

Chapter One

My father stops for a second at the door to the house before we step into the alley. He raises his hand to his mouth, twisting the curved ends of his grey moustache upwards, making certain that his fez tilts slightly to the left, and removing the black, burnt out cigarette from the corner of his mouth. Ash drops on to the front of his thick black overcoat. He wipes his face to smooth the wrinkles on his forehead, and he forces a smile across his lips. He grabs hold of my left hand and we feel our way forward in the light of dusk.

We head towards the right where the alley opens out into the neighbourhood, picking our way to the winding main street with its pedestrians and horse buggies. At the market of Hajj Abdel 'Alim, the sheikh of the quarter, calls to us: "Please, stop in for a while, Khalil Bey."

My father answers him gravely: "We'll stop in on our way back."

The greengrocer. His shop is clean and gives off a smell of phenol. A glass bowl is piled high with chocolates and hard sweets. I pull my father's hand towards it and he scolds me. The shoe shop. A shoeshine man sits at the bottom of a raised chair. A newspaper rack stands in front and a huge radio at the back. The fez press. It has a long brass foundation and a large brass mould on top. Then finally, the square.

Its light is pale in the first moments of evening. The King's picture is lit up by lamps. Posters congratulate him on his birthday. Billboards for cinemas. The movie Hassan the Fox is playing in living colour. The Black Knight is playing at Cinema Miami, dubbed into Arabic. I feel a cool breeze lapping at my exposed knees between the bottom of my shorts and the

top of my wool socks. My left hand feels warm in my father's strong grip. Tram number 22 with its open cars and its wooden benches. I race beside it with the children running along its left side to jump off at the instant when we need to escape the ticket collector, almost falling underneath its rows of metal wheels.

We board the second car, and he pushes me down in the corner so I'll look younger than my age. He pulls out of his breastpocket eight milleme for the ticket. We get off at Sayyida Square, flooded with lights. The Swaris bus. It's pulled by two skinny mules, and its passengers fill out its benches that face each other and spill on to its back steps. Its driver's whip laps across the backs of the two animals. An old fat woman sweeps the floor around a tray of cigarette butts. In a cramped space at the end there's a small desk behind a glass partition. An old hunchbacked man with a thick beard. My father takes his round pocket watch out of his breast pocket. The old man eyes it carefully until he puts it aside and puts down his money.

Again, the busy street. The lottery seller hangs his tickets on the wall. My father takes out two tickets and his reading glasses. He compares his numbers to the register of the seller. He tears up the two tickets and throws them aside. He buys two new tickets, a red one and a blue one.

A row of hawkers selling used goods and shoe shiners. A stack of old eyeglasses on a newspaper on the ground. The salesman wears prescription glasses with a broken bridge in the middle, soldered together with a big piece of tin. My father bends over and shuffles through the glasses. He chooses one and asks me to try them on. I put the glasses over my eyes and look around. I try another pair. A third pair has thin, egg-shaped frames from gilded metal. I can tell that my vision is better now. My father haggles for a while over the price then buys them.

I put on the glasses and follow my father to the spice shop. He buys cinnamon, crushed black pepper, and cloves. I can see clearly now.

Again, we take the tram with the open car. We go to the back and ride the covered car at the end with the single bench

facing backward. We shoot like an arrow past the empty stations that no riders have requested. Sparks flick off the contact pole. I put my hand over my glasses, scared that they might fly off. We rumble slowly into Al-Zahir Square. The summer season Cinema Valery has closed. My mother's in a coloured dress. Her head is covered by a silk sash that wraps around her face. Her shoes are blue and white. They have a medium high heel and closed toes. She sits in a chair with wicker arms. I try to sit on her lap but she pushes me away. My father takes me between his knees. A hawker passes wearing a clean gallabaya and carrying a basket covered with a cloth. My father buys each of us sameet, a pretzel with sesame seeds. The hawker gives us each a slice of Egyptian romano cheese in a palm-sized wrapper.

