Cairo, 1981

Om Reda sauntered past jasmine shrubs and palm trees, enjoying the bustle of cars and rickshaws on Cupola Street. She turned at a corner, walked a short distance to creaking metal gates and stepped into an alley. Finally, she entered the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century apartment building where she worked as a maid.

She plodded on worn marble steps to the third floor, rubbing bruises at her elbows. She sighed, remembering the joy she felt when her son was born twenty years ago, before his temper tattooed her arms. Following his birth, people renamed her the mother of Reda; Om Reda was the sweetest sound.

A stray cat rushed by, her gray fur rubbing Om Reda’s ankles. “Come back, you little Meow. I’ll give you treats.” She rang the doorbell and saw Fatima’s gangly shadow through the frosted panels. Om Reda smiled at the woman who was docile as a child due to a birth accident, and who had been sheltered at home when her mother was alive.

Now, a new era had begun, and Fatima could stroll uncensored in the streets of Cupola Gardens, reaching the castle where the last king of Egypt, King Farouk, had lived prior to his exile. She bought coconut confections and biscuits at the market. At home, she clutched her portable radio, and listened to ballads. All this because Leila, the young mistress, had come back from America with notions of freedom, and let her forty-year-old aunt come and go as she pleased.

“Om Reda, tell me a story,” Leila invariably said after dinner, though she knew most of her maid’s stories by heart. Om Reda felt pride that this learned woman, a journalist, loved her simple tales. She left Fatima to her radio, and sat on the floor as the mistress stretched on her bed. Om Reda recounted that she was batted as a newborn. “My mother spread bat’s blood over my arms, legs, and privates so that I wouldn’t have any body hair.” Leila raised her eyebrows, and Om Reda uncovered her hairless arms and under-
arms, saying she never had to make “sweets,” that sticky mixture of sugary water that jelled into a depilatory wax.

“Could bat’s blood work for me?” Leila smiled.

“This needs to be done at birth, but I can make you sweets if you like,” Om Reda said.

* * *

A summer breeze rushed through the kitchen window. Om Reda sat on a stool, her black jellaba hitched up her legs as she minced jute leaves and garlic on a short wooden table.

“May your birthday be happier with the one you love. Lala Lala.” Om Reda’s full cheeks stretched as she hummed the song.

“Lady, I have some news,” she said when Leila walked in the kitchen.

“Good tidings, Inshallah.” Leila’s upper lip perched on a cigarette. She opened a wooden cabinet with mesh grills and rummaged through the plates.

“Hosni Bey’s driver has asked for closeness.”

“A thousand congratulations,” Leila said.

“My intended is married. His wife lives in the village.”

“You’ll be his second wife?” Leila froze.

“It’s better to live in grace than in sin.” Om Reda smiled. “After the wedding, he’ll give me money every month and we’ll stay in his room by the garage when he’s in town. His employer likes to visit the city a few days a week. My intended’s name is Karim.”

“A name that speaks of generosity.” Leila’s voice softened.

“My son is against him. I think he’s jealous.”

“Do you worry about that?”

“Well, Karim and I agree to wed. What can my little judge do about it?” Her laughter sounded brittle as she rubbed her discolored albows.

“Don’t let your son stand in your way.” Leila grabbed a plate and left the kitchen, black hair trailing in her wake.

* * *

“One in a place of wonder, to you of grace and distinction,” Om Reda said, “there lived Hassan the brave. He was a humble man who fell in love with the beautiful Leila.” Om Reda sat on the
faded red carpet, the cracks in her heels stretched with her lotus posture, while Leila sank in her bed and fanned her manicured toes.

“Leila was a princess and her father would not consider her marriage to such a lowly man. The King asked Hassan to retrieve three emeralds hidden in the lands beyond the mountains. The King, in his wile, knew that no one had returned from this journey.

