

## Eleven

“If I told you what happened now you wouldn’t believe me,” said the driver. “I’ve been driving a cab for 20 years but what happened now was one of the funniest things that ever happened to me.”

“Go on then, tell me,” I asked.

“A woman in a face veil stopped me in Shubra and asked me to drive her to Muhandiseen. She got in the backseat and she had a bag with her. As soon as we were out on the Sixth of October Bridge, I saw her looking right and left, and then she went and took the veil off her face. I was watching in the mirror, because, look, I have a small mirror under the big mirror so that I can see what’s happening in the back. You have to be on your guard. As the saying goes, better safe than sorry. Anyway, then I found her wearing a headscarf instead. I was surprised but I didn’t say anything. A little later she took off her headscarf and she had done her hair in curlers. Then she started undoing the curlers and putting them in her bag. Then she took out a round brush and started combing her hair.

“I looked in the mirror in front of me, and she yelled at me: “Look in front of you,” she said. “What are you doing?” I asked

her. "None of your business. You drive and keep your mouth shut," she shouted back at me.

"Between you and me, I thought of stopping the car and making her get out, but then I thought: "What's it to me?" So I held out to see what else she would take off. Next thing, I found her taking off her skirt. Nice, I said, we'll have a free view. I looked again and found her putting on a short skirt and thick black tights which didn't show anything. She folded up the long skirt and put it in the bag. Then she started taking off her blouse. My eyes were transfixed on the mirror and when the car in front of me suddenly braked I almost ran into it. She shouted at me like a mad woman: "Hey, old man, shame on you, keep your eyes on the road."

"I saw she was putting on a tight blouse and pretty too. Honestly, I didn't answer her. She put the other blouse in the bag and went and started getting out some make-up stuff and started putting on lipstick and rouge on her cheeks. Then she took out an eyebrow brush and started working on her eyebrows. In short, by the time I was coming off the bridge into Dokki she was a completely different woman. Another human being, I tell you, you couldn't say that this was the woman in the veil who stopped me in Shubra.

She finished off by taking off the slippers she was wearing, taking out a pair of high-heel shoes and putting them on. I told her: "Look, miss, every one of us has his peculiarities but for God's sake tell me, what's your story?"

"I'm getting out at Mohieddin Aboul Ezz," she said. I kept my silence and didn't repeat the question."

After a while she started telling me her story: "I work as a waitress in a restaurant there, respectable work, I'm a respectable woman and I do honest work. In this work I have to look good."

"At home and in the whole quarter I can't come or go without wearing that veil. One of my friends got me a fake contract to work in a hospital in Ataba and my family think I work there. Frankly, I earn a thousand times as much working here. In a single day I can get in tips what I would earn

in one month's salary in the mouldy old hospital.

"My friend at the hospital gets 100 pounds a month from me to cover up. She's a girl who looks out for herself. Every day I drop in on her place and get changed. But today it wouldn't have worked to go to her place so I had to take a taxi to change in. Any other questions, Mr Prosecutor?"

"Lady, I'm no prosecutor, and if I saw one, I'd fall flat on my face. But they say that he who cooks up poison tastes it. You changed in my taxi and I wanted to know why. Once one knows the reason, the wonder ceases," I said, and thanked her for telling me the story. Now honestly, isn't that a strange story, sir?"

## Twelve

I was chatting with the driver and he turned out to be a long-standing fan of Zamalek football club. When he was young he used to go to the stadium to watch Taha Basri, Mahmoud el-Khawaga, Ali Khalil and fresh young players like Hassan Shehata and Farouk Gaafar. This year (this was the winter of 2005) Zamalek was getting beaten by all the teams.

I tried to convert him into an Ahli fan like myself but he told me that Zamalek was in a bad way and kept falling behind so it needed someone to stand by it, not like Ahli, which was up at the top of the league and didn't need anyone to support it. Zamalek was like Egypt, he said, we all have to stand by it so that it stops falling behind.

I asked him how we could stand by Egypt.

"We stand by Egypt if we prepare our children for war," he replied. "It's true that ever since he came to power Mubarak has managed to steer the ship so Egypt hasn't got into any confrontations with anyone. To be frank, good for him, that's the best thing he's done. The Americans tell us to turn right, we turn right; left, we run to the left. That was important in the past so that we could take a breather and the country's economy could pick up a little and we could stand on our own

feet. To be honest, the man has been able to save the country from any recession.

“But war is inevitable. The Israelis won’t be able not to make war. Peace will kill them and they know that well. They’re itching for a fight. They have their eyes on Syria and Iraq and they keep prodding Iran and they have set Palestine on fire. They want it ablaze so they can get more money from the Americans and they can make their young people more Zionist. If the Jews felt at ease, they would go back to Europe.

“So in the end they will turn on us again, not tomorrow but it will be the day after tomorrow, so everyone’s role in the country is to prepare his son for war, because for sure it’s coming. We now have to give our army the same spirit with which I fought when I was in the army between 1968 and 1973.

