

# The Toughest Man in Cairo vs The Zionist Vegetable

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According to my old neighbor, Kamal Hanafi, the vegetables in Israel are huge and good for only one thing. “The cucumbers,” he exclaimed, eyes lighting up, “are this long”—he stretched his hands more than a foot apart. “They are this wide”—he made a circle with his two hands. “And they taste like shit, all chemicals and unnatural fertilizers.” He spat. “No one can eat vegetables that disgusting. The only people who use them are the women, who sit like this”—he spread his legs to demonstrate. “And the men, of course.” The invisible cucumber in his hands jabbed sharply up. “And now they’re sending their vegetables to Egypt to fuck us all.”

Kamal could see it. A flood of Israeli vegetables, inundating the Egyptian market, washing away the old dream of agricultural self-sufficiency. More pernicious still: the image of oversized Zionist produce coming for his two young daughters. Kamal was very concerned with what his children put in their mouths. “It is difficult to keep them pure,” he complained, before listing the few shops that still sold untainted greens from *Umm Al’Dunya*.

But it wasn’t just the vegetables. In the years since Sadat’s policy of *infitah* liberalized the Egyptian economy, delectable imports have come dancing through the open door to tempt the girls of Egypt. It began with foreign banks, foreign aid, and joint ventures with Xerox, Colgate-Palmolive, and Ford; and it culminated in a torrent of chocolates from Hershey’s and Nestlé, as well as Dove Bars, Lay’s potato chips, Pepsi, Diet Pepsi, acidwash jeans, waffles, bikinis, rap music, exercise videos, Britney Spears, and lesbianism.

If he had a son, things would be easier. But Kamal has not been so lucky. He’s been trying to have a son for years. He tries every night, he told me, but all his wife has given him are girls he will lose one day to a wet t-shirt contest and the all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet in Sharm el Sheikh.

My friendship with the Hanafi family was my proudest accomplishment in Cairo. Kamal, his wife, and his two daughters lived just down the hall in my building, a notso-solidly middle-class apartment complex in Sayyida Zeinab. Kamal was an old friend of my Arabic teacher and, soon after I moved in, I began an aggressive charm offensive. In the afternoons, I came back from my job editing English translations and stopped by their apartment for tea, practicing my Arabic with Kamal while the two girls practiced their English with me. I made a point of bringing them tasteful and conservative gifts (Egyptian-made, of course). Colored pencils, expensive stationery, pale white dolls with long, knotty hair and ugly lace dresses. I sat with Kamal day after day and held my chin thoughtfully through long lectures on the dangers of foreign involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. One day, after polishing off a plate of kunafa, I criticized the idea of US intervention in Darfur.

“It is an Arab problem,” I said. “And the Arab League can solve it. The United States is treating Sudan like Iraq—a staging ground for imperial expansion.”

Kamal nodded, gazing approvingly at me through his large square bifocals. From then on, he had his daughters refer to me as “Uncle.” I had succeeded. I had friends.

My conquest was not complete, however. I could not, and never would, win over Kamal’s wife. Rania taught literature in an adjunct capacity at one of the universities in town. I would ask her about Arabic literature and poetry, about her classes, her family, politics, movies—she was never anything but cordial, but there was something about the perfunctory way she answered my questions that

made me think she was wary of my presence.

She had cause to be wary. Soon after he declared me an honorary Arab, Kamal embarked on a courtship of his own. It began with a series of quiet taps on my door. It must have been sometime after two in the morning, and I was lying in bed, neither awake nor asleep, paralyzed by the heat and a nameless anxiety. The taps sounded like Morse code. An SOS? I tiptoed to the door and looked through the peephole. I saw Kamal’s face, stretched and distorted, peering back at me. I opened the door. Kamal was wearing his pajamas. He was barefoot. And he was holding a trembling pack of Cleopatra Superlux—super, because they came in an extra-wide hard pack; lux, because they were extra-long.

