

I had not thought about it

ahead of time or planned for it. I had been wondering, ever since the bus filled up with the sixty workers and left the company gate, why they had chosen me. There was no reason for me to be afraid, but at the same time I did not feel particularly encouraged.

The bus went down Maks street, through the Qabbari area, then Kafr Ashri and Basal Port, and entered Sabaa Binat Street, and all the while I neither spoke to anybody nor did anybody speak to me.

How did I fail to notice the journey? It was only a short distance, but it was quite distinctive, for at the intersection at the end of Maks Street there is always a traffic jam, and the intersection is always crowded with carts, trucks, trailers, the bus and the tram, and you can hear a woman scream. Suddenly the tranquillity of the rest of Maks Street, and the serenity of the buildings on both sides of it disappear. Those buildings always make you feel that you are walking alone at night, but after that damned intersection, the noise never stops chasing you.

As soon as you reach the History Bridge, the smell of stored

cotton and jute assails you, a musty smell mixed with that of the grains stored in the ancient granaries of the Credit Bank. You see a man pissing with his face to the wall of the granaries, and another taking a dump by the wall with his face to the street. The road becomes rough, and the bus goes bumping over it, while the tram, which is usually running alongside the bus, goes on rattling.

But when you reach the intersection of Basal Port, where Khedive and the Sabaa Binat Streets meet, the place is refreshing, because of the height of the buildings, and the width of Khedive Street, which ends at the port. There you can sleep in peace. But we had passed all this...

My head almost hit the ceiling when I stood up. I bent a little and surveyed their faces. I felt like shouting insults at them for their strange silence. Alexandria is usually filled with bright light at this time of the year, its sea stretching leisurely into the distance, while the windows of its houses open like a woman drying her hair in the sunlight, and the girls stroll cheerfully in the streets.

I knew that the sudden traffic jam from Sidi Gabir Station to the white palace of Ras at-Tin would not disturb the city, would not mar its appearance. And here she is: I am now out of that traffic jam, but Sabaa Binat Street seems to be at peace with the vehicles driving on it, with the stores on its sides, open but quiet. Later, I heard one of the people who were in the traffic jam say that it did not last long, and I can testify on that account, for how could you, otherwise, explain the relaxed atmosphere of Sabaa Binat Street, as if what happened in the city did not concern it?

This little city is enchanted; it can rid itself of its garbage even when the garbage collectors and street cleaning trucks do not appear on its streets. It is as if she had an agreement with secret ghosts to keep her beautiful.

"Of course you know that you will each get half a Pound after the reception..." I said.

"What do you say you each take a quarter of a Pound now, and then just leave?" I said, and I must have frowned, because I felt my eyes getting wider.

"You mean we don't get to see Nixon?" one of them asked.

"It is up to you if you want see him or not," another answered.

The driver stopped the bus when I told him to, and the workers got off, laughing. I don't think that the traffic policeman at the end of the street cared about the bus blocking the intersection of Haqaniya marketplace, obstructing the tram and the pedestrian crossing.

As for my mother, who must have been in the small courtyard of the house, throwing wet bread crumbs to the chickens, I do not think that her heart fluttered, or her chest felt tight, at the moment when her son, who had the strange name, committed a crime...

It was not yet one o'clock when I found myself on the sidewalk in front of the Crystal Cafe, where I had been sitting to watch. The parade had passed, and the crowds had slipped down the side alleys leading to Manshiya and Raml Station. The space around me appeared white and clear, with the endless blue sea, the immense sky, and me standing alone as if I had showed up after the end of the world. I almost laughed at the thought of a new world beginning with me. Then I shivered. It would be difficult to be Adam, and more difficult to have a world empty of everybody except me.

I never noticed when the people who had lined up on the sidewalk by the wall along the seashore crossed the street. Maybe they all retreated, and fell into the sea. I saw a single man in the distance, where the shore curves and disappears, and the view is taken up by tall buildings from which the pier to the castle of Qaitbay seems to extend. *Maybe the people followed the parade to the Palace, and this man is their tail end. But not enough time has passed for that to happen, and I would not have missed it.*

I pictured the president's wide glowing smile, Nixon's astonished smile, his red face and prominent cheeks, and his right arm waving as if painting an endless wall.

On both sides of the convertible, which was as wide as some mythical duck, there were two Americans, whose eyes were fixed on the high windows overlooking the street. Each had his hand resting on a gun at his side. Why was the one on the water's edge looking up, when there was nothing over the sea but the open sky?

I stuck my hands in the pockets of my pants, spat the cigarette butt out of my mouth in the skillful manner that I had now mastered, and walked on, thinking about my mind, and the

strange ways in which it was working.

Sixty times a quarter of a Pound equals fifteen. I made twelve. I thought of giving the driver five Pounds, because I figured that any money that he got would implicate him in this act, but then I gave him three, and smiled at the slyness with which I was suddenly acting.

