

## Chapter 1

### Princess Basheera

“May I ask you, honored Professor al-Busiri, if you will go to meet Princess Basheera?”

I looked up reluctantly from the student essay I was reading and considered the bearing of the woman who had entered my office unannounced. She was tall and slender, graceful; she was motionless, but there was a suggestion of incipient mobility. She was dressed in a black *naqib* and a *jilbab* so that I could see only her dark eyes. Her voice, however, had an optimistic lilt to it. *She must be about thirty*, I thought.

Deliberately, I pushed the essay to one side. “Who, may I ask, is Princess Basheera?”

“She is my employer, sir.”

“And what does this Princess Basheera want with me?”

“She has an assignment that only you can fulfill, Professor.”

*This is very strange. A young woman comes into my office at (I glanced at my watch) two thirty-six in the afternoon and asks me to meet with a Princess Basheera (glad tidings), about whom I know nothing, to undertake an assignment, about which I also know nothing, but which, it is said, only I can undertake.*

I closed my fountain pen, thinking for a moment. “Can you give me a reason, madam, why I should say ‘yes’ to your request? I have a full afternoon of work ahead of me, and I cannot afford the time to discuss university business. That should be pursued through the office of administration.”

The woman nodded. “I can assure you, Professor al-Busiri, this has nothing to do with university business. Nor does Princess Basheera wish to sell you any product or service. The assignment is related to your status as a renowned professor of philosophy.”

*This sounds like an approach for a consultancy assignment, but when was the last time, Kareem, that you were given a paid assignment in philosophy?*

“Where am I to meet with this Princess Basheera?”

“Sir, you may inquire for her at the Kempinski Nile Hotel.”

*The Kempinski Nile is a five-star hotel. She must be a person of importance.* “What, may I ask, is her family name?”

“Her family name is Chagma (wisdom), but she is well known at the Kempinski.”

“And at what time will she be expecting me?”

“If you will kindly tell me, Professor al-Busiri, when it is convenient for you, I will inform Princess Basheera, and she will know to expect you.”

I consulted my watch again, and opened my leather-bound diary. *I have no classes until 8:30 in the morning. However, I must see Hadad about this unfortunate essay at 3, and then at 4 I have sophomore student Quraishi, who wants to study the great philosopher Ibn Rushd.*

I leaned back in my creaking, antique chair and considered the slowly-turning paddles on the ceiling fan. *Well, I am curious. Who is this Princess Basheera, and what does she want with me? A ‘yes’ will satisfy my curiosity and may bring an unknown reward. A ‘no’ avoids the risk. What risk? Perhaps I can spare a couple of hours.* “I could be at the Kempinski at about six – depending on the traffic.”

“Very good, Professor, I will inform Princess Basheera.”

The woman bowed and disappeared.

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Anpu Hadad rose from his seat opposite my desk. He was a slim, clean-shaven youth dressed in jeans and a red and blue-striped Barcelona football shirt: across the front it said ‘Qatar Airways’. “I am sorry, Professor, I will try to do better.” His hangdog manner was in stark contrast to that of his hero, Lionel Messi.

“Hadad, I have told you many times that philosophy is not about being *hafiz* (learning the Qur’an by heart) in some madrassah. It involves independent, critical thought. It is about challenging what you have been told, what you understand, and what you see. You cannot present me with an essay in which you merely quote the positions of various thinkers on a topic! You must take a position of your own! You must employ logic in your commentaries. You must think; you must reason!”

“Yes, I understand, Professor.”

“Sit down, Hadad!” I pointed at a page in the open essay on my desk. “Here, you say that Socrates and Plato believed that a democracy will degenerate into tyranny.”

“Yes. It is in the *Republic*. They say that tensions within the social and political structure will lead the common people to seek the protection of a demagogue whose eventual corruption by power will lead to tyranny.”

“You have been reading the *Republic* as a political essay. It might also have been written as an allegory, or as a model of philosophical inquiry.” I considered the demeanor of my crestfallen student. “Tell me, Hadad, how much of your thinking about the philosophy of politics is influenced by what you have seen here in Cairo of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’?”

“Well, Professor, I am concerned that such a demagogue may arise from the Muslim Brotherhood, and Egypt will slide into tyranny.”

“And so you see your essay as a kind of warning against the slide into tyranny?”

Hadad gave a slight concessionary nod. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, Professor, but I suppose so.”

“I am concerned that your essay is more in the realm of political science than philosophy. Do you wish to change departments within the university?”

“No. No, Professor, I like philosophy. It makes me think, and I am greatly impressed by the philosophers we have studied.” He paused, looking down at his leather sandals. “And I have learned a lot . . . listening to you.”