I asked him if something was wrong.

He shook his head, no.

I asked him if he wanted to come in.

He did.

He showed himself to my couch and sat down, placing the pack of cigarettes on the coffee table. He had something to ask me, he said, and he didn’t want me to take it the wrong way.

He wanted me to blow smoke in his face.

I looked at the cigarettes and hesitated. It was an odd request. I didn’t smoke. Even in Cairo, where everybody smoked, I had only ever gone in for melon-flavored shisha, and even then I hadn’t really inhaled, secreting the perfumed smoke in my cheek.

I explained this to him, slightly chagrined.

Ah, but he wasn’t asking me to smoke! He used to smoke two packs a day, he said, back before he got married. His wife had made him promise to quit, and he had. But he still liked the smell, and I wouldn’t have to inhale. He looked very innocent on the couch, with his thick bifocals and his pajamas and his black dress socks, and I didn’t mind the smell of smoke, either, so I agreed.

I sat on the couch with Kamal and tore the plastic off the cigarette pack. The couch was a gift from my boss, an ancient, leonine woman who had grown up in the days of King Farouk, drank gin straight, and muttered angrily under her breath at the sight of muhajabhs.

She must have been very fashionable in her twenties, which was when she bought the couch. It was faux-French, with dark green fabric in a paisley pattern. There were cherubic faces on the wooden backrest, carved in bas-relief, blowing

“Get it get it, get it get it  
(WHOOOA)

Get it get it, get it get it  
(WHOOOOOA)

(Do you like it)

Get it get it, get it get it  
(OOOHHHH)

(This feels good)”

**Britney Spears,  
‘I’m a Slave 4 U’**

“Messenger of fear in sight  
Dark deception kills the light  
Hybrid children watch the sea  
Pray for father, roaming free”

**Metallica,  
‘The Thing That Should Not Be’**

whorls of wind from pursed lips.

Over the decades, a rusty spring had cut its way through the center of the couch. Six inches of jagged metal wobbled between Kamal and me. I’ve never been very good with matches, I’m afraid, and I had trouble lighting the cigarette. Each failed attempt added to a small mountain of matches on the table and a stench of sulfur in the air.

Finally, it caught. The cigarette flared as the paper started to burn, and I carefully drew a cloud of smoke into my mouth. I held my breath and leaned in, over the paisley print and the exposed spring, within inches of Kamal’s expectant face. He had removed his glasses for the occasion. I could see the pores on his skin, the light razor burn on his left cheek, the mustard-colored stains on his incisors, a testament to years of heavy smoking and poor oral hygiene. I thought he would close his eyes, or at least look away, but he stared right at me: I noticed for the first time that his light brown irises were speckled with flecks of gold. Then I exhaled, releasing a stream of smoke that traveled in a long, unbroken line before curling up into his nostrils. The scent of his cologne mixed with the bitterness of the tobacco. Kamal threw his head back, his eyelids fluttered, his upper lip quivered, and his cheeks hollowed as he sucked away in my direction.

Somehow I had not noticed the awkwardness of the whole scene until that very moment. I busied myself with the cigarette and the ashtray in an attempt to hide the mixture of embarrassment and amusement I felt at Kamal’s evident pleasure.

After I’d stubbed out what remained of the cigarette, Kamal relaxed into the couch. He spoke wistfully about his life before Rania, when he’d spent nearly all his time chain-smoking with his old friend Wagdi Lewis. If smoke represented freedom, Wagdi and Kamal had spent the 1980s liberating Egypt. Kamal chuckled as he described the quantities of tobacco they burned—fields of tobacco as wide as the Sahara and as tall as the pyramids.