The covered car rocks back and forth. My father pulls me to him to protect me from the cold wind. I shrink into his embrace. I drown in his odour of stale tobacco. I fight off drowsiness. I feel an urge to get up and turn the brake arm, and I see its base in the lower rail around it. I wish I could already be in bed. I am on a mat stretched over a rug in the guestroom next to the servant woman. The room is dark and the door is opened a crack, just enough to see through to the courtyard. There's a ray of light from the electric lamp in the dining room. The servant sings along with the radio: "o your coal black eyes..." Her soft voice whispers next to my ear. Her hand plays with my hair and touches my scalp. She finishes the song and tells me the story of Hassan the Fox. In the darkness, the seat turns into mountains, stallions, and castles. Hassan the Fox suckles at the breast of a ghouel and says to her: "I took a little from the right breast and became like my child Sama'ain, and I took a little from the left breast and became like my child Suleiman."

The tram slows as it approaches the square. We get off and we cross back over the track. My father stops at the butcher's. He has a huge frame and fine jet-black moustache. He wears a white gallabaya dappled with spots of blood. My father asks for a pound of boned meat that will make a good kamuniyya stew.

The butcher rolls up the sleeves of his gallabaya to reveal a wool undershirt that's sort of beige-coloured. He looks over the different chunks of meat hanging on the hooks. He grabs one of them. He throws it on to a round wooden chopping block, and he rains down on it with a wide cleaver. Then he switches to a short knife to cut the meat off the bone. He lifts a piece of the meat up in the air in front of our eyes. My father asks him to trim off the fat and gristle. He puts the piece on to the tray of the brass scales. He moves it to the chopping block and grabs a long knife with a shiny blade. He cuts it into evenly sized pieces.

My father asks him about the health of his father, Mu'alim Naseha, and says he hasn't seen him in a while. The butcher avoids my father's stare as he says: "Fine, praise God."

I sneak away from my father and move around the chopping block. The butcher shifted the meat away from its edge. He takes it and starts to roll it into thick, grey wrapping paper. As he picks up one piece, he drops it on the ground, then leaves it there. I want to tell my father, but when he takes up the roll I follow him out of the shop.

I let him know what I saw. He laughs and says it's just the way butchers are. There's no hope for them. He had to be happy just to be able to find the cut he wanted. He says that he worked with the butcher's father twenty years ago. He would make special trips to see him from the house in al-Barad Street where Nabila was born.

We head toward the dairy shop. We buy two dishes of mehlabbiya for dessert. We cross the square again. We pause in front of a cart bearing a tall pile of green ful beans. I ask my father how much it costs. We buy a pound and head towards our street. The greengrocer's shop is closed and my father comments that he usually closes around al-'ash'a, the last prayer of the day.

We enter Hajj Abdel 'Alim's shop and find him at a desk in the back, sitting under a big picture of the King. He is gaunt in his thick brown overcoat over his woollen robe. There's a white kaffiyeh around his neck and he's wearing a fez. He lets out a choppy cough every few minutes. He pushes to his feet to

greet my father. My father seems short next to him. He puts our shopping bags on top of the desk and sits in the chair next to him. I stand between my father's knees. In front of me, a poster hangs on the wall with calligraphic writing that says: "Complaints are forbidden, and anger overridden."

My father says hello to Salim, who stands behind a sales counter. He's wearing a gallabaya with a yellow overcoat that looks like the ones worn by janitors and office boys. He has a small wool skullcap on his head, and his face is very pale. He answers my father in a voice that's cold and weak.

Abdel 'Alim says: "Young Abbas is all ready. Do you want to move the furniture tomorrow?"

My father nods his head to say yes: "It just better not be ruined by all the grease and fat."

"Not at all. I put all your things out of the way." He calls out: "Abbas! Where've you gone? You better not be dipping into that sauce of yours again."

A dark, bare-footed man appears at the entrance to the shop. His eyes are bloodshot. He's wearing a dirty gallabaya and cap. He's moving slowly and he reeks.

"Move the rest of Khalil Bey's furniture from the warehouse tomorrow morning."

Abbas stammers: "I'm busy."

Abdel 'Alim says more commandingly: "It's a couch, two chairs and a table." He turns to my father: "And I found a nice maid living nearby. She cleans and cooks and takes her salary by the month."

"How much?"

"Give her a pound."

Father asks him about the man that has moved into the vacant flat in our quarter. Abdel 'Alim plays with the tips of his moustache for a while then says that he's a police constable.

"Is he married?"

"No."

