

I Do Not Sleep

Ihsan Abdel Kouddous

Translated by
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I'm both good and evil, because I'm human.

To the girl with the best heart, who feels her soul the most.
Her entire crime was that she wanted to be more than human.

To “N.” She gave me her story, and then went far away after
she took a handful of my days and a piece of my heart.

Introduction

IT IS SHOCKING THAT IHSAN Abdel Kouddous is still largely unknown outside of the Arab world. In the Middle East and North Africa, he was perhaps the most popular and prolific writer of the twentieth century. Known affectionately throughout the Arab world by just his first name, Ihsan began his literary career in the 1930s as a teenager writing humorous articles of youthful misadventure for Egypt's leading weekly political-cultural magazine, *Rose El Youssef*, which his mother founded and owned. By the mid-1940s, he was already a rising star as an incendiary journalist. He stirred up scandals to inflame public anger against the corruption of the old guard, laying the groundwork for the public embrace of the coming 1952 revolution. Ihsan would go on to become editor-in-chief of not only *Rose El Youssef*, but also important weeklies such as *Sabah al-Khayr* (Good Morning) and *Akhbar al-Yawm* (News of the Day). During the Sadat and Mubarak eras, he was in charge of *al-Ahram* (The Pyramids), Egypt's daily newspaper of record. From the early 1940s until his retirement in the 1980s, Ihsan was among the most prolific journalists in the Arab world, consistently publishing at least one weekly political or cultural article, frequently two or three.

Yet it was not Ihsan's journalism that made him a household name. Instead, it was his fiction. When he began writing *I Do Not Sleep* in 1955, Ihsan was already

considered Egypt's most popular writer. By the time he died in 1990, he had published more than sixty books, including twenty novels and some six hundred short stories. Ihsan was known in particular for writing about sex, love, and romantic obsession, typically employing first-person narratives by young women as they discover their sexuality and seek love—or carnal desire—in the face of repressive and outmoded social traditions. Highlighting sexual desire—especially as seen through the eyes of young female protagonists—was shocking for many segments of Egyptian society in the 1950s and 60s. Just as Ihsan began gaining popularity for his taboo-breaking fiction in the late 1940s, the well-known critic and writer Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad labeled him the “writer of the bed,” dismissing Ihsan as someone who focused on sexual titillation instead of serious literary matters. This title stuck with Ihsan throughout his literary career. Although it certainly helped the sales of his books and magazines, it turned “respectable society” against him. Despite his popularity, Ihsan later recalled that during the 1950s and 60s, people would frequently not invite him to their houses or even admit to reading his work for fear of being associated with questionable morality. Young people—and women in particular—did not want to be caught by their parents or husbands reading his fiction, or even in possession of *Rose El Youssef* magazine, where most of his fiction was serialized. Of course, these parents or husbands might have had their own copies of Ihsan's work or magazines, which they read when their children or wives were not around.

Ihsan was not simply one of the most popular and prolific writers in the Arab world during the twentieth century. His work was disseminated more widely than any other writer's. All of his novels and short stories were first serialized in the pages of the highest circulation

weeklies in Egypt before they were collected in book form and subsequently reprinted in dozens of editions. His fiction formed the basis of some of the most important and popular films in the history of Egyptian and Arab cinema, such as *I Do Not Sleep*, *There's a Man in My House*, and *My Father's Up a Tree*. Legends of the Arab silver screen such as Omar Sherif, Lubna Abdelaziz, Abdel Halim Hafez, and Faten Hamama bolstered their careers thanks to their performances in his films. In total, forty-nine Egyptian films were based on Ihsan's short stories and novels. Dozens of radio plays and television series were also adapted from his work, some lasting for hours and broadcast over months, and aired repeatedly by state radio. Ihsan's work is still being revitalized for new audiences, most recently with the 2017 Ramadan television serial adaptation of *Don't Extinguish the Sun*.