It wasn’t just cigarettes, though. There were modest amounts of alcohol, as well, and some (wink wink) hashish. And there were politics. Wagdi was a secular leftist, and so deeply principled as to exert a gravitational force on those around him. He easily indoctrinated Kamal, who recounted with pride tales of Wagdi’s struggle with the corrupt Egyptian government and its foreign backers. Unlike Kamal, who retreated into a stultifying world of domesticity, Wagdi remained politically engaged. Even after starting a family, he had spent five years in prison for attempting to stockpile explosives. Wagdi had changed in only one way: he’d quit smoking. Not because anyone told him to, but because even homegrown Cleopatras were no longer 100 percent Egyptian.

In Kamal’s Egypt there were four types of men. There were the men over fifty, who were castrated by the events of 1967, and those under thirty, who suckled on the weak milk of Lebanese music videos; between them was Kamal’s own generation, men who had seceded from society to create inviolable nation-states of their families. And then there was Wagdi, a category unto himself, the toughest man in Cairo, a superhero who did not know the meaning of the word “defeat.”

The night ended as abruptly as it began. Kamal issued a brief but vitriolic attack on USAID. He made fun of my sneakers. He looked around the living room of my apartment and told me I needed a woman to take care of me. Then he stood up, thanked me for my hospitality, and tiptoed down

the hallway to his wife and daughters.

Our secret relationship went on like this for months—the nocturnal visitations, the secondhand smoke, the stories about Wagdi. Every few days at one or another inappropriate hour, Kamal would knock softly but insistently until I woke up and let him in. Sometimes I tried to stay up to wait for him, but his comings were unpredictable. He would probably have come every night if he could have, but he had a whole series of deliberate precautions, designed to hide his perfidy from his family, and after a while I just accepted it. I still stopped by Kamal's apartment after work sometimes, but less than before; I resented the pretense, the highly mannered welcome Rania gave me when I came in, the hungry look in Kamal's eyes when I left.

One afternoon I stopped by the Hanafis to drop off a plate of sweets my coworker had given me; it was more than I could eat myself. The door was open, and I stood at the entrance for a moment without announcing myself. Kamal and Rania were having an argument. She wasn't blind to Kamal's indiscretions.

"Admit it," I heard her saying. "You've been smoking again. I can tell. You go out at all hours of morning and then come sneaking home, washing your hair in the dark.

"It's the foreigner who smokes," Kamal said. His voice sounded desperate. "He is Hindu, from America. They have terrible habits." And then, self-righteously, "I have never smoked."

"This is just like the Wagdi situation. Your friends are a terrible influence on you."

"But I stopped seeing Wagdi..."

"And you will stop seeing this man, too."

"But he is a foreigner! He has no family, no friends."

"He is not to come into our house."

"Darling, don't do this," Kamal pleaded. I couldn't take it anymore. I left the sweets by the door and crept away, feeling sick to my stomach.

I was the bad influence? Two months into our relationship, I'd become an addict. I had begun to smoke on my own, squirreling away a pack of Marlboro Reds in my bedroom where Kamal wouldn't find them. I had started inhaling. And I... well, I didn't have many friends, actually, but I didn't need to hear about it from Kamal, and I certainly didn't need his pity.

A week later I heard the familiar tap-tap-tap on my door. I lay in bed, ignoring it, hoping he would go away. But he kept drumming his fingers, and despite myself I let him in and once more acted out the ritual. Looking nervous, he asked where I'd been, why I hadn't come by his apartment. I told him I'd been busy. I couldn't bring myself to tell him I'd overheard their conversation, and he couldn't bring himself to tell me not to come by. We had achieved a kind of equilibrium. I mostly stopped listening to the stories he told, chain-smoking the time away till he was done. His visits became less frequent—his precautions had become still more elaborate, I guess.

One night Kamal appeared at my door in a state of extraordinary agitation. I was already smoking; in fact, I was marinating in smoke.

He sat down next to me. "My wife is leaving tomorrow," he said. She was going to Beni Suef, to visit her family. "Freedom," he sighed. Then he leaned across the metal spring and put his hand on my arm. "I need your help," he said, his voice dropping conspiratorially.