My father asks Salim for ten eggs, fifty dirhams worth of cheese, fifty dirhams of halva, a box of Sheikh al-Shareeb tea, a piece of Nablus soap, and a block of dark kitchen soap.

Salim asks sullenly: "On your account?"

My father nods his head yes. Salim opens a large register and records our order in it, and father warns him, "Only fresh eggs, no rotten ones."

"Yes, of course, only fresh. We have butter from buffalo milk too."

My father shakes his head and asks for a pound of country shortening instead, then asks in the same tone: "Do you have anything to put it in?"

"No."

His brother yells at him: "Just put it in a glass jar." He puts our groceries in two paper bags, and my father gathers them up against his chest. We leave the shop. I ask him if I can carry one of the bags. He tells me no because I'll drop it. The book for new readers. Sirhan between the Forest and Home. He puts the eggs in his pockets and they're crushed. He sticks the lamb between his legs but then can't walk. He drags the duck by a rope and chokes it to death.

We head back to the quarter. I ask him why he didn't buy butter. I like it with honey or molasses. I love the Murta brand that takes forever to melt. He tells me that Salim puts salt in the butter jar to cheat on the price, and that his brother Hajj Abdel 'Alim had warned him to stop doing it many times but to no avail.

We make our way into our darkened neighbourhood. We walk slowly. Weak light from the slats in the wooden shutters on the balconies. The blinds in the balcony of the house in front of ours are open, but the glass panels and the thin hanging curtains behind them are closed. We go up our couple of worn, broken-down steps. The darkened door to our flat is to the right of the stairs that lead up to the higher floors. To the left, a vague opening leads to the grocer's storehouse. I try not to look at it.

He hands me one of the bags and says: "Hold on tight." He unbuttons his overcoat and pulls it to the side. He gropes for the key in his waistcoat pocket. He puts the key in the keyhole of the door and turns it. He pushes the door. I cling to his coat. We walk in warily.

He mutters a few times: "God protect us from Satan, the cursed. In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful." He feels around with his hand until he finds the light switch. A weak ray of light streams from the dirty electric lamp that hangs from the middle of the ceiling. The lamp shines on a living room with a rectangular dining table. We stop in front of the door to the bedroom that is near the front door. Father takes another key out of his pocket. He leads me inside. He turns on the light.

He puts his bag on the desk, then turns his attention to my bag, rushing to me to take it and put it next to the other one. I sit on the edge of the large iron bed frame. To my right is the shuttered door to the small balcony, and in front of me, the slanted wooden wardrobe. It rests on three wooden balls the size of a pomegranate under its three corners. The fourth ball was lost during the move, so my father put a small piece of wood under that corner. Still, the left door would not close all the way, so it stayed open a crack. A wooden clothes rack is next to it, and the door is next to that.

He takes off his overcoat and hangs it on one of the spokes of the clothes rack. Then he hangs his suit coat. On its buttonhole, there is a round patch that's bronze coloured and has the brandname "al-Gal'a" written on it. He puts his fez over the top of the clothes rack, showing the balding top of his head surrounded by hair that is almost all white. He puts on a skullcap made of goat's wool, camel coloured, with wide embroidery crawling up to its tip. Then he moves on to the grey woollen waistcoat with wooden buttons. He puts on his brown robe and pulls it closed with a thin red rope belt. He wraps a wide scarf, made from the same material as the skullcap, around his neck and chest.

I untie my shoes and set them down next to the door. I put on my slippers without taking off my socks. I take off my coat and throw it over the back of the office chair. I do the same with my sweater and my shirt, then I shudder from the cold. After I have put my pyjamas on, I put the sweater back on. I grab a canvas bag nearby on the desk and take out a loaf of twice-baked bread. A small black cockroach hops out of the

bag. I stumble back away from the desk. He asks me if I would rather have cheese or halva. My eye is fixed on the spot where the cockroach crawled out. I say I'm not hungry. He says: "Shall I make you an egg and some date paste?" I shake my head no. He puts the loaf back in the bag.

I start to get my school bag ready. I make sure I have my blotting paper and ink bottle. I notice he is still wearing his trousers and shoes. I ask him: "Why don't you undress?"

He says, "I want to sauté the meat first."

"Leave it till morning."

"Then it'll spoil."