“Hassan bloodied his arms climbing cliffs. He battled invisible demons who yanked his hair and pulled his nails. He sifted twirls of mud at the bottomless lake, and finally found the three emeralds. When he returned with the prize, the king had no choice but to allow the marriage.

“Hassan the brave married Leila and people arrived from the farthest kingdoms to celebrate. The wedding lasted three days and nights. Hassan and Leila led a pure life and begat boys and girls.”

Om Reda looked far away as she told her story and finished with her usual punchline: “What do you say? Was the story sweet or stale? If it’s sweet, it is your turn to speak. If not, then tie me in a knot.”

She lowered her voice as Leila fell asleep, with the light filtering through the long wooden shutters. Om Reda planned a nice garlic-coriander pesto to top off her colocasia stew as she walked back to the kitchen, her bare toes grasping the faded tiles.

Om Reda had seen this family in better times. Fatima’s father, the old master, was a Supreme Court judge who was chauffeured around in his Rolls Royce, and whose four-course meals were cooked by a chef and sous-chefs. Servants cleaned the house, personal aides ran errands, and a physical therapist came to administer bi-weekly massages. The judge’s home library held books etched with gold. His wife was the daughter of the last prime minister of Egypt, before the revolution that promised bread and free education to the poor. The masses got bread and free education, but no jobs. The judge and his wife lost most of their vast agricultural lands to nationalization. Politics were for the people of politics, and the rich, Om Reda shrugged to herself.

On days when her intended, Karim, wasn’t in town, she went back to her single-room apartment after work. Her son lived
with her and banged the walls because he hated his laborer job and didn’t earn enough to get married. She ignored his tantrums. Sometimes, she suffered a few bruises. In the evenings, she would light the flick of her kerosene burner, boil a cup of water, and sit on the porch steps, drinking tea and observing traffic, pedestrians, buses, and donkeys pulling carts. Sometimes she bought a few piasters’ worth of salted peanuts from the peddler, or a roasted sweet potato. Life was always happening outside her door.

In the morning, she walked to work to save on bus fare. Leila would be at the newspaper’s office downtown, and Om Reda cleaned and cooked, awaiting Fatima’s arrival from her outings.

Fatima opened the thin foil covering her biscuits and sipped her tea, stretching on the sofa. Purple veins traversed her legs like an exotic species of vine. Her smile revealed the perfectly aligned teeth of her dentures.

Om Reda sat on the floor, near Fatima, watching a movie. The television was enclosed in a dark wooden armoire. Leila Murad, that glamorous singer-actress with a heart-shaped face and a voice like a nightingale, played the role of a high school student who receives private language lessons at home. She sang light-hearted songs, teasing her taciturn teacher and mocking the rules of Arabic grammar, while serenaded by servants beating on tambourines. The lyrics urged the listener not to conjugate the past tense as one should let the past be and not worry about it. Fatima sang along with the classic songs she knew by heart.

Om Reda heard Leila’s footsteps echoing in the hallway, as she headed back from the kitchen to her bedroom, a room the size of Om Reda’s apartment, which opened onto a large balcony. The door was left ajar and Om Reda could see Leila’s friend, Doctor Nina, sucking on her ebony cigarette holder and laughing with the robust mirth of her mixed French and Syrian ancestries.

A repetitive beat blared words that Om Reda couldn’t understand, though she knew it was English. An herbal smell streamed out, reminding Om Reda of her son; she liked it when he smoked hashish because it made him less angry. He would lie back on his cot and smoke his hashish cigarettes till he burned his fingertips. *Tomorrow, I’ll get a good job*, he would say. *None of that construction...*
work. But when he ran out of money, he always went back to the laborer’s days.

* * *

“Here’s marriage reduced to its most elemental functions,” Leila said, her voice reaching to the hallway. “I’m really confused by her choice.”

“What other options would Om Reda have?” Nina said. “I mean, who else would marry her?”

“She’s been a widow long enough, and she seems happy now.” Leila said, her voice trailing.

“How old is she?”