While Naguib Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988, Ihsan Abdel Kouddous has been almost entirely ignored by critics and academics, both in Egypt and abroad. My forthcoming book on Ihsan will be the first in any language focusing on his fiction and his central role in the production and dissemination of Arabic popular culture in the twentieth century. Until this translation of *I Do Not Sleep*, not a single novel by Ihsan has been available in English. There are many reasons for this neglect. In addition to discomfort over the depiction of sexuality in his fiction, critics dismissed him because of his simple, direct style. Unlike Naguib Mahfouz, Ihsan employed simple vocabulary and sentence structure in a way that appealed to the widest possible readership—especially young people—but not to literary critics. Starting as early as 1943, he repeatedly called for the simplification of literary Arabic so that it could be used as a vehicle not only to build large audiences for the press but also to touch the emotions of ordinary Egyptians.

Throughout his career, both in his journalism and fiction, Ihsan strove to transform Arabic from the language of the elite to that of the masses, occasionally making fun of the complex vocabulary and syntax of writers like the “Dean of Arabic Literature,” Taha Hussein, and the future Nobel laureate, Naguib Mahfouz. The pressures and demands of press serialization—not only selling magazines, but also keeping readers coming back week after week for the next installment—played a critical role in Ihsan’s style. Nearly all of Ihsan’s novels were serialized weekly for months, sometimes for over a year. He was highly attuned to the importance of sales since his magazines depended on circulation, not advertisement, for revenue. His clear, crisp, simple prose had been a key element in his success as a political journalist. Employing a similar style in his fiction gained him a massive audience but cost him the attention of critics, who insisted that his work was neither serious nor literary. Thus, while his books remain wildly popular in the Arab world, the lack of support by critics meant that publishing houses outside of the Middle East neglected his fiction. The publication of *I Do Not Sleep* in English is, thankfully, a first important step in rectifying this decades-long oversight.

We now know that when Ihsan began serializing *I Do Not Sleep* in October 1955, he had been deeply involved in the 1952 Egyptian Revolution and had a close personal relationship with Gamal Abdel Nasser in particular. During the 1940s and early 1950s, when Egypt was still a monarchy, Ihsan had used his platform at *Rose El Youssef* to call repeatedly for revolution, urging a strong, masculine leader to rise up, uproot the old system, and cleanse the political terrain of corruption. He met secretly with members of the Free Officers—including Nasser and Anwar Sadat—collaborating with them to uncover and publish scandals designed to spark outrage at the ruling

elite. When the Free Officers finally launched their coup on 23 July 1952, they invited the ecstatic Ihsan to the barracks to participate in negotiations to form a new government. While Ihsan later claimed that he did not know about the coup beforehand, he was a particularly enthusiastic supporter of the Officers and the coup in the weeks and months that followed. No doubt, Ihsan initially believed that Nasser and the Free Officers were carrying out his own vision of the revolution, performing the cleansing operation that he had envisioned, eliminating the monarchy and the collaborating elite while laying the groundwork for democracy.

By early 1953, however, it became clear that the Officers were instead establishing a military dictatorship. Ihsan was horrified. He once again took to his platform in *Rose El Youssef*, this time dissenting against the Free Officers, and calling for the rapid implementation of democratic reforms. While these calls were muted at first because of political pressures, Ihsan took advantage of the lifting of censorship in March 1954 to express his anxieties about his own role in laying the groundwork for the coup and supporting the Free Officers in its aftermath. In a series of editorials during that fateful month, Ihsan called for the end of the revolution. He demanded that Nasser and the other Free Officers leave the army and form a political party that would participate in free and fair elections. In response, Nasser had Ihsan arrested and subjected him to a harrowing three-month imprisonment.

Ihsan left jail in summer 1954 chastened. He would never again contest Nasser so openly in his editorials. That did not mean that Ihsan abandoned writing as an act of dissent. Starting in fall 1954 and continuing for a decade, Ihsan began publishing fiction—either a short story or an installment of a novel—almost weekly. As I show in my

forthcoming book on Ihsan, in many of these works he used the cover of metaphor and symbolism to explore his deep sense of guilt, anxiety, and regret for his personal role in laying the groundwork for the 1952 coup and inadvertently helping to install Nasser as a dictator. Starting after his release from jail, Ihsan repeatedly returned to the theme of a very particular type of family betrayal. In his novels and stories, a protagonist suffers psychological trauma after inadvertently bringing a traitor into the family home. Since the details of Ihsan's complex relationship with Nasser and the 1952 coup were little known, most readers never picked up on the significance of the repeated echoes of anxiety, guilt, and regret in his fiction.