I considered my student for several moments. “Hadad, I suggest that you select a different topic for your dissertation – something more abstract than politics – something like free will, or the nature of the human soul. Pick a philosopher whose thinking on the topic you select attracts you. Then, using your own analytical thinking, move the topic forward.” Hadad nodded and gave an awkward involuntary bow. “When you have selected your new topic, come back and see me.”

I believed that Anpu Hadad was capable of independent thought, but like so many young people today, he was caught up in immediacy and perceived wisdom. *I must teach him how to ask the awkward questions and how to seek uncomfortable answers!*

Mairisha Quraishi was not really – as I sometimes thought – scatter-brained; it was more that she gave the impression of being disorganized. She dropped the olive drab backpack which had been slung over one shoulder on the floor beside her chair. She began to

rummage through the various compartments. “Sorry, Professor, I just want to find this book by Ibn Rushd.”

I glanced at my watch and leaned forward, as if my familiarity with Ibn Rushd would help me spot the book.

“I’m sure I have it here somewhere.” She looked up apologetically and brushed a wayward wisp of brown hair behind her dark blue hijab (head scarf). Her face had even, pleasing features; her lips shone with pink gloss. Frustrated, she picked up the satchel, set it on her knees, and began to search more diligently.

“Never mind, Quraishi, let’s just talk about Ibn Rushd.”

“Oh. Yes, Professor.” She dumped the backpack onto the floor, brushed some imaginary dust off her jeans, and took a deep breath to compose her thoughts. “I think Ibn Rushd was wrong.”

“In which of his works do you think he was mistaken, Quraishi?”

“*The Decisive Treatise*, Professor.

“And in what do you find him mistaken?”

“He says that philosophy contains nothing which is opposed to Islam.”

I smiled. “Tell me more.”

“Well, some of the German philosophers, for example, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, were very critical of religion. Nietzsche said ‘God is dead’ and Schopenhauer said that philosophy is a science and has no articles of faith.”

I was amused. “So you’re thinking of refuting a twelfth century Islamic philosopher – Ibn Rushd – with the work of eighteenth philosophers who were critical of Christianity?”

For a moment, she chewed the inside of her cheek. “I wasn’t thinking of refuting.” Her dark eyes were full of concern. “Well, Professor, it’s just that I think it is possible for philosophy to contain something which is opposed to Islam.”

“Can you give me an example, Quraishi?”

“The Qur’an says, ‘Man is truly created anxious: he is fretful when misfortune touches him.’”

“Yes, it is in *The Ways of Ascent*.”

She nodded. “But I think it is possible for a philosopher to assert that the anxieties of man are learned, not created; the anxieties are the result of nurture, not nature.”

I smiled. “And are your anxieties learned rather than created?”

She shifted in her chair. “I’m not sure about me, but I have observed my sister’s children from the time they were born, and none of them was born with any anxieties.”

“Were they not anxious about being fed?”

“When they were hungry, they were uncomfortable. They weren’t fearful or doubtful about being fed. That would come much later – when, for example, they were on a long trip.”

“So you think that our anxieties are learned – not part of our nature.”

“Yes. We learn to be anxious about important events which are in doubt. But it takes some logical processing to recognize – from prior experience – that the event may or may not happen.”

“Could that recognition not be instinctive, and therefore part of our nature?”

“But Professor, instinct, by definition, involves no logic, whereas assessing the probability of a particular outcome requires thought.”

“Tell me, Quraishi, how did Ibn Rushd come to the conclusion that philosophy contains nothing that is contrary to Islam?”

“He said that two truths cannot contradict one another. One kind of truth is scriptural and the other is demonstrative, by which I suppose he meant the application of pure logic.”

I nodded. “Did Ibn Rushd mention any exceptions to his assertion that two truths cannot contradict?”

“Yes, he said that if the apparent meaning of scripture conflicts with demonstrated conclusions, the scripture should be interpreted metaphorically.”

“Isn’t that possible in this case?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Perhaps a metaphorical interpretation is that man is an anxious creature.”

“But that isn’t what the scripture says, Professor. It says ‘truly created’. To me, this implies that God created us to be anxious. I don’t believe He did. I believe He created an uncertain world, which causes us to be anxious.”

“You have other examples of philosophy which is opposed to Islam?” She nodded. For some moments I considered the paddles of the ceiling fan. “You know, Quraishi, if you proceed with this dissertation and it falls into the public domain – as inevitably it will – you

will be accused of attacking a central belief of Islam: that the Qur'an is the word of God. Goodness knows what that would lead to."

