That’s not to say life in Cairo was completely miserable. There were good times to be had year-round: some during our long summer, and quite a few during our short winter. Such times were, invariably, either days off work or days without it. They say the city never sleeps, they say it bursts at the seams. The city rotates and revolves. The city branches out. The city beats, the city bleeds.

In their places of work and worship, the people of this city swarm. They shop and scurry and go for a piss, so the Wheel of Production might go on spinning despite the traffic. That’s how it all looks, if you’re an eagle soaring up above. But if you’re just a little mouse of a man spinning inside that great Wheel, you never get to see the big picture. You go to work and do your job, and might even earn a reasonable salary. If, by some great fortune, you manage to see the fruit of your labors, it still won’t move you an inch. Whether you work or not, the Wheel of Production keeps on spinning, and the current carries you along.

Which brings me to the time Mona May and I went over with a group of friends to Moud’s apartment in Garden City. This was after a party at Youssef Bazzi’s place. We stayed up until the morning smoking hash and competing to finish a whole bottle of vodka. I remember seeing the music dissolve into monkeys that clung to the ceiling. There was a blonde German tapping her leg to the beat. Erections popping around the room. A young Palestinian-American, with poor Arabic, talking a lot about racism. Smoke, cigarettes, hashish. And more smoke.

“Bassam,” says Kiko, turning to me with a totally bloodshot look. “I’ve got smoke in my eyes.”

“Go easy on ’em, baby.”

I pull a tissue over her eyes and blow gently. The German girl watches with a confused look. As I pull the tissue away, my palm drips with the dark freshness of Kiko’s face. I plant a light kiss on her lips.
“Did you know there’s a kind of sexual fetish called ‘licking the pupil’?” says the German girl in English.

“How exactly do you mean?”

“Yeah, I read about that once,” interjects Moud.

“That’s disgusting,” objects Kiko, wrapping her arms around me.

What are your typical twenty-somethings to do in Cairo? Might they go for pupil licking? Are they into eating pussy? Do they like to suck cock, or lick dirt, or snort hash mixed with sleeping pills? Or one might ask how long it would take for any of these fetishes to lose its thrill. Are they good for life?

Everyone here has done lots of drugs, both during and after college. Yet here we all are, little islands unto ourselves, with no greater aspiration than to hang out together. We manage to stay alive by sucking our joy out of one another.

Mona May is standing next to the speakers. Her eyes are glazed over as though her soul’s been sucked up by the music monkeys on the ceiling, and her body sways to the beat.

After a while, taking drugs clearly got old. Or they were just not enough. And if one of us ever gave in to total addiction, his life would be over in a few months: this we know by trial and experience. Those of us left in this room are too chicken to end our lives in this or any other way, maybe because we still cling to some sort of hope, some sort of love or friendship.

For all that Cairo takes from its residents, it gives nothing in return – except, perhaps, a number of life-long friendships that are determined more by fate than any real choice. As the saying goes, “He who goes to Cairo will there find his equal.” There’s no such thing as smoking by yourself. And the food’s only got taste if you have someone to chow it down with, happily, carcinogens and all.

In this city, you’ll be lucky if you can get over your sexual tension, and appreciate sex as just one of the many facets of a friendship. Otherwise, your horniness will make you a testy bitch. Kiko rubs my back, and I feel a heat between my legs.
As dawn came up, Moud went to his room, and everyone else went home. Too lazy to head back to 6th of October City, I lay down and fell asleep on the couch. I woke up early with a slight headache, an army of ants marching in the space between my brain and my skull. I went to the bathroom and took one of the pills Moud had brought from overseas to fight hangovers. After taking a warm shower, I called Lady Spoon and agreed to breakfast at Maison Thomas in Zamalek.

On the way, the streets were washed over and empty of traffic. It’s a holiday: perhaps the Islamic New Year, or Victory Day, or Revolution Day, or Saltwater Catfish Day. Whatever it was, the city looked drowsy and everyone was checked out. At moments like this, I barely recognize the place. When I’m able to get from Qasr al-Aini to Zamalek in under 20 minutes, I almost feel like she’s decided to warm up to me. But I know that wicked smile on her face: She’s telling me, “At any moment, I can have you stuck in traffic for over an hour, with nothing to do but sit back and feel sorry for yourself as the noise of the streets slowly sucks the life out of you.” Open veins spewing blood all over the bathroom.