I Do Not Sleep is Ihsan's first masterwork from this period, the first in a series of classics that he would write over the next decade. It was his first long novel, serialized in *Rose El Youssef* on a weekly basis for over five months. The novel captivated the public, leading to skyrocketing sales of the magazine. *I Do Not Sleep* seized the imagination of readers unlike any of Ihsan's work up to that point. Nearly every issue of *Rose El Youssef* during its serialization included at least one reader's letter about the novel. Some readers were shocked and appalled at the supposed immorality of the novel, writing to the magazine to accuse Ihsan of spreading heresy and atheism—or, even worse, existentialism. Others, believing that the narrator Nadia Lutfi was indeed a real person, had fallen in love with her. One man even wrote to Ihsan to put him in touch with Nadia so that he could propose marriage. The Emir of Kuwait at the time, Abdullah al-Salim al-Sabah, was so taken with the novel that he wrote to Ihsan: "*I Do Not Sleep* cannot be fiction. The author cannot have made up all these situations from his imagination. They have to be real, and they must have happened to the author himself!"

No doubt, the novel suggests many readings. It could be read as a metaphorical confession of regret and guilt about plotting to orchestrate the 1952 coup and the horror of subsequently embedding a traitor into the fabric of the nation. Or, with its enticing language and sexual sensationalism, it could be read as a celebration of the new freedoms of popular culture in Nasser's Egypt. It could also be read as one of the first explorations of the complexities and nuances of a female narrator in modern Arabic literature. Regardless, what matters is that readers outside of the Arab world can finally discover *Ihsan*, this giant of Arabic literature and popular culture, for themselves.

Jonathan Smolin
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Part One

1

Dear Ihsan,
I'm Nadia Lutfi.

YOU DON'T KNOW ME, EVEN if I did turn your head both times you saw me. Once on Sidi Bishr beach in Alexandria and another time at the Semiramis Hotel in Cairo. Each time, I didn't pay much attention to you, as I'd gotten used to turning men's heads.

I've been writing you this letter or notebook for three months. I never meant to write you such a long story . . . my story. All I meant was to ask you a single question.

Does God exist?

But I realized it was a ridiculous question. I really do feel the existence of God.

Terror fills me whenever I mention Him. I even spent years praying five times a day, wrapping a white veil around my head, wearing a white shirt that rose up to my neck, with long sleeves hanging down by my sides, whenever I stood praying like an angel being conducted to heaven, to the unknown, to God.

Yes, I'm convinced that God exists; so convinced that it made my pen tremble as I wrote those words, doubting His existence—tremble from fear. And here I am, repeating to myself, "*I take refuge in God the Magnificent, I take refuge in God the Magnificent.*"

Maybe I wanted to ask you: what is God?

Yes.

What is God?

Tell me.

God is truth, virtue, and goodness, since the Prophet couldn't have called us to worship deception, sin, and evil.

He's the Powerful One, since the people of the earth couldn't have united to worship a weak god with no power or strength.

So, why does the Powerful Truth leave us to practice weak deception?

Why does virtue abandon us to sin?

Why is evil victorious over goodness in us?

Tell me.

Why?

Tell me.

What is God, then?

I was told that God the Almighty created us; that He created our intellect and will so we could distinguish between good and evil. And that He left us in life to put our behavior to the test, like an exam. Whoever passes has paradise as the reward and whoever fails has hell.

I was told this. I tried to be convinced, but I wasn't.

There can't be a ministry of education in heaven that gives us sheets of questions and then takes the answers to give them to committees for grading.

And then suppose that I failed the test. Who'd be responsible?

My ignorant mind and weak will.

And who put this ignorant mind in my head and furnished me with this weak will?

Who created me like this?

God.

God is the one responsible for me failing the test of heaven. How can I be punished for a crime for which I'm not responsible? How can I be burned for a sin I didn't commit,

simply because heaven oppressed me by giving me a limited mind and weak will?