She nodded. "There are at least two possibilities. First, philosophy is an assertion of truth; it is not necessarily truth itself. For example, I can't prove that anxiety is not an original part of human nature. It's just that I've seen evidence that it's not what we're born with. Therefore, my philosophy is that anxiety is learned, not created. Second, God did not actually write the Qur'an. He had the archangel Gabriel pass the words to the Prophet. And we know that the Prophet did not immediately write the words. In fact, we don't know who did write the words, except that they were recited by the Prophet, and . . ."

I held up my hand. "I know where you're going on your second point, Quraishi, and I wouldn't go there. It could be very dangerous!"

Mairisha Quraishi gave a concessionary shrug. "I am a good Muslim, Professor. I believe in God and the Prophet. I live by the Five Pillars of Islam, and the Qur'an is my guide. I just don't believe that the Qur'an is exactly the words of God."

After a moment, I said, "I think it would be better not to announce the last bit publicly, in writing. You may find yourself the subject of an unpleasant fatwa." She nodded. I leaned back in my chair and studied the ceiling fan for a long moment. "I think your suggested topic is suitable for a dissertation as long as you stay on the philosophical, rather than the spiritual, side of the fence. I would like to see your outline. . . ." I consulted my diary. "...this time next week."

She reached down to pick up her knapsack. As she lifted it awkwardly, several books fell out, including a collection of the writings of Ibn Rushd. "I knew it was here somewhere. Thank you, Professor." She gave a slight bow. "Next week then."

I spent several moments gazing at the door through which she departed. *She is certainly not a stupid girl. She's capable of original thinking, although perhaps she doesn't follow her thoughts to their logical conclusion. And it has to be said that she's not always well prepared. But she has courage – perhaps a little too much courage. What I must do is teach her to be more mindful of risk – intellectual risk – and how it can arise when we don't anticipate it. How does she manage risk in her daily life?* I shrugged. *But these are mostly obvious risks. She is a rather beautiful girl. Actually, by the shape of her she's a woman. . . . I wonder how she and Shakil (handsome), my brother's oldest son, would get along. Certainly,*

*he would find her attractive, but would her independent mind scare him off? Maybe she's not prepared to think of marriage – or maybe she's already betrothed. . . . Marriage is not high on his agenda – though it's time it should be. . . . Maybe I'll make quiet inquiries into her family.*

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Just after 5, I got into my three-year-old Honda Civic and drove west off the new campus of the American University in Cairo toward central Cairo. I don't particularly like the new campus, built on what had been desert and opened in 2008. *Yes, it has a collection of modern stone buildings, its gardens give the feeling of a welcome oasis, and the students are very fond of 'New Cairo'. But for me, the old, crowded Tahrir Square campus at the heart of Cairo is more expressive of what AUC is: an excellent liberal institution in a non-Western setting.*

But I had no choice: the entire philosophy department was moved from Tahrir Square to the new Liberal Arts complex in 2009.

*I don't really have much to complain about. I'm a tenured, full professor with the best university in Egypt. Some would say that Cairo University is more authentic. Maybe. But it has a quarter of a million students. How can one teach and learn in a place like that? It's like feeding pigeons. Cairo is a public university. Pay is lower; facilities are out of date. Worst of all: they have no philosophy department! And then there's al-Azhar University, the second oldest in the world and the leading institution for Islamic thought. But it is riven with political and religious tug-of-wars. I'm better off where I am.*

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I did not park in the Kempinski garage. I am – among other things – a frugal man. I parked in the public garage on Ahmed Raghhab Street. *There! I've saved at least ten pounds (Egyptian = \$1.50).* Outside the garage, a small, dirty child was sitting in her mother's lap on the sidewalk. I do not usually respond to street beggars. I feel that too often they become dependent on addictive, misused gifts rather seeking honest pay. But there was a look of genuine pathos in that child's eyes and I dropped a one pound coin into her outstretched palm.

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At the concierge's desk, I stated, "I believe I have an appointment with Princess Basheera Chagma."

The concierge was wearing a dark jacket, grey vest and striped cravat; he seemed like a fugitive from a film set. He frowned doubtfully. "Your name, sir?"

"I am Professor Kareem al-Busiri."

The concierge picked up his telephone and turned away, as if his attention had been diverted elsewhere. But the effect was that what he said on the telephone was inaudible. I waited; the concierge listened and spoke.

"Miss Basheera will meet you over there." He gestured toward the carpeted lounge area in earth colors with its scattering of low tables and comfortable sofas. "Please be good enough to take a seat."

"I'm afraid I have never met Princess Basheera."

"I'm sure she'll introduce herself, sir."