"Sure," I responded. I was mesmerized by the smoke's languorous ascent through the air to my ceiling. My dignity and I had parted ways some time ago. I probably would have agreed to anything.

He had made plans to see his old friend Wagdi. The toughest man in Cairo, remember? I nodded. It was to be a reunion of sorts. He wished I could meet him, he said, but it was not in my destiny; I had my own, very important, role to play. He needed me to watch his daughters while he was out.

I saw it all in my mind right then, the whole arc of our relationship: my courtship of Kamal and his family, Kamal's courtship of me. Kamal's betrayal



of me. And now, suddenly, my betrayal of Kamal. My hand shook. "They can stay in my apartment," I promised, hoping my voice did not betray my excitement. "It will give me great pleasure to welcome your daughters," I said, in exceedingly formal Arabic.

When he left, I lay in bed, sweating through my sheets. It was a hot night, and it was almost impossible to sleep. I lit cigarette after cigarette and stared at the light cast on my ceiling by the street lamps outside. I woke up covered in ash.

My recollection of the next day is hazy, filtered as it is through my guilty conscience. I remember running to the corner store and the look on the cashier's face at the sum I spent. I remember slowing my sprint to a walk when I passed a security officer, as though he could see my intentions or, worse, what was in the bags I was carrying. I remember closing my curtains because the sunlight hurt my eyes. And I remember hearing Kamal's familiar knock at an unfamiliar time of day. He stood in the hallway, dressed in a suit, with his hands on his daughters' heads.

"Good morning," he said, beaming.

The girls must have sensed something was wrong. They looked into my dark, drab apartment with trepidation. Kamal was oblivious. "Go on, my ladies. Uncle will take care of you today." He noticed the cigarette in my fingers and said something vaguely disapproving, but he hurried away with a wave before I could respond. The girls filed in, reluctantly.

I should say that my intentions were not evil. I did not intend to hurt the girls. They were merely pawns in a game their father had set in motion. I swallowed hard. Sit down over there, I said, gesturing toward the couch with my cigarette hand. I told them not to be frightened, that we were going to have a special English lesson, that we were going to have a good time together. Ash fell on the floor as I spoke, my hands moving dramatically with my words. We're going to play now, I said, smiling.

I was calm at the time, but in retrospect I must have seemed kind of crazy. I was dimly aware of how things must have looked through their eyes: the precipitous ceiling fan and the bare light bulb, the couch with its rusty spring, the bizarre cherub carvings, the spinning shadows. I saw myself: wild-

eyed and disheveled, shouting things in English, waving my arms in the air while holding a lit cigarette. The older girl, Reem, held a protective arm around her sister Haneen, who looked like she was about to cry. I wanted to stop—honestly, I did—but I couldn't. Their fear made me feel crazier. Is this what it feels like to be dangerous, I wondered? Well, then, I was dangerous. I was Dracula, bizarrely accented creature of shadow. I was Shaitan, my apartment a trap for the unwary. I was Hindu, my gods many and many-armed, my habits terrible. I was the darkness, the ugliest American, the lord of imports. I was the terrible Zionist vegetable.

My glasses slipped down my nose. I pushed them back up with a talon.

I'll be right back, I said. Don't move! The girls looked at each other in fear. I returned with the plastic bags from the corner store and placed them on the coffee table. "What's in the bags?" I asked them in English. They didn't respond. "What do you think is in the bags?" I asked again, in Arabic this time, pointing at one especially bulky bag. Nothing. I cleared my throat and was all set to ask them again when I realized that with each question, spittle was leaking from the corners of my mouth. I was foaming. The girls were trembling. This had to stop. I had to stop it. So I jumped up, took hold of the bulkiest bag and turned it upside down. Suddenly, the table was covered in... chocolatescandies cookiescrackerschipssicecream-deliciousness!