“Old. In her fifties.”

“Life is the art of the possible,” Nina said.

Om Reda saw both women get up and dance, arms stretched to the side with jumping movements, like hopping. “I love Tina Turner,” Leila said. The dancing seemed different from Arabic dancing, no swaying at the waist, no jiggling of breasts, just up-and-down movements of the arms, to-and-fro movements of the legs, and an occasional stomping of the feet to mark the rhythm. The women bent their necks, and tilted them back. American dance.

* * *

“Pray on the Prophet,” Om Reda offered her cue to the start of a story, a respectful nod to tradition. She sat on the floor by Lei-la’s bed as late afternoon light filtered through the wooden shades. Dr. Nina had left to go back to her apartment.

“Upon him are prayers and salutations,” Leila replied by rote, puffing on a cigarette.

“Hassan the brave received a visit by Hoopoe bird,” Om Reda said, “and the bird announced: ‘I have a beautiful bride for you. She’s fair as the moon, her eyes glitter like the sea and her hair shines like a thousand grains of sand. But she has a curse upon her, which is guarded by an ogre in the land of Miraj. She can’t move her legs, and she lies in bed all day, while her maid blots out her tears.’
“Hassan rode his horse into the night, and a billion stars whispered encouragement. He reached the land of Miraj. Pyramidal trees lined the road; they were bare except for black tufts at their extremities. At the end of the road, a sprawling castle flung its towers high in the sky.

“Hassan was stopped by an old woman at the gate. ‘I can’t walk to the river,’” she said. ‘Would you bring me some water, young man?’

“The path to the river was strewn with rocks and was far removed from the castle, but Hassan walked the long trail to fill her pail. ‘Take this,’ the old woman said, and her hand released a tiny seed. ‘Don’t ask questions. Just be on your way.’ She kissed his brow and disappeared in a puff of air.

“Inside the castle, Hassan was startled by a creature sprouting tentacles. Serpents slithered on its appendages, and massive cockroaches covered its head. Tiny creatures with darting eyes crouched in niches along the walls.

“‘Salaam,’ Hassan said.
“‘The serpents hissed.
“‘What brings you to the land of Miraj?’ the ogre said.
“‘I have a request.’

“‘You have good manners,’ the ogre said. ‘Had not your salutation preceded your disputation, I would have smitten you right away.’

“‘I heard you’ve hidden Leila’s curse under your throne.’
“‘Afreet, Satan’s minion, brought me the curse for safe-keeping. If you want it, you’ll have to do something for me.’
“‘What do you need?’
“‘I yearn for a thing of beauty, but nothing ever grows here.’

“Hassan the brave brought forth the seed the old woman had given him, and placed it on the barren ground. He poured water from a pitcher, and lo and behold, the seed sprouted into a tree laden with fragrant buds.

“The ogre ordered his minions to hand Hassan the parchment that spelled out the curse. Hassan rushed back to Leila’s castle and placed the curse in water. The ink dissolved, turning the water into a bubbling liquid. Leila drank it. She took tentative steps and started walking. The kingdom rejoiced.

“And so, Tutti Frutti, isn’t this tale a beauty?” Om Reda said, and started to get up.
“It’s a beauty,” Leila said, “but what if the princess saves her own self, and marries Hassan?”

“This would be a different story,” Om Reda said, squinting her eyes.

* * *

“I left work early,” Leila said, “and rushed to the police station to register for the referendum.”

Om Reda placed plates and rounds of bread on the dining room table. The long table stood like an island on the floor tiles, an arabesque design of turquoise and black on white.

“Did you vote?”

Doctor Nina drew smoke through her long ebony filter, and expelled fantastic shapes, which dissolved in the afternoon light.

“This isn’t a vote per se. This is just so we can say yes or not, whether we agree to have vice-president Hosni Mubarak as our future president. If the majority of voters say no, then they’ll find another candidate.”

“Who are they?” Nina said.