I reached into the breast pocket of my grey suit. "Thank you very much. Can you tell me . . ." There was a five pound note in my hand. "Is Miss Basheera a Saudi princess?" The concierge whisked the note away as if it were an annoying insect. "Perhaps, or perhaps Jordanian or Lebanese, and, as I'm sure you know, Professor, we had our own royalty here some years ago."

"Yes. Yes, of course. So you can't be more specific?"

"I have not had sight of the lady's passport, sir."

I took a seat at one end of a couch upholstered in a desert tapestry. Here, I could observe much of the traffic through the lobby. The guests were diverse, but universally wealthy. Men, many with brief cases, moving purposefully in suits and open-necked shirts in recognition of the heat and humidity. Women, at a more leisurely pace, conscious of their surroundings and their own expensive (or shrouded) attire. I watched and waited. *How will she know me? Will she inquire at the concierge?*

But from the direction of the elevators, a figure was striding purposefully toward me. It was a woman. She was wearing long, black voluminous trousers, a knee-length, black silk jacket and a midnight blue niqab which covered all but her eyes. She was tall – perhaps 1.8 meters, and she moved fluidly, with assurance. "Thank you, Professor al-Busiri, for coming to meet with me." She did not offer her hand; instead, she sat at the far end of the couch,

obliquely facing me. I noticed that two other people – apparently un-introduced associates of this woman – sat in chairs opposite. There was a young man in a dark suit and an open white shirt, a notebook in his lap and a pen in his hand. There was also a woman, all in black with only her brown eyes visible.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Princess Basheera.”

“Would you like tea or coffee, Professor?”

“I prefer tea at this hour.”

Princess Basheera glanced at the man in the dark suit, who gestured for a waiter.

“Thank you again, Professor.” She turned slightly toward me. I could see her eyes now that they were fixed on me; they were large, cocoa-colored, with a glistening central light. She spoke Classic Arabic, softly, deliberately. *It's as if she grew up in a family of language purists; I can't hear a regional accent or trace of dialect.* “You are, I believe, quite a distinguished professor of philosophy,” she continued, “and you have a broad understanding of the topic.”

“Yes, I teach a course in ancient Greek philosophy, and two courses each in Western and Arabic philosophy. I am familiar with the writings of the principal oriental philosophers, but as yet, we have no demand for a class in eastern thinking.”

“Excellent! And the university is about to begin the summer holiday?”

“Yes, the summer solstice will soon be upon us.”

“Forgive me, Professor, but do you have plans for your holiday?”

“I have a small flat near the beach in Al Jamiah – west of Alexandria. I go there to read and to consider.”

She nodded. “To consider . . .” It was almost a question.

“As you say, Princess, I am a philosopher.”

“Ah, yes.” She leaned toward me slightly. “And I understand the beach at Al Jamiah is very popular.”

“Perhaps so, but I go there only in the early morning or late afternoon, when it is less crowded.”

She nodded and brushed the sleeve of her jacket. “Professor, there is an important task for which I believe you are extremely well suited by your intellect, your knowledge,

your experience and your character.”

I paused for a moment. *How can a task about which I know nothing suit me so well?*

“What is this task, Princess?”

“Professor, do you know Father Khaliq?”

“No, I know no one by that name. Tell me: who is he?”

“His origins are somewhat uncertain, but he is someone dear to me.”

“Is he your father then, Princess?”

“Yes, I believe he is.”

“And what is it that you would like me to do with this Father Khaliq, Princess?”

“I would like you to find him.”

A white-jacketed waiter set a silver tray with a porcelain tea service on the table.

Basheera poured tea into a cup and handed it to me. “Do you take milk, Professor?”

“No thank you, but may I have some sweetener?”

She offered me a bowl filled with sachets.

“You mention my experience, Princess, but I have no experience finding people who are lost.”

“When I speak of experience, Professor, I was not referring to any experience you may have as a detective. Rather, I was referring to your life experience: to what one might call ‘wisdom’.”

“Oh, I see.” (I didn’t at all, so I cast about for a clarifying question.) “Yes. So you want me to find this Father Khaliq, who has, more or less, gone missing?”

“In a general sense, that is true.”

“Where is he then?”

“This is the problem. It isn’t exactly clear.”

“If it isn’t clear to me, how I can help you?”

The corners of her eyes creased with her invisible smile. “I think you are a man of great wisdom and intuition. I feel certain that you can find Father Khaliq.”

“Perhaps so, but I have no idea where to start looking.”

“Professor, have you ever taken the Hajj?”

“No, but I intend to do so. Perhaps next year.”

“I think that the Hajj is an excellent place to start.”

“So you think that Father Khaliq will be on the Hajj?”

“Yes, I feel sure he will be.”

“But Princess, there are more than three million people on the Hajj. How can one possibly find an unknown person?”