MERRY CHRISTMAS, I bellowed in English. The girls were in shock. MERRY CHRISTMAS, I shouted again. Reem stopped crying and Haneen looked slightly less anxious. I yelled again, louder this time: MERRY CHRISTMAS! I pulled open a box of Raisinets and threw them in the air, laughing as the American chocolate rained down upon us. MERRY CHRISTMAS!!!

Amazingly, all of the tension disappeared. Reem replied "Merry Christmas" rather matter-of-factly

Photography, Adrian Gaut; Art Direction, Babak Radboy

# You should meet my son! You remind me of him...

## ...He is an idiot!

and smiled, and Haneen rolled her eyes. Pretty soon we were all sitting on the floor, tearing open candy wrappers and eating bite-size Snickers bars. I taught them to say “candy bar” and “ice cream” and “whatchamacallit.” After a little while they asked if we could have music, and the girls went through my MP3s. They jumped around the tiny room, mouthing the sounds to Britney Spears songs. I helped them. It was a fine English lesson. Then they developed a synchronized dance for “I’m a Slave 4 U,” spinning until they fell giggling and flailing into twin nests of discarded candy wrappers.

“Get it get it get it get!” they laughed.

I started to feel self-conscious. “Maybe we should be quieter,” I said. Reem smiled a gigantic smile. “I mean it. Let’s make this our secret, OK? We should be careful.”

“Aiwa!” They agreed. “Secret!”

But we weren’t careful enough. I lost track of time, and when the door to my apartment opened without warning, the girls were spinning madly again, mouths smeared with chocolate and nougat. I was clapping my hands out of time, pausing occasionally to toss candy wrappers in the air like confetti. It took us all a moment to register Kamal’s dark, angry face in the doorway. I tried to sweep the candy wrappers under the cherub couch with my foot. “It’s not what it looks like,” I stammered. “It’s nothing. I was teaching them English.”

Kamal grabbed his daughters by the wrists. “Haram aleik!” he yelled at me. “You have betrayed me!” He turned and slammed the door, leaving me standing alone, Britney Spears still playing on the laptop, a half-eaten Dove Bar melting in my hand.

Kamal never forgave me. And there remained a part of me that wished things had ended on a more graceful note. After our mutual betrayal, our shared hallway continued to reverberate with ill feelings, and at any other time of my life I might have dreaded leaving my apartment on the off-chance I might encounter him or his family. But thanks to Kamal, I was a changed man. I was shameless. I wore shorts in the hallway and t-shirts in the street. I smoked a pack a day. I started drinking. And what’s more, I was obsessed with Wagdi Lewis.

One tale in particular fascinated me. Kamal and I had been driving from the airport to our apartment building. I was returning from a short visit to the United States and had thought it very kind of him to make the hour-long drive on my behalf. When I came out of the terminal, luggage in hand, I looked around to find Kamal standing by his car, a gleam in his eyes and a pack of cigarettes in his hand. He had missed me.

On the drive home, Kamal refused to open a window. I puffed and he vicariously inhaled until I grew dizzy and Kamal, drunk off the smoke, began de-claiming. “The toughest man in Cairo,” he announced, and I knew what was coming. “One time in the 1980s,” Kamal told me as he pulled his rusty Fiat into a gas station, “when Sadat was in power and everyone was being arrested all over again, the police tied Wagdi to a chair and beat him with their fists until the chair broke. Then they took the chair and tore the legs off and beat him with the legs of the chair.” I tried putting the cigarette out in the car’s ashtray. Kamal intercepted it and began waving it up and down in a chopping motion to demonstrate the violence of the torture. “And after they broke the legs of the chair on his body, the police looked down at Wagdi Lewis, lying on the concrete floor of the police station in a pool of blood. There were splinters everywhere. They squatted down and yelled at him. ‘Are you ready to talk?’ they yelled. And you know what happened?” Kamal stopped and stared intently at me, like I was one of the cops. His eyes were wide and distorted behind his thick lenses. “Nothing. Nothing happened. He was asleep. Snoring.” Kamal rolled down the window and tossed the cigarette out onto the ground of the gas

station. I cringed. “Now that’s courage,” he said.