“I’m not sure. The parliament, the army.”

“Why do you worry about such things? This referendum is rigged, of course. Our nations survive by Baraka, a mysterious grace,” Nina laughed.

“Did you ever vote?”

“Back in Syria? Are you kidding?”

“I’m twenty-five years old and have never voted,” Leila said.

“You know what happened today? A police officer said it was too late to register, that I should have registered back in January. I’ve never registered since there was never an occasion to vote. Who could have predicted that Sadat would get killed? The officer said, ‘What do you want to say, anyway? No?’ and he spat on the floor, splashing my feet. I decided to leave Egypt,” Leila said.

“You’re so idealistic.” Nina sighed.

“I’m going back to the States.”

“What happened to your dreams of being a top journalist in Egypt?”

“I’m reporting on fashion shows. The other positions are political appointments. Journalists have to abide by a list of do’s and don’ts. I’m suffocating,” Leila said.
“Let’s go to the Gloria Gaynor concert tonight at the Mena House,” Nina said. “We’ll enjoy the backdrop of the Pyramids, and kiss Egypt *au revoir*.”

Leila raised her eyebrows.

“I’ve been accepted at the University of Paris, *chérie*, as a resident in medicine,” Nina said. “The deal is that in return, I’ll translate Arabic for the doctors. Lots of patients come from oil-rich nations to seek treatment in Paris.”

“Congratulations. Looks like we’ll both be out of here soon,” Leila said.

“What about Fatima? She can’t take care of herself.” Nina said.

“I’ll miss her, but my parents are retiring and will return from the States to stay with her.”

“So you’ll be all alone in America?”

“Yes.” Leila’s lips quivered as she looked away at the window.

“And, Nina, how does it feel to be going back to the motherland?”

“Wherever I can get an education,” Nina bit her nails. “I learned French from my mother. My writing isn’t that good.”

“Take some classes.”

Om Reda sat on the floor, following their conversation. She rose to go to the kitchen and returned with a bowl of steaming okra. “Lady Leila, why don’t you tell Doctor Nina the story of Hassan and the fate of doom, the fate of gloom and the seven seas?”

“Yes, we could both use it,” Leila said.

Om Reda’s tiny gold earrings caught the light as she sashayed back to the kitchen, smiling to herself.

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“The great sultan of Egypt dreamt that Hoopoe bird visited,” Leila said, “and warned him that his life was cursed by three fates: the fate of doom, the fate of gloom and the fate of the seven seas. The bird scratched the sultan’s face with his sharp beak and flew off. The sultan awoke and screamed when he saw blood trailing down his face. Soothsayers and necromancers rushed to the castle, consulting in his private chambers. They decreed that to avert these fates, the sultan needed a hero.”
“Hassan the brave was summoned by the council and ordered to undo the curse. First, he had to find the cave of Babel. Hassan ran through valleys. He found a yellow ogre by a river, standing tall as a mountain. Hassan clambered up a date tree. ‘In the name of the Almighty,’ he said as he dug his spear into the monster’s heart. Fairies appeared, sprinkled Hassan with gold dust, and guided him to the cave of Babel.

“Minions reached out from the walls, pulling his hair and jellaba. They spoke a language with clicks and snorts, and hissed black fumes. Hassan scraped his arms fending them off. When he was shoved against a latch, the wall split open.

“A thousand candles illuminated servants milling in red livery and a young woman reclining on a lounge-chair. Hassan was dazzled by her beauty; her blue hair flowed to her waist and barely covered her breasts. As he got closer, the woman changed into a blue monster with large boils and a single eye. The monster laughed.

“Hassan shot his spear into her eye. The monster shrank and disappeared. The cave filled with rainbows, and Hassan staggered outside.

“At the shore, he clambered up into a boat. Winds blew in fierce gusts, and large fishes snapped their jaws at him. When a fish flopped onto the boat, Hassan gutted it with a knife. Tucked in its entrails, he discovered a crumpled paper with a curse scribbled with illegible curlicues and rams’ horns. He shredded the paper and scattered the pieces, saying: ‘I banish this deed in the name of the Lord of Mercy.’

