

*Paradise*

It was just a poke in my shoulder. Sure, he followed it up by pushing his face up close to mine, but the beginning was just a poke in the shoulder. It made my brain stop working. What could I do against him? Should I poke him back? If I did so, he'd beat me ignominiously for sure. Should I walk away? That would be an unforgivable sign of weakness and my friends would never let me live it down.

It was broad daylight, and there was nowhere to hide from the ordeal, or the scrutiny. My other friends were standing round but no one intervened to hold him back – which would, at least, have been a way for me to get out of it with dignity. None of them said a word as they stood there, waiting to see what I'd do. He stuck his nose against mine and kept up his threats. I raised one hand but he struck it down hard. He wanted me to stand as stiff as a soldier at attention while he spoke to me. I raised my other hand and he hit that hard too. I had to do something. I ran away and picked up a rock and came back toward him, looking mad and threatening. He didn't move. He just looked me steadily in the eye; all I could think of as an excuse was to pretend that my knees had given way and to fall to the ground at some distance from him. It was obvious, laughable, pitiful cowardice, no doubt, but I had no other option when faced by this youth who was older than us. Unlike the rest of my childhood friends, he'd appeared only about three years ago. He'd gone out into the big world before us, and was ahead of us in his experience of sex and of teenage life; he smoked and drank alcohol and told us about the major fights he got into along with his friends, or his gang, against anyone who got in their way in that world of which we knew nothing. He and his friends were capable of tracking down their rivals to a café or hashish den, giving them a good thrashing, and pulling the place down over

their heads. Or so he said. It wasn't to be expected of me that that I'd stand up to the youth, even if the price was that I'd have to avoid going out to play with my friends so that I wouldn't have to put up with his mockery of me. I stayed at home for several days, for this hardened veteran of the streets beat up on the guard of our building, who was two years my senior but much shorter than I. This guard used to say that those whom God had created dwarves built up stronger muscles to make up for what they'd been denied by way of height. The well-known Egyptian proverb, "I'll thrash you and I'll thrash anyone who dares to defend you," had come true.

I was almost fourteen. My voice had begun to change, becoming deeper. I had outgrown the embrace of childhood that permitted weakness and indulged crying. It was impossible, for me as much as for my friends who'd witnessed the scene, to forget about the knee pain that I'd faked. My sense of myself and of my relationship to the world could no longer ignore the society in which I lived. I was now like that society. It too was a society with a rough voice, and a mustache. It too was a society that had no time for weak knees. That same year, it became apparent that I wasn't the only one to reach that conclusion.

That year, the events known in Egypt as the Central Security Incidents took place. We were in school that day and were surprised to hear the administration asking us to return directly to our homes. The area in front of the school gate filled with the cars of hundreds of families waiting for their children. My family wasn't waiting for me, however. The Opel '68 that was all that had been left of the estate of my grandfather, who had died when I was two, had been sold the year before, and I was forced to go home on foot, totally unaware of what was going on. On my journey back to the house, I was accompanied by a youth whom I knew through a distant family connection. He told me that what had happened might be a repetition of what had taken place in Asyut five years before, when, two days after the killing of Egypt's president, Anwar Sadat, the Jama'a Islamiya had attacked and tried to take over the city's police headquarters. Those were events I'd lived through myself, when I was nine, and they had ruined the Feast of the Sacrifice for me, for which I criticized the Jama'a bitterly.

When I got home, however, I discovered that what had occurred this time was simply a mutiny by police recruits throughout Egypt, and that the sole point of resemblance between it and the earlier events was that anger had been translated into violence, shooting, and the burning of cars, nothing more. The Central Security Incidents were not the doing of an organization that aimed to overthrow the regime or possessed ideological goals. It was anger, pure and simple. What was important was that this event opened the way for me to a closer acquaintance with the youth who kept me company on my way home, because we met again a few months later and he reminded me of what I'd said about the Jama'a Islamiya when I'd thought it was behind the violent incidents. I repeated my opinion to him, in a few words that I'd memorized from my father: "Abdel Nasser understood them and imprisoned them. If he'd let them alone, they'd have killed him the way they did Sadat." We had some friends with us. Some agreed and some didn't.