No, a thousand times no. This can't be God. God doesn't need to give people a test, because He has known them ever since He created them. He's too merciful to leave them to a fight in which they're torn between good and evil. He's not like the Roman emperors who used to let lions loose on their subjects, to be entertained by the sight of the battle between wild animals and men, by the sight of blood spilled in the Colosseum. He's God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. He's love and peace. There has to be another explanation. There has to be another explanation for good and evil, for heaven and hell, for the scales of judgment in heaven.

Or have I become an infidel?

I feel my heart pound. I feel as if there's another woman inside me slapping her cheeks, screaming and wailing as if she's throwing me down to hell.

I repeat again: "*I take refuge in God the Magnificent, I take refuge in God the Magnificent!*"

God will no doubt forgive me, since He knows that He didn't push me to all this questioning and doubt and that I'm a victim of myself, which always defeated me and always pushed me to evil, to sin.

Yes, dear Ihsan, I'm evil. I'm hooked on evil.

Despite that, you can't see evil on me. My face is innocent like a child's, untouched by age even after I've stood on the earth and walked in crowds of people, my purity unpolluted by the crush of life. My eyes are the color of green fields wet with dew. None of what is inside me ever flashes in them. Even when I cry, they don't express my grief. Instead, tears flow over them like a strange hand coming forward to cleanse them. My small mouth is traced by two firm lips. I never need to put on lipstick since my lips are always the color of cherries, as you would describe them in one of your stories, Ihsan, so that as soon as you touch them, you'd think that blood would burst

out. My hair is blond like eighteen-karat gold, a deep color without sparkle, like a valuable treasure left to rust. Sometimes I tie up my long hair and sometimes I let it hang down in two braids like arrows of tightly woven gold pointing to my chest and my heart.

Quite simply, I'm beautiful. One of the most beautiful girls in Cairo. I told you that I'm used to turning men's heads, including yours. But I'm not bragging or boasting about my beauty. Beauty hasn't saved me from evil. Rather, it might have been one of the things that pushed me to it. How I wish that God, who granted me my looks, would take it back from me, and in exchange would show me the path of goodness.

I've described myself so you know there isn't anything in my appearance to show you what my soul has to work with, and there is nothing in my face to warn you about me. On the contrary, there's only that which would attract you to me and reassure you about me. My appearance of innocence might deceive you into fearing for me as I encounter people and the world. But I only fear myself, and I only ask for protection against myself.

Don't think, however, that I've killed someone or stolen something, or that the evil I'm talking about represents a crime that the law prohibits or that could be brought before the courts. No. Never. But is evil only killing and stealing? Could the law prohibit every kind of crime?

Only the law of heaven punishes my crimes. They are only brought before the court of the conscience.

Let me tell you about one of my crimes.

I was twelve years old. I was coming home from school, running through the streets of Dokki with our black servant chasing after me, carrying my bag.

I noticed a young man standing on the side of the road, looking at me with his mouth wide open as if he were thunderstruck.

I still remember him today. He was about sixteen, tall and broad-shouldered; he looked like he'd be one of the top athletes at his school. His face was brown and strong, but the signs of his physical strength couldn't hide his goodness and naiveté. Indeed, they might have revealed that he wasn't so smart.

He would be standing on the side of the road when I walked home from school. He was always looking at me with his mouth wide open like he was thunderstruck. At that age, I recognized my beauty and I understood the young man's look. I started smiling whenever I caught him out of the side of my eye standing in his place. I began strutting a little while walking past him, intentionally averting my face to make him think I felt his presence.

I'd get back home and think about him, but then my thoughts started taking a wicked direction without me realizing it. I was like a child thinking about destroying her doll for a reason she didn't know, other than the desire to destroy. I wanted to see him destroyed, even though he hadn't done anything wrong.

Unconsciously, I was driven to execute the wicked plan.

I started smiling at him. I began slowing down as I walked by. Whenever I passed him, I purposely talked loudly with the servant so he would hear my voice and wake up from the thunderbolt that hit him whenever he saw me. He started smiling at me and walking a few steps behind me, until the servant would notice him, and then he'd run off.

When the plan was ready and the decisive hour approached, I left school and ran away from the servant, who was waiting for me at the door, heading home alone. When I passed the young man, I gave him a big smile—bigger than the one I usually gave him every day.

He noticed that the servant wasn't following me, so he came after me. He got so close that I could hear his breath.

