't change my new temperament, so I appeared there as if I was always in a rush. I can't stand staying in one place for long. And

now I've been in Egypt for nine months, *inshaallah*."

Trying to imagine the first girl you'll meet on your way today, and how the day will shape up pursuant to that; part of the morning's theology. Underwear, pants, undershirt, shirt, pullover, and another pullover, and a sweater. Nothing exits the sleeve except my hand in order to hold the metal rail parallel to the roof of the metro car. At the next station, the crush in the metro is redoubled. I stand on a leg and a half.

My bent knee is mounted by a young woman under cover of the crowd. The woman is wearing jeans and a veil over her head as if her lower half were liberated and her upper half conservative. Her thighs fit snugly around my thigh. I can't help thinking that this is not sexual equality, since she is rubbing her crotch against a male thigh. But that doesn't prevent the diffusion of warmth from my thigh to the rest of my body, while she went on – confirming, in my mind, the separation between the two halves of her body –chatting hysterically with a companion of hers, turning her face away from a true and evident connection. She left her body to graze in other pastures, separate from her faculty of language, which remained in the company of God, the metro passengers and her companion, veiled just like her.

I exit the metro tunnel from an opening that overlooks the most famous of sidewalk in Cairo; the sidewalk on which are the Ali Baba Café, the Z Cafeteria and the famous newspaper seller.

Each time I descend from Maadi to the heart of the city, I choose a different opening of the passage to exit from; a different entrance to the city each time. One time, Al-Bustan Street, other times, Al-Tahrir Street, Qasr el-Nil, Champollion, and most of the time, Talaat Harb Street. As for now, I will come in from Mohammad Mahmoud Street.

When Henry Miller returned to Brooklyn after wasting years in Europe, and as he entered the street on which their house stood, he found that the shop of the merchant who had hit a child in front of him had been transformed into an undertaker's. I too saw impersonal encounters play a certain role in the transformation of places and my relationships with them. And if you detour while passing through Mohammad Mahmoud Street, on your right hand side, right after the AUC, there is a domed building with a door that has a pointed arch. This is the nursery of the neighbouring French school, where I spent a portion of my childhood. That was during my stay at my grandfather's house in Abdeen, before our return to Maadi and my subsequent move to the neighbourhood branch of the school. That domed building of the nursery was, during my early childhood, painted in pink, its small courtyard tiled in mosaic and overlooking the sandy courtyard of the large school across a small garden with a fine wooden gate. The small doors to the classrooms that lined the tiled courtyard also had pointed arches. The details of that pink world wrapped my childhood in what now resembles a dream. The small fountain on whose surface lotus petals floated. Frogs sat on the broad flat leaves of the water plants; we would stroke them cautiously with tree branches we held in both hands. The small puppet theatre on which Madame Georgette would put on Karagoz plays in French – we didn't understand her, of course, at that time, but we enjoyed it greatly. The black piano that Madame Nabila Habashi would play with fingernails always painted in beautiful colours. How often I wished, when I was young, that she would invite me to her home so that I might see her in her house clothes. I don't know why, I always imagined she wore toe rings when she was at home.

The shadows extending up the pink walls; how I would measure their increasing length against the approach of the time to leave, when the bell ringer would stand and strike the bell in the small garden between the two courtyards, and I would find my mother waiting for me by the exit.

Early one autumn morning in 1990 I came to this place. I had taken a large number of

sedative pills, yet still wasn't able to sleep, and so thought to visit the cradle of my dreamlike childhood to find, perhaps, something to cajole my memory. I tricked the doorman by telling him I was going to ask about enrolling my little brother in the nursery, so he let me in. I found no shadow of my memories hanging there, so I left and caught a train back to Maadi.

I told the story about Henry Miller to explain that the building that used to be pink is now grey, not by the act of time but by the act of a skilled painter who selected the appropriate colour so that I could now stand here, after twenty years, contemplating my early childhood.