The gathering broke up and I was left alone with the boy I'd gone home with. He asked me if I knew any members of the Jama'a Islamiya and I said no, even though a few years before I had known one – one whose name, in fact, had a very special place in the history of the Jama'a Islamiya. My friend condemned me for expressing such harsh opinions when I didn't know them and gave a different account of them. He was dazzled by their acts, by their 'heroism,' and by the 'glory' they'd earned by their commitment to their religion, for *glory belongs unto God, and unto His Messenger and the believers* as it says in the Qur'an (8:63). Then he promised to make me a gift of a bicycle chain that could be used to hit people during fights. He himself had been taught how to use it by the Jama'a and possessed a number of such chains that had been made into weapons by disconnecting one of the links of the chain to make it straight, not circular, and by wrapping one of its ends in adhesive plastic.

A few years before, I'd got to know Antar. He worked in a small restaurant that sold beans and falafel close to our house, and during the vacations I'd see him every morning. He'd joke with me and my sister and ask me about the soccer league match results. "Watch!" he used to say, challengingly, and set about rapidly

chopping tomatoes, or squeezing out from the ring formed by his thumb and index finger a ball of bean paste ready to drop into the oil; if he noticed me in the midst of the throng, he'd serve me quickly so that I didn't have to wait. One night in 1979, I was doing homework with one of the neighbor boys in his apartment upstairs, and the sound of demonstrations against the Camp David Accords came to us from the outside, though we couldn't see anything. The grownups talked of the Accords as treason; this was the indisputable consensus in both my neighbors' households and my own, and it was not to be questioned. What the grownups said was not open to debate: they knew things we didn't and they listened to the news and could recall events we had neither lived through nor could find in the history books. That wasn't all, though, for the following day we learned that Antar had been killed in the demonstrations. So it definitely was treason. The day Sadat was killed was one of the happiest of my childhood, along with the day when Ahli football club – fielding only youth players and substitutes – beat Zamalek's first team by three to two, and the day when my parents bought me a bicycle as a reward for getting a score of 97.5 percent in the Elementary Certificate exam. I asked my uncle on my mother's side, who was a recent graduate of the Police College, if the police really had gone into a mosque without taking off their shoes during these demonstrations, and he smiled and didn't answer. I asked him about Antar too. He was talking to my mother and his sister, and to him my queries were just "kid's talk." I was very fond of that uncle, but I didn't like the police, because they were "unjust people."

Antar was in the Jama'a Islamiya and against the regime, but "Uncle" Ahmad, the newspaper seller, was different. Ever since we were little, waking to his cries of "Akhbar! Ahram! Gumhuriya!" had been one of the characteristic markers of a vacation. He would cut a bit off a cigarette packet to form a ring, which he'd wrap around the paper before throwing it up onto our balcony. If I woke up before he came, I'd wait for his arrival and go out onto the balcony and throw him a clothespin to use in place of the paper ring, especially during cigarette shortages. Sometimes I'd go down to the street and ask him if I could throw the paper

up onto the balcony. Either way, doing so guaranteed that I'd be the first to read the sports page, and to find out the name of the Arabic film that would be on TV in the afternoon. I'd also discover whether an episode of *The Six Million Dollar Man* would be on the *We Have Chosen for You* program that evening. If it was a Thursday or a Sunday, I'd make sure he didn't forget to deliver the *Mickey Mouse* and *Samir* comics with the paper. If I was lucky, I'd run into Uncle Ahmad on his donkey cart, either very early in the morning or after he'd finished his rounds, and be given a ride. Once this cart, or rather the donkey that pulled it, didn't stop when a police car was crossing an intersection in front of it, as cars did when they had the bad luck to happen on a passing police car. The officer got out of the car and, violating every rule of Upper Egyptian manners, slapped the man, who was old enough to be his father, on the face. From then on I was too embarrassed to joke around with Uncle Ahmad. I felt that I ought to make myself look sad whenever I saw him, out of respect for his feelings.