He bends over and pulls back the bed sheet used for a cover. Shoes, plates, cartons, and metal pots. A jar of tin injectors for enemas. He grabs a metal pan. He looks around for its cover until he finally finds it. Then he leaves the room and I follow him. He takes hold of the package of meat and empties it into the pan. He heads toward the start of the dark hallway in front of our room. There's a toilet with its door hanging open and a sickening smell coming out. The large bathroom is closed, its door held shut by a wooden plank. The metal sink has a water tap mounted on the wall over it. He washes off the meat well. He walks to the kitchen at the end of the hall. He goes into it with me hanging on his clothes from behind. He picks up a box of matches and lights one of them. The light falls on the side of the wall covered in water. There's a wooden table with a kerosene Primus lamp on it. He squashes a big red cockroach with his foot. He presses on the Primus lamp several times, then lights a match and moves it close to the wick. The flame flickers. I grab on to him and blink my eyes. Hassan's woman dangles the long braids of her hair from the window so that Hassan the Fox can climb them. Suddenly, the ghoul can be seen coming from far away. It is a big blur that looks like a huge bale of hair riding the wind as it covers wide spaces, kicking dust and gravel up around it. It stops under the window and cries up to the woman: "Unfasten yourself and let down your long braids; take in the ghoul or endure his cascades."

The stove crackles. The colours of its flame spread out. He

turns the meat over with his spoon, and he raises up the pan and pours out its juice in the sink.

I ask: "Isn't it done yet?"

He says the meat has to come to a hard boil to get rid of all the microbes. He opens a jar of shortening, digs out two spoonfuls, and throws them in the pan. He flips the meat a few times, then adds the water. He throws in a dash of salt, then another of black pepper, then he covers it. He goes with me to the small toilet room to pee. When I complain about the smell, he says its plunger is broken. I recite the Quranic verse of "The Chair" the way he taught me. He gives me a gentle shove to help me up on to the stone toilet seat. I resist and he climbs up with me to stand by my side. He holds me by my shoulders while I undo the buttons on my underpants. I look up at the wall. Rays of weak hall lighting beam down on the big black hole. Suddenly a black spot comes flying up out of it. I cling to my father's clothes, but he tells me: "Don't worry. It's just a black widow."

We go back to the kitchen. He flips the meat and adds more water. He waits until the water boils, and then he turns off the flame. He carries the pan to the living room while I hang on to him. He leaves it on top of the buffet. We go back to the hallway and he washes his hands with soap.

We go into our room and he closes the door carefully. The door to the balcony shakes violently and father says that it is the winds of the month of Amsheer with its dust devils and whirlwinds. He grabs an old gallabaya from one of the hangers and uses it to plug the open crack between the door and the tiled floor. He puts another piece of cloth under the door of the balcony. He thinks over the empty space between the wardrobe and the wall, then he bends down to the ground and eyeballs the long narrow open space between the base of the wardrobe and the floor tiles. He pulls open the two doors of the wardrobe and takes a look inside. He bends over and lifts up the end of the bed sheet. By now, he is panting from the exertion. He takes off his robe and hangs it on a knob of the rack. He recites: "There is only one God, none but Him, the Living, the Eternal, who takes not slumber, nor sleeps."

I climb up in the high metal bed before him. I slide over to my place next to the wall. He bends over and wraps the covers around me while he keeps reciting. He finishes up the verse of the Chair, then follows it up with another. His voice gets more and more quiet until the words become faint. He brushes my face with his warm hand. My eyelids fall in surrender. The ghoul smells the scent of Hassan the Fox, then says: 'Fee, fi, fo, fum; I smell the putrid scent of a human'.

He raises his hand and I open my eyes. He puts his hand back. I close my eyes. He lifts his hand again and I open my eyes again. Hassan the Fox and Hassan's woman seize the chance to escape when the ghoul goes out. The woman has forgotten about the drums, and has painted the entire castle with henna. The ghoul comes back and calls out to the woman, then the objects painted in henna start to spin around her. The sieve calls out in a beautiful sing song voice in sync with its movements: 'straaaain, straaaain, straaaain.' The quern says: 'griiind, griiind, griiind.' But the forgotten drum takes revenge for itself by crying: 'Take her, Hassan the Fox, and fly away!'