Will any child crouching inside stand here twenty years later and contemplate it? What colour will it be? Maybe it's more appropriate for the coming days for it to be black, and for its windows and the doors with the pointed arches to be painted red to suit the American fast-food restaurants from across the street.

If you continued walking along Mohammad Mahmoud Street until its intersection with Nobar Street, you would know that after that it takes on a different character. The first manifestation of this difference is the change in name, as it becomes Qolah Street. Secondly, you're no longer in the Bab el-Loq district, but in the heart of the district of Abdeen and at a distance of a few steps from its square with the palace.

The architectural character differs: the street narrows a bit. And Qolah is the name of the birthplace of Mohammad Ali Pasha, grandfather of Khedive Ismail who established the palace and the square.

And before the intersection of Qolah and Mohammad Fared streets, formerly Imad El-Din Street, on your left hand side this time, there is a narrow street that would more suitably be called an alley, but is called a street because off of it is a small lane that carries the same name under the classification of alley. The alley-street and the lane-alley are Al-Balaqsa Street.

On that street is the tomb of an unknown sufi named Sheikh Hamza. When I was young, my mother would drag me by hand to buy something from an animal feed shop across from the tomb. It was the time of the saint's *mulid*\*, and because the *mulid* was of a narrow scope, all its decorations were gathered in that small area of Al-Balaqsa Street: seesaws, firecrackers and marquees.

And in this *mulid* I witnessed something I haven't witnessed since in any of the large *mulids* I attended as an adult and of my own volition. The ones so vast in scope – like the Seyyida Zeynab Mulid, for example – that details are lost, and they may essentially just be a crush of human beings.

And the unique thing I witnessed from that low vantage point at the height of my mother's knee was a red booth with a long-bearded man looking out of its window holding in one hand a sharp instrument resembling a razor blade and wiping it with a cloth he held between the fingers of the other.

I clung more tightly to my mother's hand and asked what the man was doing. She replied perfunctorily that he did circumcisions. Everything I saw afterwards was tinted red; the flares of the firecrackers, the marquees, the flickering lights and the blood. The blood that began to pour in my imagination. And what terrified me even more, and pushed the questions running through my little head to their climax, was that I saw them offering him a girl, not a boy, and separating her thighs.

And on this same street (alley), fifty years ago, lived Hanna Ibn Saad Allah, the gasoline merchant. A legendary figure I never saw, of course, but about whom I was told a great deal.

I heard that Hanna, in his time, slept with most of the women of the alley. It isn't unusual that from time to time, in a place like this or some other, such a Casanova would appear, except that the Casanova of Balaqsa had none of his era's gauges of virility. He was short and lean with a gaunt face in an era that measured beauty by the pound, before the introduction of French units for measurement and sex. He would wear clothes that were always stained with kerosene from his work in his father's shop. To top it all off, he was Christian.

He would squat, like a rat, behind a greasy worktable, receiving his clients from among the women of the alley. His tastes did not distinguish between the wife of a merchant or a sheikh or an effendi. He had a unique method for luring them: since he was a resident of the alley and knew its people, he would start his prey off by asking her about her husband. Bit by bit, he would take on the manners of said husband and exaggerate them until he transformed the husband into an imposter in whom the wife (prey) would recognize the lie on which her life was based. Within moments, he would demolish the institution whose foundation was that husband, and so as to strike while the iron was hot, would visit her directly the next morning after being certain of the husband's absence. After that, he needed nothing more than simple strategies he had perfected to enter the bed that was no longer sacred.

I heard this from Mrs Safeyya, my grandfather's neighbour before his death, our neighbour after our first move to the Abdeen district, apartment 39, Mustafa Kamil Street, and one of the late Hanna's lovers.

The story was not directed at me, but at my father whom she treated like a son. She could stay up late into the night chatting with him in way she couldn't with the children of her womb.

She also said that her husband continued for years to wonder about the secret of the kerosene that she would rub into the pillows before they lay together, to bring back Hanna's memory.