Maybe he was right. Maybe that was courage and not just psychological trauma. All I knew now was that I wanted to meet this man who had yawned in the face of torture. I wanted to see just how tough he was, how strict his principles were. If they were anything like Kamal’s, I was pretty sure I could break him.

Finding the toughest man in Cairo was remarkably easy. My Arabic tutor knew him and arranged a meeting: 3:30, Saturday afternoon, Midan Orabi. Deciding what to wear was more difficult. I initially thought about wearing my suit, the same one I’d worn to meet Naguib Mahfouz a month earlier, but thought better of it. A suit was meant to impress, or, at least, to insinuate. I wanted to intimidate. I found my most shameful possession, a shirt so embarrassing I had repressed its existence by wadding it into a ball and burying it in the deepest crevice of my bureau.

The shirt belonged to my father. He’d bought it when he came to visit me, during a trip to the beaches of Dahab, on the Red Sea. I’d lied and told Kamal we were going to Aswan, to see the treasures of ancient Egypt. I knew that if I told him the truth he would scoff. Prostitutes and Israelis, he always said, those were the only things that existed in Dahab. He was wrong: There were shirtless Australians as well, and a class of Egyptian salesman evolved specifically to seduce my father. They called my dad Amitabh Bachchan, and he was flattered; he thanked them in Hindi, and they complimented his Arabic. Within hours of our arrival, my dad, giddy with the attention and the power of the dollar, had bought three t-shirts, two with a camel and a pyramid, and, more humiliatingly, a third emblazoned with an image of the Stella beer label. He wore the shirt for the weekend. He wore it proudly, smiling and waving every time someone would yell “Hey, Mr Stella” as he walked past.

I pulled the t-shirt on and stood in my bathroom in front of the mirror. I rehearsed talking points to my reflection: The war in Iraq, I said, was necessary to disturb the unproductive stasis of Arab politics. I turned so I could look at myself in profile. Opening the Egyptian markets to foreign goods was necessary to shock a stagnant economy into action. I sucked in my stomach. It was Hayek who said it best. Or Milton Friedman. I shrugged. It didn’t matter. Liberal interventionism would trump Oriental despotism.

I was ready.

I arrived early for our meeting. Wagdi was two hours late. I waited for him in a coffee shop and got a table in the center, strategically located underneath a ceiling fan and next to a giant plastic bust of Umm Kulthum. Her impressive head gazed impassively at the hordes of teenagers roaming outside. Most of them were playing Amr Diab ringtones on their phones and sweating; others were buying bodybuilding magazines and tabloids with news about Hollywood celebrities from a group of old men who seemed to despise their customers as much as their wares. I had a hard time knowing what Umm Kulthum was thinking. Each lens of her iconic sunglasses was the size of my face. I don’t think she was happy with what she saw.

It was warm in the coffee shop, and I dozed off. A rough hand on my shoulder woke me up. It was Wagdi. His broad, ugly, pockmarked face was inches away from mine. He smiled.

“Sleepy Mr Stella,” he said. He roared with laughter.

I looked down at my watch. “I guess I should have assumed,” I said, as coldly as possible, “that everything in this country will be two hours late.”

Wagdi seemed stung by my insult, which boded well for the afternoon ahead. He apologized and promised to make it up to me by giving me a walking tour of Cairo I would never forget.

Outside, Wagdi grabbed a poorly dressed sheb by the shoulder and pointed to a large sweat stain on the man’s underarm. “That’s where we are. And that...” He ran a thick and calloused finger along the man’s sternum, following the outline of his slightly distended belly. “That is the Nile.”

Whatever advantage I might have gained with my putdown was lost in this disturbing geography lesson.

“That makes his stomach Zamalek,” laughed one of the old men who sold newspapers off a mat made of newspapers. Our human map wriggled like a fish caught on a hook.