I met Lady Spoon outside the restaurant. She had on a long white dress showing her arms and a bit of cleavage.

“You smell really nice,” she said, kissing me on both cheeks.

“It’s Moud’s cologne.”

It was her neck that made me fall for her. She’s nine years older than me, but she knows how to stay youthful, exercising regularly and always eating healthy. She’s pretty, cheerful, and has a successful career in advertising. Unfortunately for her, she’s a Protestant and happens to love Egypt, and her chances of meeting someone with both these qualities in Cairo are slim at best. She studied overseas before spending quite a long time being terrified of getting married or settling down. Sometimes, she’d like to have children. She had been used to dating men who were older than her, but suddenly, they had stopped showing an interest. Those that did show interest didn’t interest her. This was the first time that she would be dating someone younger than her, which made her embarrassed to tell her friends.
The name “Lady Spoon” was given to her by Mona May. She saw her once at a concert wearing a pair of spoon-shaped earrings.

These were the same earrings she had on now. They swayed with the movement of her hand as she chopped a loaf of bread. In spite of the dryness in my throat, I’d been smoking since I woke up this morning. Cigarettes have a different sort of taste with the morning breeze in Zamalek: something resembling bliss, desire, a softness in violet and orange.

Our breakfast was eggs, along with slices of the finest quality pork, imported from abroad. After honey, jam, and a glass of orange juice, I’m back to life. As the poet says, “You ain’t you when you’re hungry.” At Maison Thomas, her smile nudges me awake under a white bed.

We walked around the streets of Zamalek in the direction of her apartment. She had a thin silver bracelet around her ankle and toenails painted red. Sometimes we would walk hand in hand, and sometimes with my arm around her waist. Under the shade of the trees, we laughed. We shot smiles at the officers standing guard outside different embassies, but their solemn demeanor didn’t change.

I thought … Do I love her?

Of course I love her. I can’t touch a woman I don’t love. But then, what is love exactly? It’s a relaxing of the heart, a tranquility in your soul, a warmth in your stomach. It’s like any love in Cairo, always ready to disappear. A lover of companionship.

In her apartment, we smoked a joint of hash. I rubbed her knee as she played around on her computer looking for an old Madonna song. I lifted her dress above her knees and slid to the floor. Nestling between her legs, I lifted up her foot and started licking her big toe. I walked my tongue in gentle taps along her leg until I reached her knee, which I pummeled with kisses.

“It tickles,” she giggled in English.

I gave her knee a parting kiss, and continued my tongue’s journey up her thigh. I planted a kiss, soft as a butterfly, on her thinly lined underwear and pulled it away with my hands. I plunged my tongue into her pussy. I drank a lot that night. I drank until I felt thirsty. I gave her a full ride.
with my tongue before she took me into her room, where we had slow and leisurely sex. She turned over, and I put my fingers in her mouth. Wet with her saliva, I stuck them in her pussy. Slipping and sliding. I stuck them in from behind. I grabbed her short hair and pulled it towards me. I humped her violently and then lay on top of her for a few seconds. I got out of bed and threw the condom into the trash. As I gave her a smile, the phone rang.

“Hey dude, where you at?”

“Mona … What’s up. I’m in Zamalek.”

“So, you still up for a beer tonight?”

“Maybe ..”

“I’m with Samira. We’re going up to Muqattam Mountain.”

“So you’ve got a car?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay then. Why don’t you come pick me up in Zamalek?”

“When?”

She climbed out of bed with a gentle smile. Sex was over now. We’ve still got some friendship and goodwill on our faces. People are eating each other alive out there, so why can’t we keep things civil?

“How about in an hour or so.”

“Let’s make it an hour and a half. Outside Diwan bookstore.”

“Okay.”

“Bye.”

“See you later.”