I spent the night dreaming of the bicycle chain, just the way I used to dream that I was Bruce Lee, after seeing a movie of his, or Muhammad Ali Clay, after seeing a movie about him. The next day went by, and the day after, and the boy with the chain didn't come back. In such small towns, however, people's fates walk hand in hand. We owned two buildings in Asyut that stood opposite one another and rented out the basements to students. In one of these lived two bearded students whom I'd met at the soccer pitch. Once, I'd gone down to say hello to them and found one of them trying to remove the nail of his abscessed big toe with a switch blade, during which operation he went on talking to me and laughing as though it were nothing. His capacity to withstand pain was amazing. I mentioned him to my friend who'd gone home with me that day and whom I shall refer to from now on as 'the Chain Boy,' and he confirmed what I'd said, describing the student I was talking about as a "first-rate brother." He followed this with tales of his bravery, which he employed in the defense of religion and the disciplining of wrongdoers, and which, as a result, was unsullied by pride or arrogance – and which was, indeed, part of his kindly and modest nature. Such were the things that distinguished the

observant, courageous brother from the lowlife tough who used force to lord it over God's creatures.

It is difficult for a person to comprehend why he loves what he loves, or even to know what it is he loves. Till then, I'd been a boy of weak physique, outstanding at his studies. I differed from the friends I mixed with on the street in that I went to a private school, that of the Soeurs Franciscaines, which meant, as far as I was concerned, that I had to wear a shirt and pants while they wore government-school smocks, and that I could challenge them to spell the name of my school, which they couldn't. My general interests were reading and the cinema, which I started going to regularly on my own every week from the age of ten. I was a 'patriotic' adolescent who, as was natural for his age, knew little of the Great, or Small, Powers, or the balances and calculations of politics. I parroted such common expressions of the day as "the One Arab People" and "the Arabs are a people known for their glory, pride, and generosity," and blah blah blah-de-blah. I listened often to the speeches of Abdel Nasser and the patriotic songs of Abd el-Halim Hafez and I hated Sadat, 'Camp David,' and Israel, without bothering myself with the details. At the start of the previous school year, new maps had turned up in our classroom showing 'Israel' where 'Palestine' had once been. We protested to the school administration and refused to hang up the maps, and in the end the administration gave in and took them away. The same year, I fell behind while marching to the classroom in the morning lineup to the rhythmic strains of the school band, and an angry teacher stopped me and slapped my face. That day I decided this was no place for me and that the noblest thing I could do in life would be to leave school and join a group training fedayeen for operations against Israel. I didn't know any such groups, assuming that they in fact existed, but the idea obsessed me for two whole days and I spent much time teaching my younger brother, who was six, to repeat the sentence "We must fight Israel to the last man."

Naturally, I forgot all about it when I stopped being angry.

My small family, consisting of a father, a mother, a sister four years older than me and a brother eight years younger, lived in a quiet neighborhood of Asyut called Qulta Company. Traditionally,

this neighborhood had been the well-off part of that southern city. Other parts of town had now, however, overtaken it in terms of property prices and, like any other older neighborhood, the nature of its residents was changing as time passed and social paralysis set in. Despite this, its streets remained busy because of its proximity to the university, whose presence when in session caused the number of Asyut's inhabitants to more or less double. For older buildings, such as the two that belonged to us, renting out to students brought in a reasonable income that compensated for the meager yield from the apartments. In the basements of both our buildings, and on the roof of one of them, in cheap, badly ventilated, poorly appointed rooms, lived students from the countryside who were unable to pay the rent of a furnished apartment. From time to time, the students from the basement apartments would come to my father to complain that the drains had flooded their rooms and soaked their books and bedding, while the students from the roof would come during the rare rains to complain that their rooms had been turned into pools of water by the rain coming in through the wooden ceilings. It was from students such as these, and those in the other buildings near the university, that the majority of the younger members of the Jama'a Islamiya was drawn.

Some of these students shared my love of soccer. Soccer lovers among the Jama'a Islamiya were careful to include others in this team sport that was impossible to play properly when there were only one or two, or even three, players in a corner of a big pitch. I took to playing regularly with them in spite of the inconvenient time that they had chosen – after the dawn prayer on Fridays. I knew many of them by name and from time to time would run into them when they went down our street on leaving the university and would go with them to the mosque to pray. From chatting with them, I came to learn much about their personal lives. Brother Ashraf, the handsome one, had once loved to gamble and used to walk around the Imbaba quarter of Cairo with a pack of cards poking out of his shirt pocket as an invitation to others who might want to play; now, however, he was one the Jama'a's most promising preachers. Ala', an engineering student, had been