I follow his movements. He stands up straight. He bends over. He rubs his knees. He pulls off the wool wrap, the robe, and the waistcoat. He slips his suspenders off his shoulders. He sits on the edge of the bed. He pulls off his socks and shoes, then puts on long wool stockings. He lifts his right leg and pulls on his trousers, then slips on the other leg. He gets back up. He pulls off his tie and his shirt. All that's left is the woollen undershirt with its long sleeves and the woollen long johns that go all the way down to cover his feet. He puts his clothes on the hanger. He bends over and spreads his legs out. He unfastens the laces that tie the back brace around his legs and his hips. He strains to get out of it and throws it on the desk then gasps with relief. He rubs his knees and then lets loose a loud fart.

He puts on a striped flannel gallabaya. He tosses the shawl over his shoulders and chest. He stretches his hand to his mouth and pulls out his teeth, then he puts them in a cup of water on the desk. He drinks out of a jug in a metal pan on the

ground. He wipes his mouth and his moustache with the back of his hand. He fills the water back up using a cup with rusty patches, so he can have a drink as soon as he gets up. He raises his hands to his head and presses on the skullcap. He takes two steps. He stretches his hand out toward the dresser. He puts out the light. He climbs up next to me. He tucks himself under the sheets and blankets, and he rolls over to me to make sure that I'm also covered. His hand stays there on top of me. My mother's round face draws close. She rocks me while she sings the song coming out of the radio: "Sleep o love of my sooooul."

"In the beauty of the spring, your birthday draws near
You are more splendid than spring, and more dear."

We repeat the chorus behind the music teacher. A big coloured handkerchief dangles out of the breast pocket of his suit jacket. He will be coming with us to Abideen Palace for the King's birthday. They give us sandwiches made from yellow cheddar cheese. We also get a piece of halva made from crushed sesame. Monday will be a half day. The English teacher writes the date at the top of the blackboard. I can see what is written clearly thanks to my glasses. A commotion starts up in the back rows of class. The teacher turns around and goes to his chair. His clothes look all fancy and expensive. The cuffs of his trouser legs are wide in the style of the day. They are stiff over the fronts of his shoes and cover his heels from behind down to the point where they touch the floor. He says without looking up at any of us: "Whoever doesn't want the lesson, please help themselves to the exit."

The older students in the back rows get up and leave the room. I take my six-shooter out of my drawer and I follow them. The outer hallway runs down to the empty courtyard. A total calm has come over the school. The hallway is empty. I bend over so I can pass underneath the windows of the ongoing classes. Another classroom. The teacher's lounge. Its door is closed. I put my eye against the keyhole. There's a rectangular table with a bare headed man sitting at the end. He is bald. His fez is in front of him on top of several notebooks. I manage to recognise that he's the science teacher. He looks strange

with no fez and no hair. He picks up one of the notebooks. He's staring disapprovingly at the corner of the table. I can see at the edge of my vision a number of hands playing cards.

I catch up with some students on the stairs. We sneak out to a courtyard at the back where an annex to the school is being built. They all spread out behind the piles of sand and gravel. They take out their handkerchiefs, fold them once, spread them over their noses, then tie them at the back of their heads. I take off my glasses, which I've given the nickname 'Gandhi', then I tie my own handkerchief over my nose before I put them back on. I squat down behind a pile of gravel holding on to my six-shooter. The courtyard of the old school is surrounded by wide black fencing so we can't see out. I buy a yam with hot sauce from a small opening in its side. We find an old staircase with worn out steps leading down. A student says that the schoolhouse used to be the palace of an Emir. He's sure that there's a magic well underneath it. We are scared but go down anyway. We stumble upon a lizard. My mother tells me it's a princess in hiding.

I stay in my place behind the pile of gravel without anyone calling for me. The bell rings. We go back up to our Arabic grammar class with heavy steps. The teacher has a thin, gaunt build. He has a long neck with a thick kaffiyeh wrapped around it. His shoulders are constantly wiggling inside his suit coat. We all know that he only stopped wearing his jubbah and turban less than a year ago.

