

Nadine Monem

Close to the Slaughterhouse

'What do you mean, so you can die?'

'I want to go back to Egypt so I can die.'

'OK'

'A Friday would be ideal. I would like to die on a Friday.'

'A Friday. OK. But is there something wrong with you? Do you feel alright?'

'I feel wonderful.'

The pink eclipse of my father's thumb is covering his phone camera, obscuring his face. I put him down on the table and start searching for apartments in Cairo. Would he want to die in Shobra where he grew up, or a better neighbourhood? Would he want views? I search for Shobra on a map. If I have been there, I don't remember it. My father tells me a story of visiting my grandmother's apartment when I was two years old, when my father was the same age I am now. He tells me how my grandmother squeezed the pale rolls of my thighs, ran her fingers through each twist of my blonde curls. I didn't see the inside of my grandmother's apartment again, I don't have a memory of her hand wrapping itself around my pale thigh, and she didn't twist her fingers through my hair as it darkened. Even if I had remembered her, even if I could have found her apartment on a map, we couldn't have gone back there. The building was condemned even before my 83-year-old father was born. It is long since torn down.

'When do you want to go?' I ask.

'There is no rush. In the autumn, when it's a bit cooler.'

I tap some dates into Airbnb, making sure to include a few Fridays, to give my father options. I don't know if he will die immediately, or if he will want to visit with people first. It's a question I cannot ask, I have never been able to talk to my father about time, or place, or attachment. The few times I have tried, he pretends not to have heard the question, or he answers a question I didn't ask. I look at him now, his white afro cut close to his skin, his head bent over an envelope that either won't close, or won't open, I can't tell which. Radio Cairo is playing through the tinny speakers on his laptop, and its third-handedness makes me feel a sudden loneliness. I turn back to my screen and scroll through listings, zooming in and out of the interactive map

of the city. My daughter is calling me from the other room, her voice rising in volume and ire, and even through the obscured screen I can tell my father is becoming fatigued by the sound. She appears at my side, a fistful of sage in her right hand picked from the communal gardens in front of our flat.

Hello habibti, my father calls out to my daughter.

She peers at herself in the small screen of my phone and pushes leaves into her mouth.

Call me back when the kids are in bed. My father says.

A week later, I still haven't called him back.

Here is a short list of the things I know about my father: his name is Hemat Ibrahim Monem ibn Abdel el MokkaDEM; he was born in Cairo; his mother is a Sudanese migrant worker; his mother is Faiyumi; he is a champion boxer; he is a psychiatrist; he is an elite card player; his name is Hemat Monem; he is a poet; he is an Imam; his name is Matthew Monem; he runs a cattle ranch in Mount Pleasant, Ontario; his mother is a direct descendent of the prophet Mohammad; he is an economist; he was a child soldier; he was Omar Sherif's bridge partner; he is a defector; he is a revolutionary; he is a philosopher; he is salesman; he is the husband of one; he is the father of three; he is the husband of three; he is sadly infertile and will never have children of his own.

If I feel compelled to *know* something about my father, if even it makes sense to use that word, I can triangulate the facts of his life with third person accounts. I can compare those accounts to the *facts of history*, if it makes sense to use those words. If I feel compelled, I can piece him together in this way. I know that he has never known an Egypt without British soldiers. That he used to see them crowded in doorways or striding across the city's many squares. That as a young child he was fascinated by them, by their orderliness, their long boots and khaki shorts, how they could stand to wear those upholstered helmets in the midday Cairo heat. When he was old enough to go to school and be taught about the disordered Egyptian character, he admired the soldiers' regularity even more. He used to walk behind them as they strode in twos down the alleyways in Cairo. And they, if they noticed him at all, would peer down at him, exasperated by his continued existence, by the continued existence of a city full of exasperating people. If my father got too close, they would try to move him along, which always baffled him. He was walking the

same streets he was born in, that he had been walking his whole short life. He had never been outside out of Cairo, so he couldn't imagine where, exactly, the soldiers were trying to move him along to.

