

1

May 1948. The sun, shining vertically on Cairo, prevailed mercilessly in the middle of the sky, unchallenged. The clouds, unable to resist the blazing rays, had dispersed into oblivion. It was as if the furious sun was whipping the city with its scorching flames for some unknown catalogue of wrongs. Street dogs and cats put aside their age-old enmity and sought refuge in whatever shade they could find. Children played marbles in the lobbies of their buildings; less fortunate ones played outside with the lids of soft-drink bottles and apricot stones. Hawkers of cooked *ful*, grains, vegetables, fruit, clothes, and household appliances stationed their carts, each in its designated place, and cried out their wares. In spite of the merciless heat, El-Wehda Street throbbed with animation.

The people of the street had learned to accept nature's moods and to live with it. *Fate*, they called it. They accepted what they could not alter. It was a sort of faith that was rooted deeply in their hearts, helping them to maintain values from long-past and unremembered ages. They were simple people. Their ultimate dream was to earn their daily bread and to live in peace. Sometimes, even that was too much to ask when life decided to be unfair.

The buildings in the district, with cracks lining their bare bricks, looked as pale and ancient as haggard old people. Among them stood the house of El-Arabi, occupying the centre of the main street and overlooking a side street. It was a small building, but was nonetheless eye-catching because of its prominent location. El-Arabi had rented out a two-room flat on the ground floor to Nagy and Musa, each sharing

one room with their wives, while his own family occupied the flat on the first floor. His carpentry shop was on the street level of the building, alongside a plumbing shop rented out to Nagy.

As was his habit, El-Arabi sat with Nagy and his son-in-law Kamal in front of his shop, chatting and whiling away time until customers came with new assignments. El-Arabi wore a dark-brown head cap and a long, light-brown *gallabiia*. His sleeves, rolled up to his elbows, revealed the muscular forearms of a carpenter. His brows, thick and bushy, shadowed his beady eyes, which at first glance seemed cunning and greedy. As soon as he started talking, however, those same beady eyes radiated the kindness of El-Arabi's heart. He was everybody's friend, smiled at everyone, and was well known for his empathy. He was pious, but without running to extremes. With his gentle manner, simple heart, and humorous temperament, he could dissolve any discord between himself and others, even if he had to reconcile himself to an unfavourable outcome.

Kamal, too, was a carpenter. He stood six foot tall, with a square jaw, long nose, trimmed moustache, and broad shoulders. His eyes looked dreamy, and welled up easily; but far from indicating weakness, this stemmed from simple values and a stalwart idealism. His eyes radiated the glow of his ambitious spirit, which was unbreakable, untamed. His education was interrupted at high school, when he dropped out to work with El-Arabi in order to support his family upon the death of his father, but his love of reading did not abandon him after he left school. His dreams were greater than his financial ability, and reading in his spare time was his only means of self-education.

When Kamal first saw Amina, his heart skipped a beat and he felt something mysterious stir within him. He felt himself born anew. Was it her beauty that attracted him? But her face was not the sort that turned men's heads. It was not out-of-this-world beauty: it was serene as the desert night, quiet as the stream of the Nile, and soft as a touch of light paint on canvas. It was not her beauty that caught his eye, but something more that gripped his soul and attached it to hers. He could see in her wide black, kohl-lined eyes a sparkle of light that his soul

yearned to follow, and in her wheaten complexion he saw the colour of sand kissed by rays of sunlight. When he looked in her eyes, he whispered to himself:

*When I see you, my words fall away
I look beyond your eyelashes
And see deep oceans
On which the seagull of my heart migrates
Leaving the human world
For a bright world of purity
Void of flame
Full of innocence
And angelic beauty.*

It did not take much for him to recognise her as his soul mate, the other half that rendered him complete. He loved her with every speck of his being, and discerning what it was he loved about her bore no significance to him. He felt that the only natural thing he could do was simply to love her, as though their match were divinely predestined. And thus, they finally married.

As for Nagy, the plumber, although his build was small at five-foot-six, he was nonetheless vigorous and sinewy. He had smiling eyes and was clean-shaven except for a neatly trimmed moustache. He was honest and tended to be more emotional than rational. On many occasions, his emotions carried him to undesirable ends. He admired Kamal's glowing spirit and vivacious mind. Whatever they discussed, Nagy would readily and trustfully believe what Kamal advocated. Being neighbours in both residence and vocation brought Kamal and Nagy closer together in mind and heart. It was their habit to sit in front of their shops chatting when no jobs were at hand.

Khaleel, the eighteen-year-old coffeehouse boy, hastened toward them in slippers, a head-cap, and a grey *gallabiia*. He carried a tray with

three glasses of steaming red tea, which he did every day at this time.

'Here's the best tea for the best men!' he said vividly as he set the tray down on a stool.

'I hope it's better than yesterday's dishwater!'

'Trust me, *Hag Arabi*; it's the best tea you'll ever drink.'

'Huh. This is all we ever get from you, Khaleel.' El-Arabi clucked his tongue disapprovingly, then turned to Kamal and Nagy, 'We Egyptians are masters of sweet words that we never fulfil.'

'I'll be damned if you don't like my tea today. Just taste it and you'll thank me for it.'

'Okay, Khaleel. *Only deep waters are a real test for divers*,' said Kamal, smiling.

They sipped their tea with a hearty slurp, as they always did, as though to tell one another, 'It's time for tea now, let's enjoy it!'

El-Arabi nodded and hummed his approval.

'Lucky you, Khaleel! *Hag Arabi* liked your tea!' Nagy reassured the boy with a pat on his arm.

'You pass the test today,' added Kamal.

A smile of pride spread over Khaleel's face. 'At your service. Do you need anything else?'

