

Alexandria: The weather turned chilly and dismal

strong winds, heavy rain, clammy early morning mists drifting up Boulevard Mustapha Pasha from the sea. It was peculiarly like a northern winter, but without the snow. My chest tightened up and it became a constant battle to get breath, even though I had an inhaler and tablets. I wanted to go to Cairo for the dry winter warmth there but, because of work, I couldn't.

Somehow I got through my classes. I wheezed to the tram station, wheezed into the Faculty and into the classroom, taught, painfully and slowly, marshalling what breath I had, and finally wheezed home to Sidi Gaber again. The worst struggle was at the end when I had to climb the stairs of the building to our flat right at the top. Three floors; three landings where I stopped and prepared myself as best I could for the next part of the ascent.

Madame Aglaia watched me solicitously as I came in and slumped down at the hall table, my mouth wide open, tensed, trying to grab the air I needed after the slow weary climb. But there never was enough air and it would take me a couple of minutes before I could do more than gasp out a few disjointed words to her. She gave me advice about doctors which I disregarded because I didn't believe they could give me anything

better than I had already. I'd been using the same medicines since childhood; they seemed the proper treatment for asthma whether they gave me adequate relief or not.

Madame Aglaia also fell ill but with flu and then, as she moved shakily about the flat after two days in bed, feeling depressed and worn-out, Spiro, her nephew, went down with the same thing. So we were all ill – everybody except Pitzo, the skinny ginger cat who either slept or yowled mournfully in the hall, and the raucous old woman who came several times a week to do the washing and help with the cleaning. I didn't know her name. Madame Aglaia always referred to her scornfully as "the Arapina".

The Arapina sat on the floor, brown withered legs like tanned bone stretched apart, stirring the clothes in the massive pan balanced on the spirit stove. Usually Madame Aglaia treated her as a kind of licensed jester. One of the things she really enjoyed, and which I enjoyed too in a way, was to see the old woman cadge a piastre off me for a cigarette. She'd shriek at me first in a frenzy, "*Ya khawagga, idini wahed sgaigh! Cigarra! Cigarra!*" and then, just in case I hadn't understood, she'd mime what she wanted – two scraggy fingers parallel to her mouth holding an invisible cigarette, the pursed lips inhaling, and then the sudden wide toothless gap as she exhaled. Yet when she'd been down to the shop and bought the cigarette, she'd stick it behind her ear and go on with her work. She saved it for later, as a bonus.

But on the day that Madame Aglaia got up from her sickbed and Spiro went to his, the washerwoman didn't seem to want to extract her usual tribute from me. She just looked up at our pale ill faces, shouted something to Madame Aglaia that was lost in the roar of the spirit stove, and laughed. The sight of us was enough. Still laughing, she raised herself a little, bent her head full into the steam, prodded at a knot of tangled clothes with her stirrer, then squatted back again. I looked at her shrivelled, quick face, concentrating now on her work, and resented the triumphant expression on it.

The weather got even worse and, because of the almost incessant rain and the bad drainage, the street in front of our

house became like a lake. I splashed around the edge of it, holding onto the iron railings of the courtyard, and advanced step by slow step to the corner of Boulevard Mustapha Pasha where I took a taxi to the faculty. I felt thoroughly wretched – asthmatic, cold and wet. I should have cancelled my classes and stayed home, and I cursed myself for not having done so.

That night when I went to bed, sipping the camomile tea Madame Aglaia often made for me when I was ill, the sea seemed louder and closer than usual, as though it had beaten the shoreline back to the end of the street. The tea was dark-yellow and slightly oily and had a delicate scent which fascinated me. Madame Aglaia claimed that it had great powers of soothing. All I knew was that I liked drinking and smelling it.

Next I checked my old-fashioned inhaler, holding it up against the light to see if the pipes were clear and if the thing needed more fuel. It did and I carefully put a few drops in. It smelt somehow vinegary and, in the amber-coloured bottle and amber-coloured inhaler, it looked like vinegar too.

Time for my ritual. I stuck the small glass nozzle up my right nostril and squeezed the rubber bulb at the end of a rubber tube about a foot long. I sniffed in, keeping time to the hollow huff of the bulb. When I had done this fifty times I transferred the nozzle to my left nostril and repeated the process.

Then I got into bed. I pushed the pillows together so that I was in a half-sitting position and tried to breathe deeply. There seemed to be some relief and I began to feel pleasantly weary – the kind of welcome tiredness that often comes towards the end of an attack, when you feel that the worst is over and you're going to get better soon. I put out the light and to the accompaniment of the wind lashing against the shutters, drifted off to sleep, thinking that perhaps it might be all right now, if I stayed like this, propped up, absolutely still.