When my father left Egypt, he went first to Germany, where he met my mother, and then to Canada, where I grew up. He first learned the English phrase, *fuck off*, while he was selling knives door to door in Toronto. This was his first job in Canada. The word *fuck* was sharp and hard like a blade, dangerous in the mouth. First, he sold knives, and then he sold subscriptions to volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Which, in the end, might be the same thing. Each door was a wall, and in this way, he came to know his new city. None of this mattered to my father, because he had arrived in the future. The myth of Canada was brand new, a country without a past, a place of limitless opportunity if only the right effort is applied. And when I, his youngest child, grew into adulthood, I went searching for history wherever I could find it, trying to conjure the past from the dust that gathered in the corners of my father's conversation. That didn't work, because Egypt was not a myth my father cared to rehearse, and so instead I went searching for pastness. Sometimes it was a quality or a feeling. Sometimes it was an absence. Maybe this is how I ended up moving to England, though I had never been here. Because I was raised in a colonial place it was easy to mistake Englishness for pastness, for reality and legitimacy. Which made it all the more painful when I arrived here and found that I was a stranger.

The British Library is a short bus ride from where I live. It holds a copy of every single book ever published in the United Kingdom, and vast collections of other knowledge—manuscripts, recordings, maps, reports, studies of all kinds. To get to the library entrance, you have to traverse a large forecourt, to one side an enormous sculpture by Eduardo Paolozzi crouches on a chair, a sort-of-human form bent over on to itself in a doubling, or maybe a halving. I am midway across the forecourt when I realise that there is an empty stretch of pavement all around me, that I can be observed from all sides with nowhere to conceal myself.

Inside, I find the record of a book written on the cusp of Britain's entanglement with Egypt. *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the*

Modern Egyptians written by Edward William Lane and published in 1836. I go to the low desk to ask for it to be delivered to the library's fourth floor reading room. When it arrives, it looks badly made, as though the binding will fall apart as soon as I break its spine. I read a few passages, it's badly written, under-researched. Its lack of rigour is its own injury. As I flip through its pages, I wonder what it is that I am looking for, the edge of history? The beginning of silence? The volume includes crude drawings by the author, I pause over some pictures of Cairene women's arms and hands, and briefly consider getting a face tattoo. Underneath the illustrations there is a passage on 'women':

"The general form and features of the women must now be described." [Must be described.] "From the age of about fourteen to that of eighteen or twenty, they are generally models of beauty in body and limbs; and in countenance most of them are pleasing, and many exceedingly lovely: but soon after they have attained their perfect growth, they rapidly decline; the bosom early loses its beauty, acquiring, from the relaxing nature of the climate, an excessive length and flatness in its forms, even while the face retains its full charms, and though, in most other respects, time does not commonly so soon nor so much deform them, at the age of forty it renders many, who in earlier years possessed considerable attractions, absolutely ugly."

I feel hot, bloated, too big. Suddenly bulging out of my jeans, my skin stretching, unable to hold. I get up to go to the bathroom, leaving my things on the desk, then I return worried that they will be taken. I decide that it doesn't matter if they are taken. The bathroom has small proportions and porthole windows. In the narrow stall, I take off my shirt, wriggling out of it with my arms above my head. I inspect the length and volume of breasts. My skin is warm, slightly damp, perfumed with a scent called *Marrakesh* by an upmarket skincare brand. I press my nose against my arm and try to work out what it smells like, and why I bought it. I can't make out any single note, just a feeling. I recall how sometime in the weeks after I moved to England, fifteen years ago, I was lying in my single bed, in a bare room above a chicken shop on Brick Lane with a man called Pete. He was from Oxford. He said he could tell I wasn't white by the colour of my nipples, my vagina. I remember how grateful I was to be legible. I lift my breasts and let them drop again. I inspect the colour of my nipples. A deep coffee brown. I put my shirt back on.

When I was nine years old my father appeared at the top of the stairs in our house.