“We’ll head here first,” Wagdi pointed at a small island of sweat that had accumulated, oddly, below the man’s left nipple. “The Mugamma.”

“So, what’s that, then?” The old news man pointed to the man’s back, soaked with sweat, the sopping, nearly transparent fabric outlined by a thin, white line of salt. I thought it looked like the African continent. Wagdi thought it looked like Israel, which was, after all, behind everything. “We’re not going there,” he laughed. He let the kid go.

Wagdi ploughed his way through the crowded streets of Cairo. I followed in his wake and tried to keep up as people scattered before his intimidating bulk.

As we walked he told me about his life. He was born in Shubra, to a poor Coptic family with too many children; his dad was a butcher; he was precociously literate; he went to Cairo University in the mid 1970s, where he was politicized, secularized, met his first girlfriend, went to his first protest, and got arrested for the first time. His life from that point on followed a dogged pattern: join underground cell, plot era-appropriate destruction. 1977–1980: Assassinate Israeli officials operating in Egypt; 1985–1988: Assassinate Israeli and Saudi officials operating in Egypt; 1993–1996: Assassinate Israeli, Saudi, and American officials operating in Egypt.

He never actually assassinated anyone. He never even got close. He held meetings, penned pamphlets, organized rallies, smuggled weapons, and then, like clockwork, the police would descend, and he was back in prison. When they released him, the cycle began again. It would continue, he said. It was a question of principle.

We stopped in front of the Mugamma. Wagdi put his arm around my shoulder and guided me to the very center of the plaza. Wagdi’s arm was solid. Extremely large. Strangely comforting. In comparison, my own arms felt soft and weak; they dangled uselessly at my sides. I stuck my hands in my pockets, tried not to slouch, and we stood like father and son in front of the Mugamma, our shadows stretching away at an angle towards Sharia Tahrir. “This is the glory of the Egyptian state,” he said. “A thousand bureaucrats trapped in an unassailable fortress.” I waited in silence for Wagdi to continue. I started counting the windows from the topleft of the building, and when I got to one hundred and twenty-four, began to think that Wagdi had nothing left to say. I looked up at him. His body almost eclipsed the afternoon sun; a blinding corona met the edge of his silhouette. Turning back, I blinked at pinpricks of light that danced between the Mugamma and myself.

I tried to make a noise that would express condescension or knowing skepticism. It came out as a croak. He was so large! And as to the corruption of the third-world bureaucracy, Wagdi and I were in agreement. I knew I had to say something. I could show no weakness. For had not TE Lawrence (or was it Thomas Friedman?) taught me that Arabs only respond to ostentatious displays of strength? I tried to rally.

“I think the building looks like it’s reaching out to give us a hug.” The building had two wings that jut out, four window-lengths, on either side. They looked like arms extended in friendship and in love to the traffic of Midan Tahrir.

Wagdi’s face turned hard. “The Mugamma is a fortress. It embraces nothing. It crushes the life out of those who work inside, and of those of us who live and work outside, as well.” The weight of

his arm on my shoulder was heavier now.

We began walking down the Corniche. I took the offensive, complaining about the traffic, the dirt, heat, the crowds, the noise, the poverty. "Look at other developing countries," I instructed Wagdi. "India, South Africa. There is hope for those countries. They have industry, a growing middle class. There is nothing here." I tugged on my t-shirt. My sweat had made it stick to my skin. Wagdi was quiet. I continued, "National pride means nothing without real economic progress. That progress can only come through liberalizing the economy."

I looked to see if any of my words had registered with Wagdi. I looked at the scar that extended from just below his right eye to the corner of his mouth. "Mr Stella," he said, "you should meet my son. You remind me of him. He is an idiot." He held my hand in his calloused mitt, and as he led me off the Corniche and into the city, I began to wilt.