But not long afterwards I woke up, wheezing badly. It hadn't worked. I bent forward in the darkness, listening to the thin crackling wheezing almost as if it weren't coming from me at all. Then I put on the light. From the bed I looked over at my desk, the books and papers there, at the door, with its panes of frosted glass, and then at the shutters on my left. Normally I liked the

austerity of my room, if I thought about it at all. Now it seemed stark and unwelcoming.

I pumped the inhaler again; the vinegary smell and the tingling in my nostrils. But it didn't take at all. I swallowed a tablet and sat rigidly upright in bed, trying to force my lungs to breathe adequately. The noise of the sea and the wind had died down a bit now, but only as though in feigned retreat, gathering power for the next push.

I needed something to take my mind off the asthma a little. Perhaps I should do some work at the desk; if I stayed in bed at least read a book. I tried to but I couldn't concentrate and put it down by the lamp – the grubby paperback next to the thick black cover of the Bible my parents had given me as a going-away present when I first came to Egypt. Play sortes then. I should open the Bible at random and ponder the first verse my eyes lit on until I got a meaning from it.

But even that proved too difficult. I gazed across at my desk again and spotted the small red transistor amongst a clump of papers. I got up and brought it back to the bed and turned the light off. If I were lucky I might get some music from somewhere, coming over scratchy and faint but music all the same.

I adjusted the dial, very delicately. The end of a far-off tune, then some sentences in Arabic, receding, advancing, and a few bars of a syrupy Viennese waltz. Suddenly a voice speaking English declared: "Today, President Gamal Abdel Nasser received an official delegation from" and then cancelled out completely, a multiple choice exercise, leaving me with virtually the whole world to guess from.

Nothing would stay. However carefully my fingers moved the dial I couldn't keep anything I heard with me. Fragments, and then the hissing and crackling of the air waves again.

Greek words that I'd been trying to learn all day began to pass through my mind in a kind of delirium – *mythistorima*: novel; *synghrafefs*: writer; *efimeritha*: newspaper, and then a word I'd learned a couple of months ago was abruptly there on the list too – *kseethi*: vinegar. The smell of the inhaler fuel must have made that one immediate again. The words were rapidly repeated, as though I were trying to cram for a vocabulary test the

next day. Louder, more insistent, nagging. I was being obtuse, and not only wouldn't learn them off by heart but wouldn't understand them either.

Then I thought I heard the washerwoman outside the bedroom door. She was on her hands and knees wiping the floor with the big cloth she used. The swish of the cloth-edge against the bottom of the door. Her fingers tapping stridently on the frosted glass now.

I switched on the bedside-lamp and left it softly burning. There was nothing, just the sea and the wind holding their breath for once, and listening to the corruption in mine. I reached for the inhaler, pumped again and waited, hoping that this time I would be given some ease.

A familiar enemy sat at the end of the bed watching me. I recognized him from childhood, the thin arms and legs, the tousled head and the sharp little teeth. He looked like Peter Pan, but what had made me scream with terror as a child when I woke up and saw him there was his malicious smile and that he was somehow, horribly, both young and old.

He was sitting as he had thousand of miles away and nearly twenty years before. When he saw that I recognized him, he put his hands in his lap and grinned. He began to swing his left leg slightly, still smiling and watching me intently. Then he put one of his hands through his hair as though he were going to welsh-comb it, but he didn't. He gathered the hair up and, after a pause, let it fall. He laughed, yet I couldn't hear the laugh, only guess at it in the stretching of his mouth. He put his hand over his face, splayed his fingers so that he could look at me; the eyes between his fingers, as though he'd plucked them out. I saw that the back of his hand was wrinkled, heavily veined and blotched with liver spots, like an old man's. He wanted me to scream as I had as a child, my parents rushing in to see what the matter was, trying to comfort me. But now I didn't scream. I'd almost forgotten how to and, besides, I hadn't the breath. I simply watched him with dulled fear.

He got up from the end of the bed and stood there arms akimbo – mock-threat, except I wasn't sure how much mock

there was about it. Then he put two fingers parallel to his mouth and pursed his lips. He inhaled, and when he exhaled the invisible smoke I saw the two rows of sharp glittering teeth. He stuck out his hand for money, his mouth gabbling silently. He made no sound at all except for the rustling of the Peter Pan tunic.

He started another mime. This time it was me. He closed one nostril and stuck an invisible inhaler up the other. Fifty times laboriously pumping – I could see his hand opening and closing on nothing. Then fifty times the other nostril. He squeezed the stopper into the nozzle of the inhaler, turned round and put the apparatus somewhere on the desk. He started breathing deeply, a cartoon of what I did, heaving his thin chest out distortedly, his mouth closed tight, eyes bulging, head thrown back as though he were hurling the breath down his throat – and then the great release. He lifted his head forward, his mouth sprang open, the eyes narrowed and the chest sank in. As he did all this he came closer to me, between me and the shutters, carrying the odd aura of light he had with him. I twisted round and looked up at him. He was almost by my head now. He stopped his asthma mime and stared down at me, unsmilingly. His mouth looked very old and severe, as though I'd displeased him and the time for real punishment had come.

