

When I suddenly saw her

in *shari'* Irfan I almost spluttered with shock. I had recognized her without a moment's hesitation. Immediately I went over to her. When I shook her hand I found it was flabby in mine, limp and nerveless.

Her blue three-quarter-length jacket hung down over a silky dress which looked dark red in the shadow of the street. It was probably made out of the parachute silk, sold in bulk in the Ladies' Alley, which came from the job-lots of English goods abandoned in the warehouses after the war.

She panted and clung to my arm all the way up the four flights of stairs. I imagined stealthy eyes fixing me from behind the closed doors. The room was very cold in that winter weather. I shut the door behind me – and found her in my arms. The touch of her finely-chiselled lips was soft and warm in the cold; mobile, lively lips. Her trembling abated in my embrace. She put her arm over the side of my face and covered it completely. I could no longer hear anything in the world except the clamour of her body leaning gently against mine.

The lamp light was a gentle glow on one side of the room. It lit up an area of white wall, one corner of the smooth and shining white bed, and the sunflower. The water had dried in the vase and the glowing petals had withered into a hard tenacious stiffness. The rest of the room lay in a secret gloom, the double wooden picture frame on the wall barely discernible. There were two pictures in the frame, cut out from books, and there was no glass. One was Albert Cossery and the other Leon Trotsky.

My eyes met hers. They were large, pale, very close to mine and just now slightly hollow. There were wrinkles around them, very fine in the smooth dark skin, and it was as if they did not see me because they were enveloping me in their fixed and solid waves. But in my arms she was an inexplicable freedom, and oblivion.

I had come out of prison after a two-year stretch. Now only the last batch of internees was still inside. My friends who had worked for the cause had grown older and had lost their enthusiasm for the acts of insurgency they had undertaken in their youth. They avoided me until they were convinced that I too had despaired of it all. I didn't even read *al-Ahram* any more.

Ramleh station seemed to belong to another country, one I did not know and in which I knew no one. The imperial palm-trees were barren, two opposing rows of tall elegant flaxen-plaited trees, strangers to me. And the people whom I had imagined that I loved with the love of Christ and Trotsky combined had passed away into their own lives, their own diversions and seriousness, into the town tram and the Ramleh tram, far, far away.

After prison my engineering diploma was a burden. I did not know how I would manage to support myself, my mother and my sisters. I gave up taking the tram and when I walked, lonely and troubled, to Ramleh station each afternoon I did not buy so much as a thirteen-millieme bottle of pop on the way. I didn't have enough in my pocket for that. My philosophical cynicism, my poetical bitterness over all of this was intolerable. What was the meaning of this deprivation? Why was it important? But in spite of the childishness of this speculation it was, even so, extremely depressing.

So I concealed the fact that I had a diploma. As I knew a couple of words of English and French I finally managed to get a job as a 'workshop assistant' with a Franco-Egyptian building company in order to earn ten pounds a month, which was fortune indeed since Egyptian engineers were not the objects of welcome and acceptance, not even by companies in 1950. After that I moved my family, my possessions and my love from Raghieb Pasha to Cleopatra; for as soon as I had begun working with that

company I had fallen thunderstruck in love with my Ni'ma, my steadfast rock. But even so my despair was total, of life, love, politics and poetry.

In the morning, half-asleep after sitting-up late with Mallarmé, when I was in the bus which followed the shore and stopped in front of the Cecil Hotel, where I changed for the bus to Dikheila – it was then that I saw the tanks, armoured cars and troop carriers clattering along the Corniche. The noise was whipped away by the sea breeze so that they seemed to have nothing to do with the city or the people living there. They were heading towards Ras el-Tin, it was not clear why. It did not look serious or threatening to me; they gave no cause for alarm. The waves at el-Mina el-Sharqiya looked artificially blue as they beat against the big crooked slabs of cement hidden underwater there. The edges broke the surface by the wall of the Corniche but there was no surf. The few people around, some barefoot in long tunics, others in short-sleeved shirts or complete summer suits – they all stopped for a moment. Some of them called out unenthusiastically for God to bring victory to the Egyptian army. There it was: the most important event in our recent history, happening before my eyes without my taking the least account of it. Or understanding what it meant.

*Those pages are extracted from **Edwar al-Kharrat's** Girls of Alexandria, translated by the Oxford-based novelist **Frances Liardet** (Quartet Books, 1993).*