“Do you believe in being open to possibilities, Professor?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I believe this openness, your wisdom and intuition will yield the clues you are seeking.”

“But can you tell me what Father Khaliq looks like?”

“I have never seen him.”

“And about how old he is?”

“He is said to be very old.”

I leaned back on the couch and sipped my tea thoughtfully. “Forgive me, Princess, but am I wrong to consider that there is reward of some sort attached to this search?”

“There is indeed reward, Professor.”

I opened my wallet and withdrew a personal check. Tearing it in half I handed it to the princess. She made a chucking sound with her tongue. “Shame on you, Professor! I have neither the inclination nor the skill to forge your signature!”

I felt embarrassed. “Sorry. I thought I was just being prudent, and I thought you would like to know my bank details in the event my search is successful.”

“Prudent perhaps, but what is missing is trust. You must trust me, Professor, if you are to find Father Khaliq.”

“Yes, I apologize, Princess. How can I contact you if I find Father Khaliq?”

She turned toward the man in the grey suit, who gave her a business card which she passed to me. I looked at the card: ‘Princess Basheera Chagma +20 109 643 0712’-- nothing more. “This is an Egyptian mobile number.”

“Yes. That is my Egyptian contact number.” She rose from the sofa and bowed slightly. “It was a pleasure to meet you Professor al-Busiri, and I wish you success in your search.”

She turned and strode away, the man and woman following her.

For a moment, I considered going to the registration desk to make inquiries about Princess Basheera Chagma. But I shook my head. *If this were a two star hotel, a little baksheesh (bribe) might do it, but in the five star Kempinski Nile, there is not a chance.*

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I am, intrinsically, a curious individual, particularly when I am placed in front of a mysterious situation: for me it becomes irresistible. In this regard, I remember my grandparents' house particularly. It was an imposing three-story building, of brown and tan brick, with cream castings of lion heads in what we used to call the 'Farouk Style'. My father's father, 'Papa Grand', was an enigmatic figure with white hair and an impressive matching moustache. Sometimes, he would sit my brother and me on either side and tell us fascinating but improbable stories about "Cairo long ago, when I was a boy". At other times he would be remote and taciturn. There was a room under the eaves on the third floor of that house, the door of which was always closed and locked. When I asked my father about it, he said, "That's none of your business, Kareem. That's Papa Grand's special room."

"What does he use it for?" I asked.

"That, also, is not your business."

Whenever I had an unobserved opportunity, I went up to see if the room might be unlocked. No. It was locked. This served to make me more determined to discover what was inside. *Where would he keep the key?* I wondered, and I decided that it would be in his bedroom dresser. One Saturday afternoon when we had finished the mid-day meal and the adults were still at the table, my brother and I were sitting in the living area reading our Black Scorpion action magazines. I put my copy down, gave notice of my need to use the toilet, and went upstairs. In my grandfather's room, I quietly slid open the drawers of his dresser and peered inside. In the second drawer, toward the back, there was a black leather box. I took it out and opened it. There, inside it, was a tarnished brass key. I put the box back and scurried up the back stairs to the mysterious door. My hand was trembling but I managed to turn the key, and the door swung open silently. Stepping inside, I closed the door behind me. Within the tiny room were a comfortable reclining chair, an antique wooden table, a wall cabinet and an *argilah* (hookah pipe). The *argilah* was tall, with an elaborate brass mid-section and a cloudy glass base; the pipe was resting on the table. I knew – even at the age of ten – that the *argilah* was used to smoke tobacco, but the pervasive odor in the room was stronger

and sweeter than tobacco. On the table was a fragment like a piece of chocolate. When I picked it up, the smell was more intense. I opened the wall cabinet. On the shelves were small, rectangular packages wrapped in brown paper. I picked one up; on it, handwritten in pencil, it said *hashish*, and it gave the weight at eighty-four grams. So this was my grandfather's secret! He came up here to smoke *hashish*! I understood that he had to keep it a secret: all Muslims are forbidden to use any intoxicating substance. As I replaced the key in the box in Papa Grand's dresser, I felt considerable satisfaction in having solved the mystery. And until now, I have told no one of my discovery.

My attraction to the mystery that Princess Basheera presented felt similarly compelling: who was Father Khaliq, and why was I asked to find him? Then, too, there was the mystery of the Princess herself: who was she and what motivated her?

As I think about it now, I suppose my curiosity is what steered me into philosophy. For me it is the science of answering fundamental questions and solving life's mysteries.

