

Chapter 2

The short walk to the pig pits is paved in trash and urban detritus.

As the sun finally comes up to shine on Zabaleen, the city in the mountains, Tarek and Rania join the convoy of workers marching to their work. A mutual respect exists between them all, no matter how young or old. Respect for each other's drive to work whatever job possible, regardless of how unglamorous it was. Respect for the men who provided for their families, for the women who contribute being unsatisfied as mere housewives, and for the children who grew up too fast.

It's a matter of survival really. The lion does not laugh at the leech who finds his home on the underside of a whale.

The members of the convoy greet each other with curt nods and silence. But in each of their hearts, the same drum beats.

Again, we march, to work and toil.

Again, we march, to put our blood into soil.

May God bless our children, through the lives we lead.

God bless our children, that they never want again.

Tarek was technically still too young to be working in the garbage pits. The age requirement is more of an advisory anyways. But as the only male currently living in the house, there was never a debate over whether he would work or not.

Many of the men and women stop at food stalls along the way to grab their fuul and tameya to go. The bean based breakfast of the working class which kept the gears of Egypt

turning for only one pound per sandwich. Others prefer to keep their stomachs empty until after the dirty work had been completed. It doesn't matter if they had money to eat on the street or had to tighten their belts at home, there was only one class in the Garbage City: dirt poor.

Even in the rest of Cairo, where it is not uncommon for entire families to be living under staircases, there was disparity. It is not a strange sight to see a brand-new imported Mercedes-Benz parked next to a donkey pulled cart, also imported.

Across all religions, genders and classes there was one truth.

Garbage is the great equalizer.

Garbage is also the reason why this city can exist. By "recycling" the waste of over 9 million Egyptians through the digestive tract of pigs, the Coptic Christians of Garbage City carve out an economic niche for themselves amongst the large Muslim majority. All while cornering the pork produce market. The garbage people of Zabaleen have thrived, even through the mass culling of their recycling machines during the swine flu epidemic.

While Tarek spends his days shoveling garbage and herding pigs, Rania lends herself to whichever storefront needs an extra set of hands. Lately, she found steady work washing dishes at Mr. Ashraf Salim's café.

Salim's café stands out on grungy main street Zabaleen. The words "Café Ramses" are emblazoned boldly on a red neon sign above the door. Like any good tourist trap, the front door is wooden and inlaid with interwoven patterns to give it a Moorish look, even though there were no Moores in Egypt anymore.

Café Ramses is particularly popular among the tourists who came to Zabaleen. The main attraction in Zabaleen is witnessing immense poverty and giving tourists the feeling that they have seen the “real” Egypt. To his credit, Salim runs his café more like a navy ship than a modest watering hole. No doubt a remnant from his time spent in the Egyptian military during the glorious time of Sadat.

Rania fits perfectly in his militant dish pit because she is naturally great at following orders. At least this was true when a supervisor was near. The Egyptian military miss out on an immensely talented recruitment base by not making military service compulsory for women.

Tarek, on the other hand, is not allowed to work at Café Ramses anymore.

Salim is a short man with a short temper and an even shorter tolerance for fools. He makes up for his stature with an imposing voice that adds inches to him. Whenever he forces himself into the daily lives of his patrons. The clouds part way and a chorus of cherubim sound their trumpets singing:

Short man, big fight. Short man, big fight.

Rania waltzes into the café, taking stock of who came in today. You had the usual unemployed men who fill their days with copious amounts of tea and aromatic therapy from the shisha pipe. Every other man in Zabaleen is able to find work, but somehow that luxury escapes these men who would rather play backgammon all day. The service industry is built on a web of unwritten agreements. The prime agreement between staff and these job-less louses is:

The tips will be good as long as the tea keeps flowing and my wife thinks I am looking for work.

Rania takes her place in the dish pit, proudly donning the kitchen apron as if it were a superhero's cape. Uneducated folk turn their noses upward at the sight of a dishwasher. To most, the dishwasher is too stupid to be a cook, too ugly to be a hostess and too stupid and ugly to be a server.

What all educated members of society know is that the dishwasher holds all the power. They control the flow of food in and out of the kitchen. The chefs could grill a thousand pounds of meat and fry a million potatoes, but it is a fruitless effort without clean plates to send them out on.

"Thank God you are here." Salim is making his daily battle station inspections. Checking to see if the fridges are stocked, the chefs sober and the dishwasher prepared for battle. "Sorry that you had to walk into a full stack of plates Rania. Mo, that idiot, could not tell dish soap from a jar of monkey piss."

"Good morning Salim Basha." Rania replies.

"Please, please I already told you not to call me Basha. I am not Turkish, and I am not Ethiopian."