He said, *Good News, Grandma is dead.*

His face was long and smooth, his body upright and rigid in his gullabaya with the faint suggestion of knees bending, first one and then the other, under fabric so white it could have been marble. I froze in the middle of putting my shoes on, not sure how to hold myself in relation to this news, in relation to my father, or the wood of the banister, or the sky outside the window, or time and its associations. The word *grandma* hung there ugly and abrupt, unformed, and half made in my father's mouth, in a mouth that never uttered that word to describe any of his relations. I didn't know the Arabic word for her. I didn't know her, not really, but even then I was worried my father hadn't used a word that she would recognise, that would conjure our relation in a language that she could understand. It felt like a severing that could not be undone, that she would not know how to find me again because the word *grandma* connected me to no one. My father brushed past me, the heavy cotton of his gullabaya cool on my skin.

I didn't ask my father then what I would have called her, if I had the chance. I didn't ask him the next day or for years after that. I know now that she would have wanted me to call her *sitto*. Sometimes I ask my father what she was like, my *sitto*. He has only a few stories, which he repeats whenever I ask. I concentrate each time because the stories change, and there might be new information in them, or better information, more true. I ask her where she came from, who her people were. Sometimes he gives me names of places and people that take no shape in my imagination. Sometimes he admits *When I was a child, I didn't care where my mother came from. And when I grew up, I cared even less.*

When I get home, I find a listing for a flat in Cairo, close to the Nile, not far from Shobra. The flat looks easy for my father to get in and out of, and big enough so that we can hide from each other when we need to. I request a stay, sending a message in English. The host responds, asking what brings me to Cairo. I write that I am coming back to Egypt with my father for a visit of indeterminate length. He responds to my message in Arabic. I don't translate my English response into Arabic because I know I will get something wrong, some inflection will give me

away. Some specificity about Cairene Arabic will be missing, one that the Internet can never know, one that only comes from the body, from flesh and attachment and experience. I respond to his Arabic in English. He asks me why, if I am Egyptian, can't I speak Arabic? I tell him it is because my father never taught me, that I was raised in Canada and now I live in England, and it is too late.

My father is mid-sentence when I pick up his call. I get the feeling that I am being called to witness a conversation he is having with himself.

I don't know the meaning of life. He says.

I shift in my seat, settling in to listen to the long answer to a question I didn't ask.

He tells me that he is just a humble salesman. He says, *And the reason I was a good salesman is because I never sold anyone anything they didn't need.*

I was eight years old when Ben Johnson won the men's 100m at the Seoul Olympics. We were a family that watched the Olympics. Being all so newly arrived from different places, we could each find someone to root for no matter who was competing, and if that person didn't win we could find someone else to reasonably claim as ours. But on that day in 1988 we found ourselves in the unusual position of rooting for the front runner. Ben Johnson was a shy Jamaican immigrant with a speech impediment whose talent was discovered on the frozen tracks of his school in Scarborough, Ontario. A suburb of Toronto as sprawling as the one we were watching him from.

In the starting blocks, Ben didn't jump around or lunge, he didn't fan his legs out first one and then the other. Ben wore a single gold chain around his neck and he was nearly motionless in his red Canada kit, his impossible physical mass crouching politely on the track. Though it has come to be known as the dirtiest race in the history of athletics, we thought the 1988 men's 100m was beautiful. We thought Ben was beautiful. As soon as the gun was fired, his whole body rose in the service of speed—straight, strong, and unbelievably fast. By 25m we were all on our feet. By 75m we knew it was over.

He'd done it. He'd won.

9.79 seconds.

A new world record.

When Ben lifted the Canadian flag for his victory lap, it looked bigger than any flag we had ever seen. In the post-race interview, Ben was asked what meant more to him, the world record, or the gold medal. In his thick Jamaican accent, he stammered that the medal was the thing he wanted most—a record could be broken, but no one could take the gold away from him. Until they did, less than 24 hours later, when his urine sample was found to have traces of a steroid called Stanozolol. They gave the gold to the American sprinter Carl Lewis, who had tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs in the trials but who had his ban overturned. In fact, six of the eight men running that day had been linked to doping. So, in a dirty race, what does a person do? What must a person be willing to conceal, or to become, if the choice is between cheating to get a fair chance, or being content with losing forever?