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I have a four-bedroom apartment in a residential section of New Cairo. As a traditionalist, I am not entirely at home there: it is too quiet and too modern. I much prefer the chaotic bustle of central Cairo, where I grew up: noisy, with the call of street vendors, and traffic horns, the air pungent with spices, and people: some drab, some colorful, in constant motion. There, too, was the old house with thick walls and high ceilings, pleasant in summer and cool in winter, where I lived with Elizabeth, my late American wife, for nearly twenty years. It was there that my two sons and a daughter had been born, and where I slept so many nights with Elizabeth. *Elizabeth: may she rest with Allah.* A reflex thought. I am mindful that she had not called Him 'Allah'; she had called Him 'God'. *Whatever He is – if He is.*

Elizabeth had come to Cairo as a Peace Corps volunteer – from Chicago – an idealist in love with humanity. She had stayed; she had learned Arabic; she went to work for the Red Crescent; she had taken a beginning-level course in Arabic philosophy at the American University. I was a doctoral student then, her instructor, and I had never met a student with such intellectual intensity – particularly a woman. What did she see in me then? My style was more cautious, more deliberate, more reliant on precedent. Hers was creative, chaotic, and fascinating. We spent hours in a coffee shop just off Tahrir Square jousting, debating,

thinking. Then, one evening she asked me to come and appraise her skill in cooking *Ful Medames* (a national favorite bean dish). I protested that I couldn't possibly come to her apartment: what would people say? Her reputation would be ruined. She had shrugged. "Don't be silly." After dinner – she was a very good cook – she seduced me. At least I think the seduction was her plan: how could I – an ordinary-looking young Egyptian man – have thought to seduce a lovely, blonde American woman? She took me to Chicago, where she married me in a Methodist church. Before returning to Cairo, Elizabeth made sure I had an American passport. For 20 years we lived on Al Kobidan Street from which I could walk the half kilometer to the university.

I was amused when Elizabeth joined the Coptic Church. "Well," she said, "there is no Methodist church. I live in Egypt. There is a Coptic Christian Church nearby. I will become a Copt."

When Elizabeth died, there was a celebratory outpouring of grief and thanksgiving for her life at the small Coptic Church. I, who had never previously accompanied Elizabeth to the church, was very touched that she was so honored by people who were strangers to me, and I was startled by the naked religious fervor of the ceremony.

I am, I confess, an ambivalent Muslim. Frequently, I miss the morning prayer, or attend to it later in abbreviated fashion. When I am tired, the evening prayer might be short and early. I know there had been a Prophet Muhammad, and there might be an Allah – somewhere. During Ramadan, I keep a small, surreptitious bottle of water behind the files in my desk, and I am entirely observant of the prohibition of sexual intercourse during the day. I give to charity. *Why, just that day, I gave to a beggar child near the Kempinski.*

But I have never been on the Hajj, though I would to take the pilgrimage some time. *Perhaps, when I'm a bit older. . . But now there is this assignment from Princess Basheera. . . It will be bloody hot this time of year. . . I don't want to go alone. . . Perhaps someone will accompany me.*

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The ceiling fan in the living room was turning lazily when I got home. There was a faint smell of garlic and coriander coming from the kitchen. I went to investigate and raised the lid on a deep pan on the stove. *Ah! It's that potato-lamb stew that Nane has made for me, Wahida and Kalifa.*

Nane is my housekeeper. She comes twice a week to clean, do the laundry, and prepare some meals. Wahida is my daughter; she is twenty-two and should be married by now: no boyfriend, but a herd of friends – male and female. I say to her, “Wahida, there is a certain student of mine who is from a good family. He is going to join the family firm. You should meet him.”

She says to me, “Papa, I am too young to get married. Mama was twenty-three when she got married. There is time for that later!”

“But Wahida, you must not wait too long, or the men will consider you past your sell-by date!”

“Did you consider Mama to be past her sell-by date?”

“No, but she was American, and this is Egypt.”

“Phaaa! Egypt is changing, Papa, and you are not up to date!”

That may be true. I follow the trends in politics and economics, but for me, sociology is a bore.

Kalifa is my younger son, a traditionalist, much like me. He is about to get his degree in physical science from American University, and his present ambition is to join the Egyptian Army. Kalifa does not get along well with his older brother, Naqib, who is an aspiring lawyer and politician, a secret member of the Muslim Brotherhood. I also worry about Naqib: he is headstrong and impatient; he lives with his wife, Anisa, who is six years older and has two children of her own. I understand, though, that Anisa is expecting again. (Hopefully, my son is the father.)

There was a gentle hum of the air conditioning from my bedroom. Wahida’s bed had been made and her scattered clothing put away. There was that large poster of the Egyptian national football team in place of pride on Kalifa’s wall: six red-shirted players behind five crouching colleagues, their green-shirted goal-tender in the center.