"Sorry, Bash- Sir. I am just trying to be respectful."

"You? Respectful? That's a nice change. Well if you want to be respectful then call me President Salim or Pharaoh Salim. Or Ashraf will do just fine."

For all his militant candor and powder-keg temper, Ashraf Salim genuinely has a soft spot for Rania. Perhaps because he has daughters himself, or maybe he sees a little bit of himself in Rania's sharp tongue.

“Try and get these plates taken care of and prepare for battle!” Salim brought an imaginary gunsight up to his eye and took a shot at the stack of dirty dishes.

“Did the Israelis cross the Suez?”

“Worse! Another bus of tourists coming in for lunch.”

“Another one? Don’t they know they have landfills of their own they can go visit?”

“They don’t even know they have ghettos of their own. They came for the real thing! Ghettos built on top of ancient ruins. The grand splendour of the Egyptian empire, a foundation for a landfill.

Rania looks around kitchen. In between the walls caked with grime and dirty linoleum floors, she could see no empire here.

“I think you should be happier to see the tourists President Salim. One lunch service with them probably keeps the water running for the whole month.”

Salim sits down on a ragged chair propped up against the greasy kitchen wall. Rania dutifully kept scrubbing and stacking, turning dirty dishes into clean ones, ready to hear another war time speech from the withered vet.

“Have I ever told you the story of why I left the army?”

“No. I always assumed you got bored waiting for *another* Arab-Israeli war to break out.”

Salim laughs and tips the chair back on its back two feet.

“A very good guess but no. I left after I visited Israel myself. After all the fighting, I was able to just go over the border just like everyone else. Idiots didn’t even check my passport. I

was expecting to see monsters, sacrificing their young, drinking blood, doing terrible things. But you know what happened?”

“You converted to Judaism?”

“Still considering it.”

“Really?”

“No. I went to Israel and I had a fantastic time. The churches were beautiful, the people were kind and the food, my God, the food Rania! You cannot tell me you’ve had good tameya until you’ve spent a night in Tel Aviv.”

Rania felt her stomach growl but didn’t want to interrupt Salim.

“When I opened the doors to this restaurant, I want every customer to have the same experience I did. I welcome everyone to my home with an open kitchen and a boiling pot of tea in the hopes that I will change their lives too.”

“That’s great!”

“But all they want is to tell their friends they ate a shawarma in a proper Egyptian dive.”

“What’s so bad about that? Should we feed them dirt instead?”

Salim stands up and kicks the chair away from him. He unpins a menu hanging on the greasy wall and brings it over to Rania. He points to the “Shawarma” section of the menu and then points to the “Egyptian Cuisine” section.

“See this. They are not the same. Shawarma is *Turkish*, my dear girl. They waste their stomach space on food that doesn’t even belong to us. Why bother coming all this way if you

aren't going to go all the way? All it takes is a cheap bowl of kushari to fill them up for an entire day of adventuring. They can dodge the traffic at Khan El-Khalili and then fornicate for hours on top of the pyramids. All on one bowl of rice and lentil."

"If you want to give them true Egyptian, why not make a buffet from the garbage on the street? It might even be better than how molokheya tastes." Rania pointed to a picture of a bowl filled with green sludge.

"I don't know how your Teta makes molokheya but here, at Café Ramses we make it fit for a pharaoh!" Salim started to help himself, to the chagrin of the chef, ladling a moss-like goop into a cracked bowl filled with rice. "The trick is to use duck broth, not chicken, that's how you make it rich and creamy. They used to eat this in Ancient Egypt you know. Used to call it Jew's Mallow."

"I didn't think they had Jews in Egypt back then."

"We hardly have any in Egypt right now. A pity if you ask me."

"Did spending time in Israel make you wish you could get their food here?"

"No. I just think it would be justice for everything they've done if we made them live in the 6th of October City, where every day they cross the 6th of October bridge to drive their kids to 6th of October University where the Zionist children can get a proper education of what happened in '73."

"I thought you were all best friends with the Israelis now." Says Rania

"I only said I liked their food." Salim replies.

He grips tightly around the spoon in his hand. The veins in his forehead look like they might explode any minute. It never ceases to surprise Rania how worked up Salim gets over events that happened over 30 years ago.

Building a modern civilization on top of an ancient one also builds a semiotic ego that haunts the birth of every Egyptian child. It is their curse that the past haunts them so.

When Rania first started working at Café Ramses, she avoided Salim at all costs, especially when he was in a fighting mood. She hid behind mountains of dishes and tried to make herself go unnoticed. After months of this hide and seek, she saw glimpses of the real Salim through the cracks of his militantly tough charade. Now, she is more worried that he might get so worked up and drop dead from aneurysm.