“Bonsoir.”

I heard his voice for the first time.

I didn't speak, but I shook my head so my braids rocked back and forth as if they were responding to his greeting.

He was quiet, as if collecting his courage.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked.

I didn't respond. Instead, I sped up the plan. In my chest was a wicked torrential feeling whose nature I didn't understand—a feeling of fear, pleasure, terror, and hesitation, like the feeling of the gambler as he's betting everything he's got.

"Could you stop for a minute?" he continued.

I didn't respond. I hurried along as the delightful wicked feeling in me intensified, together with the pounding of my heart.

We were getting close to my house. I was afraid he'd stop following me, so I turned to him and gave him another big smile, walking right next to him.

"Finally," I heard him say. "What's wrong? Why do you keep going like that? Slow down or I'll lose you!"

We'd reached the door of my house. Suddenly, I turned to him.

"That's enough!" I yelled in his face as angrily as I could. "It's impolite! What do you want from me? Why are you running after me?"

The young man once more looked thunderstruck.

Othman the doorman woke up at the sound of me screaming and ran over. He looked at the young man staring at me, and took in what was happening. He reached out and punched the young man hard in the chest.

"Get out of here!" he yelled.

The young man was upset that the doorman hit him—especially in front of me—so he punched the doorman back. Othman let out a scream like a howl, and all the neighborhood doormen and servants ran over. They all pounded on the young man, beating and slapping him until he fell to the ground. He got up and ran away as fast as he could.

I stood at the door, watching everything.
My plan had succeeded. I'd destroyed the doll.
But was I happy?

I'd been terrified when I saw the poor guy in the hands of the doormen and servants. I almost screamed at them and rushed over to save him. But something nailed me to the ground and silenced me. When I was able to move, I ran to my room, threw myself on the bed, and started crying. I cried for a long time, but the tears couldn't soothe me or wash away my crime.

I didn't sleep that night, and passed a number of sleepless nights. I remained so depressed that the blood almost stopped flowing in my veins. Every time I remembered what I'd done, I felt ashamed. A bitter, painful shame like a knife cutting my chest, until I was forced to do something—to scream, to fight with one of the servants, to break something in the house, to hit my dog—to hide my shame at myself.

Why?

Why did I commit this crime? What pushed me to it, and at such a young age?

Why didn't God stand beside me to divert me from evil?

Or was I a victim of Satan?

What is Satan?

Is he not a creation of God? Then what's God's wisdom in making a creature that pushes us to sin?

If Satan is an angel who's no longer obedient to God, why didn't God punish him and erase him from existence to deliver us from his wickedness? Why did He leave him among us and then hold us accountable—we humans—for the evil that Satan pushes us to do?

I take refuge in God since He has to have wisdom in that.

I often take refuge in God, but that hasn't diverted me from evil.

My crimes multiplied. As I got older, I got better at setting more complicated plans, executing them perfectly.

And immediately after each crime, I'd be overwhelmed by this terror occupying me. Terror at myself. I'd spend sleepless nights, tortured by my clenched heart, despicable soul, tormented thoughts, and the painful, bitter shame that cut through my chest.

A number of months passed before I forgot the crime I told you about. It was a small crime that didn't leave behind any lasting effects, except that my father insisted I go back and forth to school by car, despite the short distance from our house.

But I remember there was also a bigger crime.

I was fourteen. I had an older schoolmate named Kawthar.

Kawthar wasn't my friend, but I liked her. She was dark, beautiful, stylish, confident, and nice. She walked as if she were floating on air and talked as if she were singing a beautiful tune. Her smile was radiant and when she let her long black hair hang down her back she was like an angel protecting night from day.

All the girls loved her.

During summer break, I met Kawthar on Sidi Bishr beach in Alexandria. There wasn't anything between us but a passing "hello" that we'd exchange every morning while we were walking on the beach. Days passed, and I noticed that my cousin Medhat was following her wherever she went. He'd spend the day under the umbrella in front of her cabin, only getting up from under it when Kawthar left her cabin.

It was easy to see that love had sprung up between them. That kind of pure, innocent love that grows between a girl whose family kept a close watch over her and a young man with strong character and good intentions; a love that doesn't usually go beyond words exchanged stealthily behind the cabin, far from the family's eyes.