I like my home office, which used to be Wahida’s bedroom, before Naqib left and bequeathed his room to her. Three walls are nearly packed, floor to ceiling, with books – mostly philosophical books in Arabic and English – a few in French or German, which I read with difficulty. There are assorted texts used by the university, reference books, some history, biographies, and psychological works. The only novels in my collection are from Elizabeth. Why would I want to read about something that isn’t true?

The mahogany leather recliner chair and the antique walnut partner's desk provide all the comfort I need. And if I want to distract myself, I can watch the comings and goings of my neighbors outside the window.

I opted, as ever, for the stuffed armchair in the living room, from which I could greet my children on their return. I picked up a copy of the Al-Ahram (The Pyramids) newspaper, turned to the editorial and letters pages, and began to read.

I woke with a start when the front door closed noisily. There was a thump: Kalifa's backpack slid from his shoulder to the floor. "What's for dinner?"

"Nane made a potato-lamb stew."

Kalifa was a tall, slender young man; he has his mother's blue eyes and an almost feminine face. He flopped down onto the old leather sofa.

I said, "Tell me about your day."

"It was OK. We won the football game."

"What was the score?"

"Three – two."

"Did you play the whole game?"

"Yeah, but we should have just tied. The ref made a mistake."

"What mistake did he make?"

"He said that we scored a goal. I was right there, but the ball never crossed the line."

"The other team must have been annoyed."

"Yeah. One of the guys from Cairo U called the ref a 'blind mole'."

"That wasn't very clever. What happened then?"

"He got red carded."

"And what happened after he was sent off?"

"We scored another goal." Kalifa gave me an ironic look.

I thought for a moment. "Are you thinking you should have protested to the ref, too?"

"I don't know, Papa. What do you think?"

"I wasn't there. It was your decision." He gave a nod and a shrug. "Why didn't you protest?"

"The rest of the team wouldn't have liked it."

"Did any of them see what happened?"

“No, not really. I was the only one with a view of the ball and the goal line.”

“What happened at the end of the game?”

“I told the guys we didn’t really win.”

“And what did they say?”

“After they understood what I was saying, they said, ‘It serves them right for calling us rich kids.’”

“Do you agree with that?” I asked.

“No.”

I smiled. “Did you score the third goal?”

“Yeah, but it was easy, Papa. We were three on two.”

“How do you feel about it now?”

“Not very good.”

“What do you make of this experience?”

“Right and wrong get very mixed up,” he said. “The trouble is, every time we play Cairo, it gets really emotional.”

“Yes, and you have to live with yourself afterwards.” I thought for a moment.

“Maybe, Kalifa, if you had protested, too, the other team would not have called the ref a blind mole. Nobody would have been sent off, and the game would have ended in a tie.”

He made a sour face. “That assumes that the ref would still have allowed the goal, and everybody would know that really Cairo won.”

“It depends on what’s important to you, Kalifa: winning or playing fair.”

“I guess that’s why I’m bothered by what happened today, Papa. What’s important to me is playing fair, and I get frustrated when other people just want to win.”

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*I find it difficult to be father and mother to that boy. When Elizabeth was alive she would attend to his emotions while I tried to teach him logical behavior and discipline. But the priority he places on the feelings of others over natural justice seems inverted to me. I mean: empathy is all well and good, but isn’t fairness more important than the love of others? Elizabeth did not agree. She would say: if I love a person, I will treat him fairly, but if I treat a person fairly, I may not love him. I suppose this was a reflection of the Christian teaching to ‘love your neighbor’ (meaning ‘everyone’, as I understand it). There is no such teaching*

*in Islam, where the emphasis is on charity and honesty. This, it seems to me, is difficult enough to put into practice without trying to love everyone.*

But I was encouraged that tonight, for the first time, Kalifa seemed to be coming around to my way of thinking: he put justice ahead of the feelings of others.

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*Perhaps you have already understood that Elizabeth and I are very different people. (I find it difficult to use the past tense when thinking about her: to me, her spirit and her influence are very much alive.) Elizabeth is that very rare idealist, who understands the world with all its faults, refuses to be put off by them, and works with a tireless smile to improve what she can. For my part, I am a dedicated realist, who sees the world for what it is: an unpredictable tableau of chaos with occasional moments of blissful calm. Our charge, I believe, is to use reason as the oil to pour on the troubled waters. In this sense, Elizabeth and I shared an objective: creating peace and calm.*

*In spite of our differences, we almost never argued. Each of us understood and accepted – even respected – the framework of the other. We would sometimes laugh and tease each other; then, in those cases where joint action was necessary, we would negotiate a compromise, which often involved a two-pronged approach. In those rare cases where we could not agree, Elizabeth would give me her look of sultry intensity which invariably led us to the bedroom. She was a glorious, uninhibited lover, such as I, of a repressive Arab culture, could never have imagined. When we lay spent, looking into each other's faces, smiles would creep over us and the joint plan of action would emerge.*

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This time the door opened and closed quietly. “Good evening, Papa. How was today?”