After a quick shower, I gave her a kiss and a pat on the ass, which was my way of showing gratitude, or something like that. My hair was still wet as I went out. On the way to Diwan, I whistled to myself those words, “Okay … Bye … See you later.” I had a smoke in front of Diwan’s display window, which was full of those trashy English books that sell best in airports and
supermarkets – the kind that soak your mind in grease and fry your heart in oil. It won’t be long before they start selling them with Kentucky Fried Chicken. I tried calling Mona, but she didn’t respond. Then I caught her sticking out her head and waving at me from Samira’s car. Her hair blew in the breeze, or maybe it was just the loud music spilling out of the radio. Flags fluttered along the street, the car stopped, and I hopped in.

In order to get to Muqattam Mountain, we had to pass through the decaying remnants of the Old City. Oddly enough, it took us only seven minutes to get from Zamalek to Abd al-Khaliq Tharwat Street. On a typical day, it might take us a full hour and a half to get to the Azhar Bridge at the end of Abd al-Khaliq Tharwat, but on an atypical day, like this one, Cairo seemed to be liberally bestowing her gifts on all those traversing her streets.

All this emptiness was due to a lack of spare change on holidays like today. The streets, especially downtown, take on a completely different appearance. Mona’s wearing a long skirt of some light fabric. I stick my head between the seats and see she’s bunched up her skirt in her lap and is rolling a joint. I’m distracted by the glow of her knees, and Samira’s turning up the music. Jimmy Hendrix’s guitar shrieks like a hen laying its first egg. I open the window as we pass over the Azhar Bridge, and imagine I catch a whiff of cumin, pepper and spices. As we exit the bridge and enter the Husayn district, I smell some burnt coffee beans which, without being an expert, I can tell are of poor quality. The scent fills my nostrils. Among the tombs in the City of the Dead, the smell of liver fried in battery acid lingers like a rain cloud. We finally emerge from the torrent of odors that fills Cairo all the way to the edge of Muqattam Mountain. We go to Bar Virginia and order some beers.

We only talked about things that would lighten the mood: films we’d seen recently, some interesting new music, tales of the wonders and oddities recited by taxi drivers, the jesters of the city.

The sun is about to set, and Cairo’s laid out before us like a grid, a two-dimensional image from Google Earth. In the middle of this mess of satellite dishes, horrendous looking houses and
high buildings, there appears one of the city’s old ponds. It’s a small spot of water, the last that remains of the many pools left over from the Nile after it was circumcised by the Aswan High Dam. In the background there echoes the voice of Muhammad Muhyi, singing a song by Hafni Ahmad Hasan.

A gentle breeze blows. Condensation collects on the green bottles of beer. A moist handshake of appreciation between the beer and its connoisseur.

Samira’s fooling around with her phone. Mona takes her beer and clinks it with mine. Her smile, a lock of her hair blown by the wind, and Cairo at sunset in the background. For a few moments, I feel something resembling happiness.

Revenge Has No Place in Modern Life (2)

I made only two visits to the secret bunker underneath Garden City. The first time, it was just me and Ihab Hassan. The second time, Madam Dolet joined us too, as the three of us took shelter from the evil spirits that prowled the streets above. It was the beginning of the Storm.

The location of our bunker was a secret even to many in the Society of Urbanists. The Society – or should I call it the Organization? I don’t really know the difference – kept a well-maintained archive of the mysteries and truths it had discovered over the millennia. Yet its contents remained scattered and dispersed beyond the control of any single member: were it all to be assembled, no mortal could withstand its blinding light.

Ihab only found out about this place by chance. He had been investigating the construction of Cairo’s sewer system when he learned of an obscure faction within the Society that, long ago,
had obsessively set about constructing complicated networks of tunnels under major cities. These tunnels led only to empty rooms. With time, many of them disappeared. Some became rivers, or filled up with ground water. A few, however, remained intact. In the 1950s, this information was brought to the attention of one of the Organization’s leading members, who went on to form a secret sub-committee dedicated to the maintenance of the tunnel networks in several locations around the world: Cairo; the suburbs of London; Washington, D.C.; Rio De Janeiro; several boroughs of New York City, with the exception of Manhattan; Port Said; Santiago; and so on. Ihab became privy to these networks as well, but the other members of the administrative council – including Paprika herself – remained totally unaware of their existence, save for the more famous ones such as the catacombs of Paris.