I crossed Chamber of Commerce Street, and entered Sa'ad Zaghlul street. I glanced to my left, and saw the people sitting outside the Brazilian Coffee Store drinking coffee. The girls were wearing such tight skirts that they revealed the edges of their panties digging into the firm flesh, and light shirts through which their bras were showing.

"Cappuccino," I said to the man behind the espresso machine, who then looked up at me. Is there anything wrong? Is it because I am tall? Because I have come into the shop alone? There were young couples sitting and whispering in every corner of the shop. Standing alone among them, I discovered that I could not look around. It would be an invasion of their privacy, and would oblige people to raise their eyes quite high to look back at me.

"Pardon me!" said the girl who almost bumped into me as she rushed into the store. Then she took a step backward, and nearly fell down the steps at the entrance. I held her arm, and felt my fingers press into her soft flesh. The smell of her perfume invaded and shattered me. It seemed as if my clothes fluttered, and my nose widened at the invasion. I bought a newspaper from a nearby newsstand, and walked away with the sensation of her cool flesh still on my fingers. I did not care what the man behind the espresso machine said when I left before he had finished preparing my coffee.

On Safiya Zaghlul Street, I realized that my feet alone were deciding on my route. I love this street, and no one has ever liked the Alhambra Cinema as much as I. It used to open early in the day, and the students always came then. It must still do so. We used to wait for a full hour before the movie started. The washed floors had a familiar smell, faint lamps were spread far apart on both sides of the theater, and the bathroom had a distinctive light. There was a spontaneous seating arrangement, as if whole schools came into the theater, and not just individual students. And there were exchanges of insults:

"The School of Commerce at Muharram Bey salutes the

Crafts School. May Allah provide! May Allah provide! Seven crafts in hand, but it's luck we demand. Tra la la la..."

"Alexandria School of Crafts salutes Abbasiah High. Rain falls from the sky. Fish, out of water, die!" "Abbasiah High salutes The School of Commerce. Spiro Spatis betrayed the nation. Spiro Spatis betrayed the nation..." Meanwhile, the light of the bathroom remained distinctively visible.

It was quite a while before the show started. Then came the famous song: "My beloved nation, my grand nation, day after day its glories increase and its life fills with victories. My nation is growing and becoming liberated. My nation. My nation." Everyone sang along. Then came the cheer: "Long live the good-for-nothing generation!"

As the movie started, so did the whistling, while the light of the bathroom remained distinctively visible. The steam engine runs between Marilyn Monroe's thighs. Jack Lemon leaves his apartment to his boss, who brings Shirley MacLaine to it. Reeve Valen rapes Sophia Loren at the coal store. Gina Lollabrigida jumps into the circus ring with Tony Curtis. Burt Lancaster smiles idiotically at Gary Cooper. Kirk Douglas sadly touches the belly of Jean Simmons, who is pregnant with his son, the son of Spartacus. Jack Sirnas kidnaps Rosanna Podesta, and starts the Trojan Wars. Steve Reeves plucks out a tree and throws it in front of the cart whose horses have bolted. A strange man, who is sitting next to me, says that he had personally known this Hercules before he got into the movies. The door to the bathroom opens every minute, and while my face remains turned towards the screen, my animal calls for that door. When I feel the warmth on my thighs, I put my legs apart, and then I get up. I am not the only one spilling himself on the bathroom floor. It was very crowded, and each person is looking intently at the floor to hide the well known secret. All I see are bushy heads of hair...

Why do I remember all these useless details now? It is all over, and it was not even a conscious decision on my part. I do not go to the movies or think about my animal any more. Is it possible that I have forgotten about it? Well, I should not let it distract me now, I should only look ahead.

The street was as clean as it always is. It gives me the familiar feeling that it is mine. I am the one who designed it, and designated its beginning and end. Here is the usual morning

IBRAHIM
ABDEL MEGUID

The House of Jasmine

breeze blowing gently with the taste of fresh spring water. The noon sun sheds only its brightest and most tender rays. It seems like it has been years since I last walked down this street! Why am I suddenly realizing all of this?

I thought of throwing the newspaper in the nearest trash can, so I could be alone. I was busy catching the breeze, scented with women's perfumes. My eyes raced with the sun's rays over their brilliant legs. I did not want to sit at the spacious and loud pool club. Hani was always the winner there. I had run into him three years ago near the telephone office. He was laughing constantly as he usually did. How can a sergeant in the army laugh so hard in a public square? But I was glad. He did not ignore me. I asked him if Rashid still knew all of Abdel Halim's songs by heart. He said that Rashid had finished Medical school, and joined the army, and that he did not see him any more. The army is a big place... He also said that no one leaves the army these days.

"Haven't you been drafted by the army?" he asked.

"I am an only son, as you know," I answered.

"So you are responsible for the home front," he said, and giggled freely. Then he told me that it had been a long time since he came to this place at Raml station, and that he was there to make a telephone call to his fiancée in Cairo. Then he left.

"Breaded veal." I said.

"I'm sorry, but we don't have them today," said the handsome black waiter. I did not know what else to order, and I had not realized that there was a menu on the table. At Elite, there were always dating couples, and you could always hear them kissing. Hani used to tell us amazing stories. He said that he joined the Military Academy to get the largest number of girls to fall in love with him. What brought me to Elite just now?