My cousin didn't tell me about his love, but he became more interested in me, inviting me to sit with him under his umbrella. He'd talk to me for a long time, finally ending with

him chatting about my school and classmates. He knew Kawthar was my classmate. He wanted me to talk about her, but I ignored what he was after and I kept quiet. When you read my story, you'll know that I'm good at staying quiet.

Then Kawthar became interested in me. She started trying hard to befriend me. She insisted on inviting me to her cabin and giving me ice cream. But, without thinking about it, I blocked her attempts, ignoring the friendship she was offering me.

The wicked feeling started creeping into my chest.

I started feeling the ugly desire to destroy the doll . . . and there were two dolls in front of me to destroy!

I wonder what pushes children to destroy dolls.

I swear to you that I resisted this feeling and desire as hard as I could, with all my will and all my nerves. There wasn't any rational reason making me revolt against this pure, innocent love. I loved my cousin like a brother and I wished nothing but the best for him. I just about loved Kawthar, and I wanted the best for her too. I had no excuse to hate them or envy them or fear one could harm the other. So why did I think about destroying them? Why did I commit a crime against them?

I succeeded in controlling this evil feeling all summer. All I did was spend a lot of time with my cousin, sitting with him under his umbrella and having fun with him, especially when Kawthar was in her cabin. Up until that time, I hadn't launched into any set plan.

We returned to Cairo and went back to school, where I was surprised by all the girls talking about Kawthar's love for my cousin Medhat.

I pretended to ignore all this talk. I didn't join in and I didn't encourage anyone to talk about it with me. But it started fanning the flames of evil in my chest, and the craving to destroy started to overwhelm me. When I went to bed, I started not being able to sleep. I'd think and think, until I came up with a plan and started executing it. I began savoring the feeling,

savoring the fear, terror, and hesitation, the pleasure of putting my intelligence to the test, the intoxicating anticipation, the excitement of the gambler as he bets everything he's got.

I was friends with one of the neighbor girls, who wasn't a classmate. I came to an understanding with her and then told her about the plan.

I called Medhat and when I heard his voice, I handed the phone to my friend, who spoke with feigned anxiety and fear, as if someone were keeping tabs on her. I kept my ear pressed against the phone next to hers so I could hear.

"Hello? Medhat? How are you?"

"How are you?" he asked. "Who's this?"

"You don't know my voice, Medhat?" she asked. "It's Kawthar."

"Kawthar!" Medhat cried in a trembling voice. "I didn't know how I could see you or talk to you since—"

"I can't talk now." My friend cut him off, mimicking Kawthar's voice. "Au revoir."

"But listen, Kawthar—"

"Later, later, Medhat." She hung up.

I was exhilarated—by the cleverness of my own plan!

Two days later, we talked to Medhat again, my friend speaking as if she were Kawthar, using the same scared voice, rushed as if someone were keeping tabs on her.

"Listen, Medhat, come by tomorrow in front of the school as we're leaving so I can see you. Au revoir."

The poor guy didn't get a chance to say a word.

The next day, I went to school pretending to be absent-minded, confused, and sad. I put my arm around one of my classmates.

"Can I tell you a secret?" I whispered, leaning toward her. "But swear you won't tell anyone."

My classmate's eyes sparkled in delight. None of the girls at school knew a single secret about me. My beauty—and I'm not exaggerating if I tell you that I was the most beautiful girl in

the school—pushed the other girls to try to gain my friendship and learn my secrets, but I'd frustrate them and not tell them a thing. I relished the knowledge that I was a locked box to them.

"I swear!" my classmate declared. "I swear I won't tell anyone!"

"My cousin is driving by the school door to see me," I told her, pretending to hesitate shyly. "I want you to distract Principal Zeinab so I can talk to him quickly."

My classmate opened her mouth wide in shock.

"Your cousin Medhat?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do you love him?"

"Please. *He's* the one who loves *me*."

"So why haven't you talked with your family about it?"

"I'll tell you later."

"Tell me, Nadia, so I know how to play along with you."

"He came to propose, but Daddy won't agree to it until he finishes university, when I'll be nineteen. He hasn't come back to the house since."