El-Arabi thanked him, saying that they needed nothing for the time being. Khaleel saluted them, stamping his right foot dustily into the ground like a soldier, then left as briskly and happily as he had come.

'Nice lad,' said El-Arabi.

'I hope working for El-King won't turn him into a villain,' said Kamal.

'So do I. May Allah protect him from the evils of his master,' said El-Arabi.

With an ailing mother and two sisters to support, Khaleel, like many others, needed to work for El-King. Imposing his might on the district, the powerful *ma'alleem* gave his subordinates only the minimum needed to keep their loyalty. He knew he could sustain their allegiance as long as they were living from hand to mouth.

El-Arabi wiped his sweaty forehead. 'Why don't you splash some water in front of the shop? It's so hot.'

Obediently, Kamal opened a cabinet in his shop, pulled out a worn plastic hose, and connected it firmly to the water tap. Nagy opened the tap and Kamal splashed water outside the shop to cool the parched ground, turning the dust into stiff mud. A faint cool breeze rose off the wet pavement, drying up the droplets of sweat rolling down the men's faces.

'I wonder why Musa hasn't paid the rent so far,' mused El-Arabi. He combed his fingers through his greying beard, and his bushy brows almost covered his narrowing eyes.

'Why don't you remind him?'

'It's quite embarrassing, Nagy. He's been settling it punctually for months. And I know he's now rich enough to pay it easily.'

'Do you want me to remind him tonight?'

'Yes, Nagy, please do. It'll be more embarrassing for both him and me if I have to remind him myself.'

'It's your right and there should be no embarrassment in it,' said Nagy. He reached for his glass of tea and took a long sip, his eyes watching El-Arabi closely to see if that was all. El-Arabi lipped his thanks with a nod.

As they continued to sip their tea appreciatively, El-King, garbed in a long black cloak over a white silk caftan, approached them with his distinctive slow, well-measured gait. Striking the ground with his staff, he marked each firm step with a puff of dust – his way of drawing attention to his authority. The three men knew nothing good would come from him, and the silence among them thickened uncomfortably.

Seeing him was the stillness that preceded the storm. Talking to him would be the storm itself. They braced themselves for bad news and put down their tea glasses, their faces yellowing with the sickening of their hearts. It was not El-King's habit to approach people. He summoned them to his coffeehouse instead. This departure from his routine caused them even greater worry.

'*Salamu aleikum*,' his hoarse voice roared.

They greeted him respectfully, but struggled to suppress their hatred and fear. When the *ma'alleem* walked down the street, fear lurked in every nook and cranny. It sneaked into people's hearts and showed in their eyes. It was the only instrument El-King understood for dealing with people, and one on which he built his kingdom.

Nagy offered El-King a wooden chair and El-Arabi called out to Khaleel to bring a glass of tea right away.

'I've just finished one. You're a kind man, *Hag Arabi*,' said El-King with a fleeting sidelong glance at El-Arabi as he waved at Khaleel to cancel the order.

'I won't waste your time. You know why I've come to see you.'

He sat with his back straight, in spite of his sixty years. The bags under his eyes, far from making him look worn, gave him a look of great authority. His two hands firmly grasped the head of the staff in front of him, and he looked like a well-fed lion proudly looking down on subordinate creatures. El-King never needed the staff to prop himself up. Rather, it was a prop to show his prestige and a manifestation of his intimidating power.

'Haven't you changed your mind?'

'Regarding what?' Anxiety seized El-Arabi's face.

'Your house. Do you still not want to sell it? I need this land and you know that I'll give you good money for it, good enough to buy a better house for your family,' said El-King calmly, trying to sound rational.

A moment of embarrassing silence tied their tongues. El-Arabi dithered for a while and seemed at a loss for words. His eyes darted worried looks, and tension built up within him.

'I'm sorry to disappoint you,' he summoned his composure and resumed, 'but I can't sell this house. You do not know how much I'm attached to this land. You are not the only one who has offered to buy it, but ... I just can't sell.'

An impatient look swept over El-King's face. He sighed and ground his teeth, barely suppressing his anger.

'I'm different from them all,' said El-King slowly, not bothering to conceal his pride.

‘You are our master and protector and we respect you. But please save me the embarrassment of refusing your offer.’

‘As you like, *Hag Arabi*,’ he said, knitting his brow, then continued with a threatening tone, his vanity on full display, ‘but I am not happy. You should know that. *Salamu aleikum*.’

With this, he stood up and looked down at El-Arabi from his full six feet. His face was red and he touched his grey moustache to make sure both sides were still erect. As he stalked away, his cloak flapped arrogantly about his gigantic body.

El-King was not accustomed to having his demands turned down. He knew he could take the house by force if that remained his only option. He had done so before with others, whose houses he gave to his relatives to inhabit. With El-Arabi, however, it was different, for he was respected and admired in the district. El-King felt it would be wiser to wait. Only minor punishment would be needed for the time being.

Left alone with Kamal and Nagy, El-Arabi struck his right palm into his left in bewilderment.

‘How can I sell him my house? Can you imagine what it would be to sell my land? This is my history – my roots and my life! How can I sell it?’

Silence was their only response.

‘Many have wanted to buy my house so they could pull it down and build a tower instead,’ he resumed as though he was trying to convince himself of something he was unable to comprehend. ‘Though they offered me great sums for it, I rejected them all. How can I sell my beautiful memories in the house where I was born, raised, and married?’

‘Never sell it, *Hag*, not even for a million pounds,’ said Kamal.

‘He will keep pestering me.’

‘Let him do whatever he likes, but don’t sell the house. You will never forgive yourself if you make such a mistake.’

‘No, I won’t do it,’ said El-Arabi in a determined tone.

‘As if the protection tax he collects from every family each month weren’t enough,’ complained Nagy, almost in a whisper lest one of El-King’s men hear him.