He started to dance – the flat, small boy's stomach moved sinuously from side to side, in and out, and there was the illusion that his body was suddenly like the rounded full bodies of the Egyptian belly dancers I'd seen with their large breasts and short thick legs. So close that he was almost touching my face, he interlocked his fingers in front of his crotch, forming a pocket which he opened and shrunk rhythmically. I watched the old hands with their liver spots, and the child's delicate hips, which seemed curved, voluptuous, swaying behind them. The only sounds in the room were my wheezing and the faded hissing of the transistor, and somehow he was dancing to them; they were his music. He broke the pocket finally and, still dancing, put one of his hands behind his ear and leaned his head back into it. He watched me teasingly whilst the hand began caressing his hair. And then he gave me a smile so beautiful I felt myself stifling in it, as though it were a seal against my mouth and nose. But I

couldn't struggle, couldn't do anything, only study, obsessed, his head moving lazily and contentedly, stroking the old blotched hand that stroked it.

Madame Aglaia knocked at my door and came in to see how I was. I felt too ill to teach and told her I'd spend the day at home. She nodded firmly, curtly almost, as if at long last I'd made the right decision. Her large, strong fingers on the door-handle looked as purposeful as ever, but her face was drawn and grim with the effort of going on whilst she still felt so wretched. I asked her if she was any better, but she only made an impatient gesture and went away to the kitchen to organise breakfast.

I drank some tea, ate a small piece of bread and jam, and then washed and dressed slowly. The sky was heavy and grey and it was still raining. The wind came in bursts and then died down and behind everything was the constant dull thudding of the sea. But none of it seemed threatening now.

I took my inhaler and afterwards a tablet for good measure. I sat down at my desk, trying in vain to become immersed in the draft of a poem I'd done recently. How had my Peter Pan gone? The last thing I remembered was the stroking and then nothing at all until dawn, when I heard the muezzin at Sidi Gaber mosque. During a lull between gusts I listened to the thin, passionate voice coming over to me in triumph and supplication. When it ended I got up and opened the shutters. Then I switched off the transistor, which had almost gone completely dead now, and half-dozed until Madame Aglaia knocked.

When Madame Aglaia came into my room again she was carrying a crucible of burning incense. She looked determined, defiant, but said nothing. Surprised, I watched her as she walked around the room making the sign of the cross with the crucible. Large dramatic arcs of smoke swirled before her, hung for a moment in the shape she'd given them, then began to drift together and sink to the floor.

I liked the smell of the incense. It seemed to be the counterpart in smoke of Madame Aglaia's camomile tea and, for a moment, I almost thought that this was the sole purpose behind what she was doing – a new way to bring me some

temporary relief. But as she stood by my bed with the crucible, I had the pleasant feeling that she had the power to turn my austere room into a church. The picture faded and I was watching a squat woman with a pale, ill face furiously shaping the last wisp of incense smoke into the semblance of a cross. But, even then, I wasn't sure that I'd been wrong. "The three of us ill at the same time. Look at you – you can hardly breathe!"

It wasn't merely the fault of germs and bad weather. Madame Aglaia was convinced there was a malicious power that wanted to see us down. The evil eye, the *kakomati*, had been put on us, and Madame Aglaia had decided to drive it away.

"Do you really believe in the *kakomati*?" I asked her.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Why not?"

"But who'd do something like that to us?"

She looked at me, ironically patient. "If I knew that, Mr. Jim..." And then she unexpectedly grinned and said: "Besides, if you ask a priest to cleanse the flat it costs fifty piastres." She laughed and I laughed too, wheezily.

She left the room to reload the crucible. A couple of minutes later I heard her arguing with Spiro but he wasn't up to protesting much that morning. After she'd finished his room, banging the door shut as she left, she went into hers. Then she did the kitchen, the lavatory and shower-room, and finally I heard her moving up the long hall, from the window outside my bedroom to the table where we ate, and then to where the hall bent sharply left up to the door – driving the evil vigorously before her. I imagined a huge eye dumped out on the landing, sitting in the air at about face level, glaring in at us, exiled, trounced by Madame Aglaia and her spiritual broom.

I started reading through the draft again. I must sit straight-backed, calm, and try to prise out the right lines, the right structure.

The washerwoman arrived, croaking in protest as Madame Aglaia, fired with her cleansing chided her for being late. I looked forward to the old woman tapping on the door and going through her usual performance for a cigarette. There was an innocence in her that my Peter Pan's mockery, by contrast, had only made more certain.

I checked on the inhaler and then went through my asthmatic's ritual once more; fifty times up one nostril, fifty times up the other. I had a brief sneezing fit afterwards which seemed to jolt my lungs a little looser. The smell of the incense hung heavily in the room, musty now and mingling strangely with the vinegary smell of the inhaler fuel, like some kind of medicinal, holy snuff.