My father was twelve years old during the 1952 revolution, the military uprising that toppled King Farouk and forced the British out. At least officially. Their taxonomies remained, looming over the disorder of freedom that filled the spaces they left behind. My father had seen the images of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the public face of the revolution. His confident smile, his pressed uniform, his impressive height and broad stature—which meant he was hard to look down on, difficult to move along.

On the July morning that the revolution was called, the streets filled with people euphoric in their sudden apprehension of themselves. My father burst through the door to his mother's apartment to find his sandals, digging his feet into them so he could join the crowds below. My sitto asked him where he was going, what all the noise was about. She was sitting on a chair by the open window, straining to see down the alleyway to the celebrations in the streets beyond. My father explained that the revolution had come, that the British were being forced out, that Egypt was free! To which she responded, *What, so after all of that, they are just leaving us?*

Four years after the revolution, Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. It was 1956 and the Allied forces of Israel, Britain and France went wild with an intimate aggression. British paratroopers landed at Port Said, at the mouth of the Nile, and the French paratroopers landed at Port Fuad. The Israeli forces invaded at Sinai, aiming at Gaza. My father, aged 16, had just been drafted into the National Guard. He was given a pair of used coveralls and sent into service. I have seen a picture of him from that year, or it's possible

that I have invented it. In the image I am imagining, he looks thin, long. He finally shot up to a decent height. His skin is sun-darkened and his tight curls are cut close to his head, side parted and partially smoothed down. The Egyptian army had just been overwhelmed in a brutal battle for the canal, or for the economic interests that twisted through it like a bad current. My father was sent, along with other new recruits, to clean up the ports after the fighting had stopped. Port Fuad, where the French paratroopers had landed, was considered to be the worse of the two postings, the messiest. The French army had fired indiscriminately at soldiers and civilians, unable or unwilling to tell them apart.

Over the years, my father has described what he found when he arrived there. He has told the story many times, but it is one of the only stories that remains the same in each telling. He says the stone curbs edging the square near to Port Fuad were unusually high, a foot off the ground. He says the blood from the bodies of the dead in the square rose to meet the top of those high curbs. That after the first day of hauling bodies out of the lake of blood and on to the waiting lorries, his coveralls were stiff from the blood drying on his body in the midday sun. He tells me how bad the smell was, clinging to his body for days and weeks afterwards.

My last name is El MokkaDEM, a fact I only discovered, or maybe realised, when I was in high school. It's an old name, one I am not sure if I pronounce properly. I have been told that it stretches far back into Egyptian history, that it literally translates to mean: *the person who puts things in the right place*. It is a name that my grandfather was proud of, had nurtured myths around—stories of consorts to the early kings, of peasants who had wisdom beyond their station. But by the time my father came of age in the mid 1950s his family myths had all soured, been made small and late. When he decided to leave Egypt he went to the German embassy to apply for his visa, and the clerk processing his paperwork asked for his name. *Hemat Ibrahim Moneim ibn Abdel el MokkaDEM*, my father said. The clerk was small and pink with a sweep of dark hair that looked like it never fully dried. He peered up at my father through eyes pinched in amusement. He said that my father's name would not fit on the form, that my father had to give him a name that would fit on the form. And though his last name, my last name, was centuries old, was the record of at least a family history, it had become

so threadbare that it only took my father a moment to shrug it off. He offered up a new name, one that seemed smoother, less situated. That didn't confine him to history. Hemat Monem. And our name was erased.

'Marhaba Mohamad!'

I am never so cheery or effusive as when I am speaking to my Arabic teacher, because I need him to live.

'Marhaba Nadine! Kefahalak?'

'Alhumdullilah', I say, looking at my notes. I have not done my homework, which was to sing the Arabic alphabet over a karaoke track of Clearwater Revival's 'Fortunate Son'.

'Mohamad, would it be possible to have lessons twice a week for the next little while? I am returning to Egypt in the autumn with my father and I need to be able to get around myself.' I don't say that I will need to learn funereal vocab words, I don't say I might need to know how to wash a body.

'What do you mean returning?' He looks confused. *'Will you come to Hurghada?'* I don't know how long it will take to get from Cairo to Hurghada, or if I will be able to leave my father for long enough to make the journey.