“It was . . .” I sought a description. “It was normal . . . and interesting, Wahida.”

She sat on the adjacent couch and removed the dark blue headscarf; the cascade of dark hair flowed over her shoulders. Her voluminous grey *shalwar* covered her knees where her hands rested. “What was interesting, Papa?” She cocked her head to one side.

“I’ll tell you and Kalifa over dinner. How is your work at the Red Crescent?”

“There is talk about opening a new center in Al Marj.”

“Oh?”

“It is an area of great need, Papa. There is the un-permitted area east of El Souk.”

“The un-permitted area is also the un-policed area. You’re not thinking of transferring there, are you?”

“I might.” She has a way of lifting her head to indicate her resolve.

I scowled and picked up the newspaper.

“Papa, don’t you care about those poor squatters? They have no other place to live!”

A frown emphasized her black eyebrows, set above hazel eyes.

“I care about them enough to contribute to your employer but not enough to entrust the safety of my daughter to squatters.”

“I’ll be all right . . . if I decide to go.” The last phrase was almost a question.

“Wahida, I know you don’t like to hear me say this, but if you were male, I could not object, but . . .”

She interrupted, “Oh, Papa!”

“Wahida, hear me out! I am very proud of you. You have followed your mother’s example of working for the Red Crescent. You dress plainly – not with the many clinking bracelets of some of your friends. So you do not attract thieves. But Wahida, you are obviously an attractive young woman. Nothing short of a *niqab* (face veil) and *jilbab* (long, dark garment) can hide that fact. And there are men, Wahida, who . . .”

“I know, Papa, I know,” she interrupted. “But it doesn’t seem fair.”

“It isn’t fair.”

“I mean, after all, I would be there to help them.”

“The difficulty is that some men could conjure up a perverted meaning of ‘help’”.

She sighed morosely. “What’s for dinner, Papa?”

“Nane made a potato-lamb stew.”

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“Papa,” Wahida prompted, “You said something interesting happened today.”

We were seated at the old, round table with the yellow cloth. Chairs for five were arranged around the table, but the three of us sat together.

I put down my fork. “Yes. I have been asked to go on the Hajj.”

Wahida looked up. “Who asked you, Papa?”

“Quite an important person – I believe from Saudi Arabia.”

“Who is this person?” Kalifa asked, “Someone connected to the royal family?”

“Yes, I think so, but I am still thinking about it.”

“So you haven’t decided yet?”

“No, but I have to go sometime, and I thought I might as well go sooner rather than later.”

“Who would go with you, Papa?”

I shrugged. “I was thinking that you might like to go with me, Kalifa.”

“When is it?”

“It starts on the twenty-eighth of June.”

Kalifa shook his head. “Classes will just be over then, and I may have some army interviews. Besides, it’s awfully hot then. If I had some spare time, I’d rather go to Al Jamiah and relax on the beach.”

I asked, “What army interviews might you have?”

“They said that once I have my degree, I can apply for an army commission, and once my application is in, I expect they’ll want to talk to me.”

I nodded.

“You’re not thinking of going alone, are you, Papa?” Wahida asked.

“No, no,” I said dismissively, “there’s always a contingent going from the university.”

“What about the fellow from Saudi?” Kalifa inquired, “Would he be meeting you there?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Wahida was puzzled. “Well, why did he even mention the Hajj to you? Is he selling arrangements?”

“No, no, nothing like that. I think it was mentioned because there was a thought that I might meet a Father Khaliq.”

“Is he the Saudi guy’s father, or is he one of the Saudi royalty?”

“No, no, he is the father.”

“But Papa, there are a couple of million people on the Hajj. How can you find someone you’ve never met in a crowd with that many people?”

“I asked about that, too. I think the answer is that I’ll have to make inquiries. I know a little bit about him.”

“The thing I don’t understand,” Kalifa offered, “is why the Saudi guy doesn’t go on the Hajj himself and look for his father.”

“Well, I think you have to bear in mind, Kalifa, that there are some very complex relationships in the Saudi royal family. Sometimes families are not as close as we are, and if that’s the case, my Saudi contact may have good reasons for wanting to involve a very neutral third party.”

“OK, but I hope you have a nice contract with this guy.”

“I am assured of a reward. Besides, it’s my obligation to go on the Hajj.”