I listened with the feeling of someone who would understand later on.

Mrs Safeyya had become infirm, having reached seventy or beyond. Eyes painted with kohl, she would sit like the lioness, Sekhmet, goddess of war, on a large chair in the living room of her apartment, with the door open to the building's stairwell, watching the motions of ascent and descent with astonishment, as many strangers had begun to frequent the building whose young she knew as well as the old. She would bite her lips and slap the palm of one hand against the back of the other, in a manner that *shaabi* women are famous for, and would mutter "Shapes and colours, like Samaan's bill".

I know now that Samaan was the Jewish millionaire, owner of the Sidnawi shops, and that the bill was the textile catalogue and that three generations of Cairo's lifetime and language were between me and Mrs Safeyya.

Note:

\* mulid is the celebration of a saint's birthday

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### Insinuation

Our eyes didn't meet, two caves where the beasts of desire awake only in confrontation  
Our bodies didn't break the rules of propriety  
in a soft dance that we didn't have  
We didn't have the daring we needed to begin  
She only handed me a big blue comb  
and signaled for me to brush her hair

## Hunger

Why don't I eat something new  
like the map of Sudan, for example,  
or the delta of Egypt  
in a longitudinal slice  
from split branches to the mouth  
with a million generations of built up silt  
or eat a vast library  
full of immense books on the soul  
or a French dictionary  
until letters stream from my eyes  
Why don't I eat an extremely beautiful woman  
raw except in her femininity  
Why don't I eat a whole warehouse  
of steel nuts for high-octane trucks  
Why don't I eat a Communist party  
or a whole town, maybe Damascus  
Why don't I eat something like Sayyed Darwish Hall  
at the Academy of Arts  
Why don't I eat something I forgot in a dream  
and search for in vain in the next  
The hunger devours me  
and still I travel  
apathetic to what you're eating...

## Rock 'n Roll

*Keep your eyes on the road, your hands upon the wheel*

**These** violent blues – meant for highways –  
 serves, in my darkened room with its dusty books,  
 to drown her moans in wild beats  
 Hit play so the music explodes  
 with the roar of a train rushing  
 through a tunnel into an abyss  
 The abyss is invisible  
 but inevitable, coming  
 from Los Angeles – California ... The Doors

I loved her  
 she wanted him  
 my friend refused her  
 she came to me  
 We need tequila  
 straight from the bottle,  
 no salt, no lime  
 we need rats to eat our limbs  
 we need to disappear  
 She's above me  
 like debts inherited  
 I took her too fast  
 one stroke  
 and left her wiping up our stunning failure  
 with a sock abandoned on the bed

The bedroom doors don't lock  
 and I don't love her anymore  
 and the stereo, despite being made-in-China,  
 is good enough  
*Keep your eyes on the road, your hands upon the wheel*  
 Morrison was the accomplice to our crime  
 the plates crusted with tomato sauce  
 the sock flung away  
**While** my father ate lunch quietly outside  
 in the sweltering afternoon,  
 the summer of 1997

## The End of Adolescence

We set out from the house of a madwoman,  
three drunks speeding down the darkness.  
Impersonating policemen  
we created a highway checkpoint  
and stopped trucks, checked the drivers' licenses  
and as they drove off, papers in order  
we let laughter explode behind huge tires...

And on the sidewalk downtown  
we found treasure: burnt out neon bulbs,  
dozens discarded – we stomped them in frenetic frenzy  
on the cobblestones with our shoes, and left  
on the empty asphalt  
of Cairo's dawn  
not even a filament.  
We left glass like sugardust  
on the darkness of asphalt and stone  
and when the echoes of destruction faded  
something had evaporated from us forever.

One week after  
the third sold himself to the devil  
but we remained, me and the other  
him blind, me mute.  
As criminal destiny demands  
we circled another night  
around the shards,  
evidence of our guilt,  
the **third's ear** in glassdust

*Translated from the Arabic by the author, with Erica Mena*