My classmate's eyes became so wide that she looked like an idiot.

"But, but . . ." she stammered, then fell silent.

"But what?" I asked, knowing what she wanted to say.

"Nothing!"

I don't need to tell you that my "secret" spread like wildfire among the students that same day, until it reached Kawthar.

I saw her from a distance, anxious and miserable, as if she'd aged a hundred years.

We walked out of school.

I played the role of the confused, nervous girl. I started looking around until I saw my cousin in his car. I then looked at my classmate as if asking her for help, pushing her to follow through on her promise. And, indeed, she started talking to Principal Zeinab while the students were getting in the school vans.

I walked toward my cousin's car and started talking to him anxiously and hurriedly, as if I were committing a crime. I asked him about my aunt, his brothers, and my uncle in a tone closer to sweet nothings. He responded curtly, looking around shyly and hesitantly for Kawthar. I kept moving my head in front of him so he couldn't see her.

I left my cousin and went over to get in the school van.

The students greeted me with winks and smiles, except for Kawthar, who was silent and introverted. Her face was pale, as if I'd sucked out all of her blood.

My classmate came over to me.

"What did he say?" she asked impatiently.

"He wants to meet me away from school," I whispered. "But I don't want to."

I smiled to myself. I felt a wicked intoxication—the intoxication of conceit about my own intelligence.

After that, I was able to make my cousin wait in front of the school gates twice. Each time, I played the same role, sucking more of Kawthar's blood.

I then moved on to the second part of the plan, as if the first hadn't been enough.

For days, we didn't call my cousin. Then my dear neighbor and I called him again.

"Where have you been, Kawthar?" I heard him say as if his heart were crushed under the weight of his desire. "You made me so worried that I looked through the phonebook for your number until I found it. But whenever I call, I hear a different voice and I hang up. Where have you been?"

"I can't, Medhat," my friend responded as I whispered the words to her. "I can't call because the telephone is in the office and my father sits there all day long."

"What then?" Medhat asked, as if looking for the path to salvation. "Will we just go on like this? For two weeks, I've chained myself next to the phone, waiting for you to call."

“Listen, Medhat,” my friend said, pretending to be in a rush. “Send me a letter and I’ll write back. There’s no other way. Au revoir!”

“But wait, Kawthar!”

“I can’t. My father’s coming. Au revoir!”

Two days later, I went to the post office and got Medhat’s letter. I opened it and read it. I felt my heart plunge like it was running away from me. It was a pure, tender, elegant letter full of passion, love, and torture restrained by pride, like a man’s tears that didn’t fall but remained shining in his eyes.

I didn’t sleep.

I spent the night on a bed of hot coals. I tried to free myself, but I couldn’t. I tried to renounce my crime, but it only clung to me more. My head was on fire and my soul was screaming, almost tearing up my body.

I was tortured that night. I was tortured so dreadfully.

The next morning, I decided to fix everything—to turn back from completing this horrible crime.

But as soon as I saw myself among my classmates, the wicked feeling came back, sweeping me away like the soldier who finds himself in the middle of the battlefield and the desire to kill overwhelms him, even if he kills his own cousin.

I remember laughing with my neighbor, making fun of the two lovers.

I remember the students’ whispers about my presumed engagement to Medhat.

I remember my delight and conceit at my intelligence as I watched my plan succeed.

All of a sudden, I was pushed forward to act out the play I’d begun. I purposely sat in an isolated spot in the schoolyard and starting reading Medhat’s letter. I gave a loud fake sigh.

One of my classmates came over and asked about the letter. I tried to hide it from her, but she begged me and swore secrecy until I showed her part of it, after folding under the part with the words “My love, Kawthar.”

The story of the letter was broadcast among the students. Each of them came to look at it. I caught a glimpse of Kawthar from a distance. She was so pale she looked like there was no more blood left in her for me to suck.

I let myself get carried away by my intoxication.

I went back home and called my friend. We sat together writing a letter to Medhat, signing it as Kawthar. We were laughing at every word. We resorted to romance stories and magazines for expressions of love and passion, until we came up with a letter packed with thick, fabricated words of love.

I sent it to Medhat.

I got the response a few days later. And then I went into the schoolyard again, sighing loudly.