I change places with Fathy so I can sit next to Maher. He has a ring full of keys, a Piro felt tip pen, a Waterman fountain pen, and a fat soft eraser. He puts them in a row in front of him on top of his desk. Without standing up, the teacher explains to us the rules of the 1st stem form of the verb, the derivative stem forms, and the phonetic verbs. He does not bother to stand in front of the board because he is so short. He asks one of the taller students to write on it: "The prince of poets addresses the young men." We open up the book *Selections of the Masters*. We read along with him a poem by Ahmad Shawki. He scolds us for our ignorance. In my notebook I write down what the words mean. I spell a word

wrong. I try to rub it out with my dried up, cheap eraser. I borrow Maher's soft one.

The bell rings. I lift the tabletop of my desk. I take out the textbooks and notepads that I need for tomorrow's homework. I put them in my Weber satchel. I let down the desktop, take out my key, and lock it.

No sooner have I walked out to the open air hallway than a cold wind slaps against me. I bury my neck under my kaffiyeh, and I shrink myself inside my clothes. It is hard to drag my feet along. I move along the sidewalk outside the school, and I put off crossing the main street until I get to the square. A little rectangle of iron sparkles at me. I decide to kick it along, but then I remember my father's warnings about bombs that explode at no more than a touch and that take the form of a medicine bottle, a fountain pen, or a toy. I examine it carefully then move away from it.

A sidewalk of multi-coloured gravel. A fenced in villa with steel columns. I steal a look from between the columns. A wooden table and two chairs are at the side of the garden. The door to the villa is shut. I go back to walking. The Jewish school. It's made from pale yellow bricks. There's no outer wall surrounding it like at our school. A flyer calls for aid for Palestinian refugees. A black banner reads: "No negotiations without complete British withdrawal!" Another says: "Hey diddle diddle!" The schools windows are at street level. Long halls with rows of dining tables appear behind them. The students eat and make an uproar. I keep walking to the corner, then I turn left. I pass next to the wall of the school. The way gets a little bit steep and it has more trees. The red and yellow flowers that started to bloom at the beginning of the summer are dried and fallen over the sidewalk now that it is autumn. We try to hunt the sparrows with our bows and arrows, but we don't get a single one.

I find myself in front of our old home. It is also of pale yellow brick. The sight of it is dominated by an iron door. Around the door is an old crumbling house. In front of it, there is a big crater made by a bomb that German planes dropped. I put my satchel on the ground and lean against the wall of the school.

The house sits at the fork between two streets divided by an unkempt open space surround by fencing made of metal poles. It used to be a storage house for the tram. The metal poles of the fencing are tied at the bottom by railing barely raised a foot off the ground. We stand on the railing between the poles and puff up our cheeks, then we whistle and jump.

The first street heads toward a shanty town and the second toward a factory that makes fezzes next to a square where the fair to celebrate the prophet's birthday happens. At the point of coming together, there's a row of carriages with the heads of their chargers buried in sacks of straw. The two streets come together where there's a little bit of decline in the road. Starting past our house and going down to the street that leads to the square. At the corner, there's a nursery with flowers for sale.

The place where we live takes up the second floor and has two windows looking down on to the street. The curtains cover one of them, but in the other, only the glass is closed. It reflects the trees and the blue sky. I trace with my finger my name and the names of my father and mother in the condensation that's covered the closed window. I think to myself about the workers rushing to the factory, each one carrying a snack in his handkerchief. There are small children with them. The morning whistle of the factory blows, then I leave our house. I am met by the smell of exhaust fumes and rats. I lift my head toward the window and see my father in his round white skullcap following me with his eyes from behind the glass. I cross the road to the sidewalk in front of the Jewish school. I pass by an old man with a big red turban, leaning on a walking stick with one of his hands while resting his back against the school wall. I give him two milleme as my father has taught me. I turn to see him in the window one last time. I adjust my backpack and push my cold hands far down into the pockets of my jacket. I wind my way through the crush of students from the Jewish school. Boys and girls dressed in blue. I bounce towards the main street that goes to my school. The fog that I love so much swallows me.

I carry my satchel and I turn to follow the road. I move into

a small passage. A shop for jobless people. A wooden partition has little openings between the panels. Behind them there is a bench with girls sitting on it. One of them wears a black headscarf and a gallabaya. Next to her a girl is dressed like the fellah women. Farouk appears in the street. I wait for the signal from the traffic cop. I walk in front of the Abdelmalik bakery and the Alsabeel apothecary. I read its sign: "The acting manager is Helmy Rafael." In a few more steps, I've entered al-Nuzha Street that leads to our new house.