'I am not sure, but maybe we could meet in Cairo?' He agrees, but he asks me if I could say that phrase in Arabic. And I discover that I can't.

Instead, I tell him the name of pomegranates.

It's late after my lesson. I don't close my laptop, and instead decide to search for images of Egyptian women to work out what clothes to bring on our trip. I often do this, looking at pictures or watching videos on socials, freezing the frames to make a small study of features, of hijab styles, make-up, hand gestures. This is how I learned how to do the zaghareet. I searched for videos of Egyptian women and their ululations, watching and re-watching their movements. To do the zaghareet, you have to make your mouth round and your tongue fat, then you have to stick your tongue out of your mouth and quickly move it side-to-side, while gently screaming. Sometimes I practice this at home, quietly so the upstairs neighbour won't hear me. I do this so, if called upon, I am prepared to express joy. The problem is, the zaghareet can't really be done quietly. It requires volume, space, it only sounds right when done in chorus, in the call and response of other women. I have been doing this so long that I have seen most of the

videos my English words can access, but one day there is a new one. It's a shaky phone video of a woman sitting cross-legged in front of a bread oven in an open market. She trills enthusiastically while flipping freshly-baked bread into a basket on her head. The footage is only of her, but there are voices off camera. One sounds like the male narrator of a nature documentary. *She is doing that because she is happy to see tourists again after so long.* Another voice belongs to the man holding the phone, who makes noises of appreciation as he zooms in on the woman flipping dough on her metal peel. The woman keeps one eye on the man filming her and says something in Arabic that I cannot understand. She ululates again, putting on a show. The man holding the phone has an American accent.

His wife asks, *'Did you get her?'*

He says, *'Yeah, I got her.'* And the video goes dark.

I watch it again, freezing the frame on the woman's face, I study her features for a resemblance, inventory how the shape of her is similar to the shape of me, and all the ways it is not. I let the video run, quietly mimicking her zaghareet. So quietly that it sounds like a whimper.

Her name was Hayat, my sitto. Harrods sells a perfume called Hayat for £300 a bottle. Its product notes say that it represents the 'four Aristotelian elements of the universe: earth, fire, air and water'. I buy a half empty bottle on eBay. It doesn't smell of fire, or of earth, it smells rancid like something fluid kept still for too long. Hayat is the name of a brand of bottled water. It's also the name of three award-winning pharmacies in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Of a literary magazine published weekly from 1926 to 1929 in Ankara and Istanbul. It's the name of a holding company that distributes personal hygiene and home cleaning products. Of a brand of mayonnaise. Hayat is the name of so many things, because it means life.

Hayat would not have had any use for a literary magazine, because she was never taught to read. She was an only child, and her mother died when she was a baby. When she was ten, or maybe a bit older than that, she was sent to Cairo to work as a maid in any household less poor than her own. That is how she came to be one of my great aunt Zakaya's two housemaids, and where she would have first encountered my young grandfather, to whom a housemaid was a girl he could access at close quarters. That encounter made Hayat a mother at 14, to a girl called

Amina, and then to Mohammed, my father Hemat, Bousaina, Sayed, Abdel Hamid, Zubaida, Fatima and little Hosam. Hayat raised all these children in two rooms at the top of a condemned building in Cairo, on a small street next to the slaughterhouse.

I am going to die right here. My father stares me down through the small screen of my phone.

What?

I am going to die right here, in this chair. I look beyond him to the window of my parents' bungalow. The branches of the birch tree outside sag with a freight of snow.

OK. So, you don't want to go to Egypt?

No. I am going to die right here. There is a mosque in Markham that can handle everything. I have written down the details, I'll leave it on the desk.

OK. OK I will find the instructions. I say.

Thank you. I say.

And then I don't say anything for a while. The urgency of Radio Cairo is just audible in the background. My father is moving his mouse around, peering at his laptop.

What are you doing? I ask

I am playing bridge on the computer, against myself.

My eyes begin to sting, and I ask. *Who is winning?*

He is quiet for a moment. And then he laughs. *Not me.*