Finally, I was convinced that I'd destroyed the doll.

I destroyed the pure, innocent love that had grown up between my classmate and my cousin, a love that could have lasted forever.

At the same time, I grew bored of this game. I grew bored of calling my cousin, writing love letters to him, and playing the role of the lover.

Weeks passed and I didn't do anything, except that I felt the tightness and screaming of my soul every time I saw Kawthar.

She wasted away until her cheekbones stuck out. She was no longer chic or confident. Instead, she was nervous and coarse, fighting with her classmates for one reason or another, then keeping to herself, as if she were digesting her pain. She started getting sick and began missing school for days at a time.

I was always trying to convince myself that I didn't have a hand in what happened to her; that I only played one of those little jokes that schoolgirls play on each other.

But I wasn't convinced.

I started not sleeping.

Until my cousin came to me one day. He too was withered and miserable, like a diseased apple tree. He sat alone with me in a corner of the room.

“I’m going to ask something of you, Nadia,” he whispered as if he didn’t have the strength to hold his breath. “I’ve never asked this of anyone.”

I widened my eyes innocently, feigning surprise as grief percolated through my heart.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Something very important,” he said, still whispering. “My entire happiness rests on it. If not, I wouldn’t have asked you for this.”

“What is it?” I asked, still pretending to be surprised.

“You know Kawthar, your classmate?” he asked, his lips beginning to tremble.

“Yes,” I responded.

“Give this to her,” he said, taking a letter out of his pocket.

“I don’t understand,” I said nervously.

“Don’t ask about anything.” He cut me off. “I beg you, don’t ask!”

He moved away like an emaciated ghost.

He left me aghast, my breath almost choking my chest.

What should I do with this letter?

I had no plan. I could only lie or tell the truth.

Why didn’t I tell the truth?

Why didn’t I confess my crime to my cousin and Kawthar and save their love and their future?

I couldn’t.

I wasn’t strong enough.

I spent the night tortured, sleepless.

The next day, I went to school with the letter in my pocket. I didn’t have to pretend to be distraught and upset. I really felt that way, torn apart by confusion between my evil, cowardly self and my sober, sleepless conscience.

Sometimes my conscience got the upper hand and I almost went to Kawthar to confess and give her the letter, but it didn’t take long for my evil self to vanquish it, and I retreated once again from confessing.

The day ended.

I went home to find my cousin waiting for me, anxiety traced on his face.

“Kawthar wouldn’t take the letter,” I told him before he asked, dodging his eyes. “She told me she’s engaged.”

It was as if I’d stabbed him with a knife.

His face went so pale it lost almost all its color. His lips trembled until I thought they were going to fall off his mouth. His eyes drifted until he looked like he couldn’t see.

“Merci,” he said in a weak, hoarse voice like a rattle, reaching out to take the letter. “I’m very sorry, Nadia.”

And he left.

I swear to you that what befell Medhat and Kawthar befell me too. I couldn’t eat anymore, or laugh or sleep or taste life. I lost weight and became emaciated. My face turned pale and my father started sending me to doctors.

I felt like my crime was seeping out of all the pores of my body. I felt like each breath was a hollow drumbeat in my funeral procession. I felt like my heartbeats were a tight fist clenching around my neck.

Yes, I was tortured horribly for many days.

I don’t need to tell you what happened after that.

Kawthar was engaged the following summer. It was as if she’d committed suicide. Her fiancé was the least likely person possible to achieve her hopes and dreams.

As for Medhat, he allowed the passage of time to mend his heart with the threads of forgetting.

But this crime remained a black spot inside me. I’d see it every evening as I took off my clothes. I’d remember it every time I saw Medhat.

I wondered whether Medhat could have been Kawthar’s husband. Was I the one who destroyed the nest of their dreams?

I wondered what pushes a child to climb a tree to destroy a bird’s nest and then cry when the bird dies.

What pushes him to commit this crime?

And then what pushes him to regret?

Answer me.

But you can't unless you know me and my story. Maybe after you know my story, you'll know it's too late for me—that you won't be able to help me with your advice or reach out to save what's left of me.

But let me write to you to ease the weight on my chest. Maybe I'll be able to relax.

And maybe after that I'll be able to sleep.