Life is full of many such small comedies.

Salim's old battered heart finally settled. There would be no heart attacks or aneurysms today. Salim sits back down in his chair and slides a sloppily rolled cigarette from his personally monogrammed cigarette holder. It is simple, yet elegant. His initials are etched into the rose gold case along with his former military rank. The letters glow matte red when they catch the light from the heat lamps at just the right angle. He staggers over to the stove and uses the pilot light to light his cigarette.

The sweet aroma of hashish and tobacco cloud the messy kitchen. Outgoing plates are infused with the woody smell of the white smoke. Undoubtedly a food violation albeit a minor one considering the restaurant sits in a landfill.

The heavy smoke makes Rania's head feel like a half-deflated balloon. It reminds her of the burning chrome censer that Abouna Ibrahim uses every Sunday morning. She learned in

Sunday school that when the hot smoke from the censer floats up to heaven, it carries the prayers of the congregation up with it.

She wonders if that is why everyone here smokes so much.

“Speaking of your Teta, how is she doing?” Salim settles back into his chair.

“She’s still breathing.”

Rania stacks the last clean plate and admires her handywork. She absorbs the satisfaction of a clean dish pit, rips off her gloves and then leans against the greasy wall beside Salim. It won’t be long until the lunch rush begins in proper and the kitchen descends into chaos.

“I know she’s still alive. The day that woman dies, she’ll plan to take as many of us with her if she can. I asked how she’s doing.”

“If you visited her more often, you could ask her yourself. She’s pretty lonely these days. God bless Nada for letting Teta help out at the store.”

“They let her talk to customers?”

“No not really. She usually might stock some shelves or make tea for some customers but mostly she sits outside. It gives the store a friendly feeling when an old woman is sitting outside it.”

Maybe we should start doing that here. Salim ponders silently.

“I thought she was volunteering at the church.” He asks.

“Abouna Ibrahim said she had done enough for the lord in her life and that she should spread her faith outside of God’s house.”

“She must have really pissed them off.” Salim laughs. “I used to think Abouna Ibrahim was a reasonable man but actually I think he only appears that way compared to the others he surrounds himself with. They all think kissing his ass cheeks is a substitute for communion.”

Salim rolls the flaming ember between his fingers and takes a long pull on the roached cigarette. His lungs aren't as young as they used to be and everyone in the kitchen hears him hacking and coughing up a brown phlegm. When he finally catches his breath, he finishes the rest of the cigarette and snuffs it out on the side of a garbage pail.

“You know, I used to know your grandmother quite well.” He says.

“I think she mentioned that once or twice actually. If I try to press for details she threatens to take off her slipper.”

“That woman needs to learn how to forget and forgive.”

“You have no idea! That poor newspaper man is too scared to go anywhere near our house. For her to get banned from the church, whatever, I can still go by myself. But with the newspaper man, I have to go harass customers to see how the world is going.” Rania jokes.

“Your place is in that dish pit. Not out there talking to customers, don't forget that. But you aren't missing much. Same wars, new enemies. At least it's nice to hear your grandmother hasn't changed much either.”

“What happened between you two anyways?” asks Rania.

“She stopped answering my damn phone calls!” Salim said with more nostalgia than vitriol. Rania could see, in his eyes, the same look Teta Aida gets when she is telling a story or remembering something that happened long ago.

“No shit.” Says Rania. “I figured you weren’t my grandpa. I mean before that? Did she kick your ass to the curb?”

Salim gives no response.

Salim is not present. His body is still here in the kitchen, but his mind is nowhere to be found.

It is impossible for Rania to see where Salim truly was in the moment. Staring into his light brown eyes, she sees the reflection of a crowded city square.

Perhaps Salim is standing in the middle of Ramses square. Oogling the girls who flaunt their new French fashion sense. Fighting with his comrades over who will stand in the shade cast by the limestone statue of the square’s namesake and who will burn in the unforgiving Egyptian sun. They pass a lit hashish cigarette between the two borders of sun and shade, enjoying each puff of smoke before they were to report back to base. Enjoying the last few weeks of spring before summer would bring the heat, and with it, the threat of war.

Six days.

Not long enough to make wine but long enough to make a man. Long enough for a battalion of eager boys to throw down their guns in Sinai and march back to Cairo, defeated as men. Long enough to mature Ashraf Salim’s hair white and char his lungs.

“Ashraf Basha!”

A bus boy bursts into the kitchen unceremoniously with a stack of dirty plates. He plops the plates in Rania’s pit and walks over to Salim.

“You are requested in the dining room sir.”

Salim stands up and wordlessly straightens his shirt and pants in a dirty mirror hanging from the greasy wall and marches onto the battlefield.