Wagdi took me to Midan Attaba, where he lived in an apartment on the eighth floor. We went up. His apartment was empty, except for a mewling mass of cats. Wagdi gave me a glass of ice water and directed us all onto the balcony.

Wagdi picked one cat up by the scruff of its neck and trained its eye on the Tiring Building, a decrepit Viennese-designed department store languishing in Midan Attaba. On the top of the building was a sculpture of four Atlases holding up the world. I thought that the Atlases were somewhat ugly, and the globe, disproportionately small. I made one final attempt at critique.

"I don't understand why it takes four Atlases to do what one Atlas can do anywhere else."

"It is simple, Mr Stella. The weight of the world is heavier here in Cairo." And with that, I gave up. The man, like the Mugamma, was a monolith. I was crushed. I squatted and started playing with the cats. Wagdi looked down, pleased to see that we were making friends.

Then a door slammed inside. Startled, I stood to see Wagdi shifting his weight from foot to foot. "My son," he said. "My son has come home." The cats were perturbed. They started clambering on one another, as though attempting to form a feline pyramid. Wagdi's son, a scowling, insouciant fourteen-year-old wearing tight, torn jeans and a black Metallica t-shirt, walked onto the balcony. The cats darted past him into the apartment.

"Dad," Wagdi's son yelled. "The cats are inside. How many times do we have to talk about this. The cats live in the street. People live in the apartment."

Wagdi began apologizing to his son. "Don't apologize," the son said, "take the cats downstairs." Wagdi began apologizing to me. I made what I thought were reassuring gestures with my hands. It was a strange scene. The toughest man in Cairo, pleading with a teenager. Wagdi seemed to feel it, too. He followed the cats, leaving me alone with his son on the balcony.

"God I hate those cats." He looked me up and down. "Are you American?" he asked, and when I nodded, he began to speak in English.

"What the shit are you talking for to my dad?" I smiled.

"He is a motherfucker. I hate him." He produced a pipe and a crumpled cigarette out of a pocket. "Like Sherlock Holmes," he said. He pronounced the L in Holmes. He broke the cigarette in half and poured the tobacco into the bowl of the pipe. He struck a match and almost lit the scraps inside, and then leaned against the wall, sucking on the pipe with exaggerated pleasure. "

Damn, that is smooth." He passed me the pipe. I played along and sucked air through the pipe. The faint, faraway taste of the tobacco reminded me of a more innocent time, now long past, when I didn't smoke at all.

After a few seconds, I passed the pipe back to him. It was dark out, a development that clearly irritated him. He grumbled and turned on the light on the balcony. A moth began to attack the light bulb. It was a losing battle, but the moth was tenacious, throwing itself mindlessly against the glass again and again. The fluttering shadow cast by the moth just made Wagdi's son angrier.

## I was foaming! The girls were trembling! This had to stop... I had to stop it!

"That moth is stupid," he complained. "Egypt is shit," he said. He pointed the stem of the pipe at the Tiring Building. "That is shit." He pointed at the green lights of the mosques in the distance. "Religion is shit."

"Religion is shit?" I asked, feeling like I should say something.

"I hate God."

"You hate God?"

He looked at me meaningfully. "I hate America more than I hate God."

"You hate America more than you hate God?" I felt stupid repeating his words but I wasn't quite sure what to say. I was beginning to empathize with the cats. "I hate Britney Spears more than I hate God. But I hate Amr Diab more than I hate Britney Spears."

"And the cats?"

"Those cats are pimp motherfuckers. I hate my father more than I hate Amr Diab more than I hate Britney Spears more than I hate Egypt more than I hate God." He looked satisfied with himself, like he had just solved a puzzle. He passed me the pipe, and I obediently took another puff.

"So what do you like?"

He lifted in a fist in the air and made the devil's horns. "I love metal." He stuck out his tongue and thrashed his head around. Just as suddenly, he was still. "Stop smoking. The pipe doesn't work, you asshole."

Anand  
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Zionist Vegetable'  
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