It was during my first visit to the Garden City bunker that Ihab unloaded on me his whole family history, beginning with the story of his grandfather Hassan and the “idealistic crazies” – his words – of Egypt’s nineteenth-century Renaissance. He wound it all up by lamenting his current plight as the Organization’s chief administrator. He was at war, and defeat for his side meant nothing less than global apocalypse.

I didn’t get why he was telling me all this. When I asked him, he replied with the simplicity of a man peeling a peanut: “Because you’re an intelligent young man, someone I can trust. Besides, you’re not one of them.”

He paused, before confessing, “I want you to make me a website.” After repeated attempts to explain himself, he suggested we create something similar to WikiLeaks. Being an intelligent young man, it wasn’t difficult to guess what he was after.

“So we're talking about exposing the Organization?” I asked.

“You want to play this game with me?” he countered. “I mean, like most kids your age, you’re not easy to impress. I get it. But don’t you want to make something of yourself, to have your own story to tell to future generations?”

I accepted the offer, perhaps because I really was worried about turning twenty-five without
having a good story to tell. My life might pass by in a single shade of misery. This “game” opened a new window and gave me the energy to jump through.

Mona had recently been telling me about how disgusted she was with her job at some local programming company, so I shared the offer with her as a possible way out. Ihab had promised to pay cash, out of his own pocket. She was unimpressed at first.

“Dude, I don’t do websites. I’m in IT. You know what IT is?”

“But you’ve done websites before, no?”

“Way back, when I was in college.”

“Alright, why don’t you come over and meet this guy. Just to make his acquaintance.”

I can say without a doubt that the look on Mona’s face when she first met Ihab was unlike any I’d ever seen. She was actually impressed. This guy was legit. It was love at first sight, and when Ihab brought out a bottle of aged wine, it was like he’d tickled her clitoris with his tongue.

“I’m screaming with excitement,” she said with a voice as soft as honey.

I wanted some excitement too, and getting my cock sucked wouldn’t quite do the trick. I needed to discover a whole different erotic zone. I needed someone to dig a well in my side and accidentally hit upon a site of pleasure long buried under layers of skin, spleen, and bullshit. I needed, not so simply, Mona May. I don’t totally buy everything Ihab’s telling me, but I wouldn’t totally reject any of it either. What he has to say blows like a gentle breeze on my face, and I can sense something new on the horizon.

“Let’s follow the light,” Mona says, “and catch fire like a bunch of moths.”

And so she returned to her old hobby of web design. Of course, this meant she would meet Ihab often, alone, without me. Of course, they developed something of a relationship. Was I jealous?

Of course not. The whole thing was so cute it was enchanting, and I was content to see the joy on their faces each time they were together. To see her finally regain her appetite for life was enough to make me feel optimistic. “Someday I’ll get what I want,” I started telling myself.
“Someday I’ll succeed.”

I only wished, sometimes, that I could be part of their relationship, something of a third rib.

I wished the same thing with Reem and Paprika. I wanted only to exist in their presence. I realized for the first time that this was the kind of love I needed: to be that sort of “third party,” suspended somewhere between reality and delusion.

When I met with Reem to be briefed on the topic of the third film, I felt for the first time that Society had swallowed me whole. It was as if my whole life were a puzzle, a network of mazes designed by one the Society’s architects, sprawling underneath the city of Cairo.

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This time we met at Cilantro in Dokki. The first surprise she had for me was arriving all alone, without Paprika. The second surprise was a red scarf wrapped around her head, which I would later realize was a hijab. And the third and final surprise: this was to be a 45-minute film about her, the one and only Reem Saeed.

“I’ve been trying to quit,” she said, asking me if I could spare a cigarette. I gave her a light. She puffed out a thin cloud of smoke as the waiter took away our coffee.