I had stopped in front of Rialto Cinema, enchanted by the pictures hanging outside the box-office. Jane Mansfield was still at the center of the pictures with her big bosom almost ready to jump into my hands. But I had stopped collecting her postcard photographs to take them to the bathroom with me at home. I had stopped buying postcard photographs at all, and the factories have also stopped producing soap bars with pictures of nude women on their wrappers. It must have been a government decision. It must also have been the government which changed the kinds and brands of soap. It did not know that I had already

quit my bad habit without any conscious decision on my part.

I had not thrown away the newspaper yet. I let it fall out of my hand. I saw a young couple looking at the pictures while holding hands. They were glancing at me, then whispering to each other and smiling. I bent down to pick up the newspaper, and felt a pain in my stomach, so I crossed the street, and came to Elite.

"Why isn't there breaded veal?"

"There are no eggs. We ran out suddenly."

"Shrimp then. Large grilled shrimp, and beer."

I was not going to retreat. At the tables, there were young men sitting with women ripe with both femininity and happiness, and the music was what you could call dreamy. Why this silence following my entry? The atmosphere may be sweet but it also invites sleep. with no kisses or whispers around me, I lit a cigarette, found the menu on the table, and started reading it. Will there be more orders to take the workers out to greet the President? He always visits Alexandria on the twenty-sixth of July. He practically moves his headquarters to Alexandria during the summer now. My fortune, therefore, lies in those who will visit the President during the summer. But... Oh God! The relationship between Egypt and Syria has been strained, between Egypt and Libya, between Egypt and the Soviet Union, between Egypt and the Palestinians. At least four leaders will decide not to visit Egypt this year, perhaps even more. The waiter had placed a bottle of beer on my table, and I had drunk it all. My stomach hurt. I drank the beer like water on an empty stomach. Now came the shrimp, its powerful aroma preceding it as the waiter rushed with it to the table. Now I thought that I should throw food into my stomach quickly. I ordered a second beer. My only hope is the twenty-sixth of July. What if he actually moved his headquarters to Alexandria before that date? There will not be any receptions. He cannot visit Alexandria if he is already here. Then it is all a matter of luck. I had a headache, which was strongest at the front of my head. I had never drunk any beer before.

I left after paying a whole six pounds, half the revenue of Nixon's visit. There were rumors in the city about American ships unloading mounds of butter and powdered milk, and the rumors were so strong that Hassanayn told me yesterday that the people of the Bahari and Anfushi areas were hogging the

foodstuffs, and depriving the rest of the people of any of it. It was also said that the American marines were giving out dollars in Manshiya, that helicopters were dropping sacks of flour tied to parachutes of Japanese silk, and that the parachutes were even better than the flour, because the cloth was so soft that it was perfect for making lingerie... None of this was true. The only person who gained anything from Nixon's visit is me, at least so far. It is a shame that Alexandria did not know that, and that I had wasted half of what I made. I was afraid that I might fall down on the street with my headache, drunkenness and stuffed stomach. It would be loud and comical, like the collapse of the Hafi Building. A tall person should never get drunk. Why did I take this little tour? Is this what thieves do? I had planned to buy a new dress and a pair of shoes for my mother. Why did I forget?

It was past three o'clock when I stood in front of the entrance of Elite. I was covered with sweat, and the weather was scorching. Safiya Zaghlul street was disappointing to me with its noise and glitter.

"Can you take me to Dikhayla?"

"Of course," answered the cab driver with a smile. I was not sure whether he was smiling at my height, at my posture as I bent down, or at the smell of beer coming from my mouth, but I could not care less about such happy people. I fell asleep, and he woke me up after we had passed Maks. I wiped away the sweat flowing down my neck. I gave him a whole Pound, twice what he deserved, and he was grateful.

The first thing that struck me in the house was its dirt floor. My father had covered it with a thin layer of concrete seven years ago. I took off my clothes and hung them on a hanger, together with all my other clothes. I put on my pajamas, and found a five piastre coin in one of the pockets. When, and why did I put it there? Mother must have eaten lunch alone, and not waited for me, for she was taking a nap. I lay down in bed, and lit a cigarette. I tried to blow the smoke strongly to make it reach the wooden ceiling, but it did not. I must have left the newspaper at Elite. I thought of selling the house, and of following international politics in the newspapers. What is this sudden sexual appetite?

I saw my mother standing at the door staring at me, as if in disbelief that I had come home alone. If only the President would

visit Alexandria on Mother's Day!

"What's the matter with you, Shagara?"

"Nothing. Just thinking about getting married."

Ibrahim Abdel Meguid is one of the most prodigious of Egypt's post-Mahfouz generation of novelists. Although he resides in Cairo, much of his fiction is set in his native Alexandria. This text is an extract from his novel, The House of Jasmine. Noha Radwan grew up in Cairo and teaches Arabic literature at the University of California in Berkeley.