“The sea became as smooth as a lake. He rowed easily now, imbued with a superhuman force. When he reached the city of Ur, he ran to the king’s castle.

“‘Your majesty, I have battled the fate of doom, the fate of gloom, and sailed the seven seas. You are free from the curse of the evil one.’

“‘Dear Hassan, you are brave indeed. I bestow upon you the lands beyond the mountain and decree you a prince.’

“Lavish celebrations took place, and Prince Hassan lived happily ever after with Leila, and they begat boys and girls.

“And so, Tutti Frutti, isn’t this tale a beauty?” Leila said.

“I loved it,” Nina said, puffing out waves of smoke. “There is no curse that can’t be undone. A year of French lessons, and I’ll be writing like Molière.”
Om Reda was getting married. She glanced up at the balcony, and smiled at Leila, Fatima, and Doctor Nina. Ululations and the metallic ring of cymbals rose in the night, a full moon gracing the sky. Fatima looked down at the narrow alley leading to the garage. She perched her arms on the sill, drinking her milky tea, a dreamy look on her face. Leila stood next to her and sucked on a cigarette. Nina sat on a chair, licking froth from her lips, a glass of beer at her side. She observed the proceedings through gaps in the ornate cement balustrade.

An old man sat on a rickety chair in the alley, his brown skin was etched by deep wrinkles, and he wore a conical red hat with a tassel. He sang of eternal love and happiness in quarter-note melodies, his knobbly fingers plucking his lute.

Om Reda wore a long blue dress and a scarf embroidered with red beads. She huddled at a distance from her groom, surrounded by her friends. Hurricane lamps glowed, and the groom wrung his hands as he balanced gingerly on a wooden chair. He had dyed his hair with black henna, a color that contrasted with his thinning pate. He smoked his nargila slowly, its water bubbles rising in a foamy mass, the smell of applewood drifting in the night air.

A handful of guests wore ill-fitting suits and gathered on plastic chairs set on the uneven tiles of the alley. They drank tea and helped themselves to heaps of koshary, topping the mixture of rice, macaroni, and lentils with fried onions and tomato sauce. Some grabbed chunks of roasted lamb from a platter.

Maids from neighboring apartments wore glittery scarves and crashed cymbals using their thumbs and middle fingers; the metallic sound rose with piercing clarity, like a trumpet call. The gray cat weaved between their legs, licking scraps off the floor. Palm trees swayed gently. An owl disappeared with a flutter, and constellations shone in a clear sky. The garage door at the end of the alley was open, revealing a black Oldsmobile in the light of the single bulb. The door to Karim’s room, by the side of the garage, was festooned with colorful lights.

One of the maids circled Om Reda’s head with a thurible and chanted: “I protect you from the evil eye five times, and another five times,” as fumes flitted out of the incense burner’s perforations.
Suddenly, Om Reda stood up. Her cheeks were tinted a florid red, and her lips were grossly rouged. A necklace of Indian jasmine hung from her neck, dangling on her ample bosom. She tied a scarf around her hips and her dress hitched up revealing a thick silver anklet. She walked toward her husband, bent down to kiss his cheeks, and shook her hips in his face. She ululated, and the maids responded with a crescendo of their own. It was a sound beyond words, beyond music: a guttural sound that hearkened to ancient times and seemed to pause the proceedings.

“A blessed night,” said the musician, his conical hat tilting forward as he exerted himself on the lute, producing complex melodies with a harried beat.

One of the maids, a woman with a long, thin face, said, “The night of entry,” and she blushed, and the other maids giggled.

Om Reda bobbed her head, stretched her arms, and moved her legs back and forth. She stomped her feet, and her ankle brace-let jingled. As the guests watched, she smiled and disco-danced to the ancient beats.