“Because I have a relative who’s an officer in the army, a very clever officer who went to the Soviet Union on training courses. The army’s spent a packet on him and sent him abroad several times to make him highly skilled. Know what that officer is doing now?

“He’s working at an armed forces mess in Nasr City. What does he do? He organizes parties and buys food and serves it. They’ve turned him into a chef in a restaurant. See the disaster when you take an officer on whom the country has spent thousands of thousands and make him into a waiter. The disaster is that he’s happy and delighted with his status now. How long do you think we’ll be able to last without war?”

“I’ve no idea,” I told him.

“In my opinion no more than another 10 or 15 years,” the driver continued. “That means I have a son who’s 10 years old and when he leaves university war will have broken out between us and Israel.”

He paused a moment, then resumed: “The problem’s with them, not with us. They’re the ones who won’t be able to keep the peace and it’s no use us making peace with ourselves. Peace is something we have to make with someone else, isn’t it?”

He laughed at his own joke. “Personally, I’m always explaining the situation to my kids so that when the drums beat, their ears will be ready to hear the call,” he added.

## Thirteen

As we were driving along the Cairo University wall I let slip to the taxi driver how nostalgic I felt for my college days and confessed to him that the dreams for Egypt I dreamt within these walls even now shook me to the core, despite the passage of two decades since my graduation. I said that most of those who sold out had received the keys to the gates, while those who continued to dream had seen their towering hopes dashed to the ground by battering rams.

“And which faculty were you in?” the driver asked.

“Economics and political science,” I said.

“So you studied politics, sir?”

“Yes.”

“That’s great, an excellent opportunity, because for ages I’ve had a question I wanted to ask,” said the driver.

“And what’s the question that maybe I can answer?”

“What would happen if we came and said to America: ‘You have nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction and if you don’t get rid of all these weapons, we will break relations with you and declare war on you, and we will have to use military force to protect Cuba, which is a small country and we have to look after it.’?”

“Of course, we wouldn’t be serious, but we would force the world to take positions. And the world would have to stand with us as they stood with them when they said the same thing against Iraq, and as they are saying now against Iran. I’m not saying we would fight them. Of course you definitely understand me. But we would say exactly the same thing as they are saying to the countries of the world. I mean, for example, we’d ask to monitor the American elections because we’re not confident their election procedures are sound, we’d ask for there to be international monitoring of the ballot boxes, and anyway we would have the right to say that, ‘cause everyone in America and the whole world said there was fraud in the Bush elections and that his brother in his state fixed the elections and made him win. And we’d say we have to defend democracy and we have to send Egyptian judges from here to make sure the democratic process is proper.

“You know if we did that, we’d make them understand what they are doing to people, and we’d vent some of the anger that’s inside us, just like when some disaster happens and there’s nothing to be done and you let off steam to whoever and you find yourself calmed down, but the disaster’s still the same as it was.

“Or else we could sue America for supporting international terrorism and taking sides with countries which aren’t democratic, and get evidence of that and, as you know, it’s very easy to get evidence, especially in such a matter. Then when you make this move, you’re on the side of democracy and against terrorism and you’ll find a few countries taking your side against America.

“We could also call for economic sanctions against America if they don’t comply, I mean take what Rice says every day to all the poor countries in the world and say the same thing to their faces.

“The most important thing is that all of us should cancel out what the Americans say. We should say ‘White Irish Protestant American, or Black Muslim American, or Hispanic American, or White Catholic American, or Black Protestant

American, just like they say these days: ‘six Iraqi Shi’ites died and two Iraqi Sunnis’, and the sons of bitches at our newspapers repeat the same thing, and of course you find them saying: ‘an Egyptian Christian’ and ‘an Egyptian Muslim’, and of course we have to demand as loud as we can the right to defend the rights of the blacks in America, and sue if some White Scottish American kills some Black African American, of course we have to make a big scene at least because he’s African like us, I mean, he’s much more closely related to us than a White Italian American with freckles is to some Egyptian Christian, I mean, protecting the rights of the black minority there, that’s our role, and we have to intervene in everything big and small.

“I know I always talk too much and repeat myself. I’m waiting for you to respond but you just hold your tongue and don’t respond.”

“I’m thinking about what you’re saying,” I answered.

“You see, I leave the radio on all day and every day what the Americans say gets up my nose. It’s enough to drive a man out of his senses. It’s very serious because soon people will explode. ‘We feed you, we put you on your potty, do this, don’t do that.’ Soon we’ll burst and that’ll be the end of it. So I had this idea, that we should do to them just as they do to us. People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. And those people live in houses of cracked glass mixed with cancer.”

“Okay so why don’t you send that suggestion to...” I started.

“I’m just letting off steam, man, I mean shooting the breeze. They’re ready to let the Americans do anything to us. The suggestion they might like is the Americans put a camera in every Egyptian house so they can monitor the population explosion.”