

**AHDAF SOUEIF**

***The Map of Love: chapter 8***

**The English is followed by chapter 8 from the Arabic translation**

**published as**

***Kharitat al-Hubb***

**by the General Egyptian Book Organisation**

**Al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah al-Amma li-l-kitab**

**Cairo**

**2001**



A woman like her  
Should bear children  
Many children,  
So she can afford to have  
One or two die.

(Ama Ata Aidoo, 1970)

Cairo, May 1997

The loud buzz of the intercom sounds through the corridor. I'd been in my bedroom, working, as is usual with me now, on my Anna project, reading on the period, looking at pictures, trying to imagine. I've always liked working in bedrooms, moving from the desk to the bed to the dressing-table and back to the desk. At one stage of my life it had been necessary, now I ignore the empty rooms and spend my days and nights in this one corner of my flat. I think of the table by the window as 'Anna's table' and it is covered with her papers. I've arranged them chronologically as much as I could; the undated sheets I've compared to dated ones and matched the paper. They stand in twelve piles, one for each year—some years more substantial than others. The journals stand alone. I have tried not to read through them, to read one year at a time. But then I know how the story ends. I don't think that matters. We always know how the story ends. What we don't know is what happens along the way.

Anna's objects I keep wrapped as I found them, in the trunk which now stands by the wall next to my dressing-table.

I was expecting Isabel and I had stopped work and was standing at the window, vaguely watching a woman hang out laundry. She must have done a white wash for she hangs out vests, white vests, one after the other: big ones, medium ones, little ones. She bends down and vanishes for a moment behind the wall of her balcony, then straightens up with a vest in her hand and a clothes-peg in her mouth. She shakes out the vest and pegs it by the shoulder next to its brother. When she has finished and picked up the green plastic tub and gone inside the vests hang in the still air shoulder to shoulder.

And to think that there were times when I grumbled at their washing. But there were also times when I stood still, one wet sock in my hand, struck by a premonition of what it would feel like when there would be no more socks to wash, no more games' kits to hang up to dry on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when all my time would be my own to do with as I wished. What do I wish? That I was still with my husband? That my children lived next door? No-one lives next door any more. That woman there

across the road—who knows where her children will go when they grow up? Canada, Dubai, the moon. Maybe she'll be lucky and one of them will settle here, in Cairo, close enough to give her grandchildren to hold and talk to in her old age.

I looked down at the trees in the garden below. I wondered, if they were washed, if someone just washed them down with a hose, how long would it take for the dust to settle again? I wondered how old the trees were: were they left over from the time when this part of the city was all green, planted fields? Or had they started their lives as town trees? Unlikely, I think. In this city trees are torn up, not planted. The great avenue of giant Eucalyptus at the beginning of the Upper Egypt road in Giza, destroyed. Trees that soared up to sixty metres, reached to the sky, planted by Muhammad Ali close to two hundred years ago, torn up by the roots to make a wider road for the cars and trucks heading for Upper Egypt.

When the buzzer went I thought it was Isabel come early. I walked to the door and picked up the handset and Tahiyya's voice rang in my ear: "Daktoah! Ya Daktoah!"

"Aywa," I shouted back, "Yes," holding the handset away from my ear.

"Can I come up to you for two bits?" she shouts.

"Of course," I say, "Itfaddali".

"Now?"

"Yes," I say, "Come."

Tahiyya is the doorman's wife—and my friend. She asks after me and sends her children to see if I need the washing-up done or my clothes taken to the ironing-shop. Now she comes in smiling, with her littlest—his leg still encased in plaster—on her hip.

"Please God you weren't asleep?"

"No, no," I say, crossing the room to close the balcony doors as she puts the child down on the floor—

"but that thing is so loud; it startles me every time."

"Why don't we get the engineers to turn it down?" she suggests, looking at it.

"We could," I say, looking at it too.

"Or they might ruin it," she says.

"Let's not," I say. It's a new addition, a modernising touch, and she and 'Am Madani are very proud of it.

"We don't mean to wake you," she says.

"I wasn't asleep," I say. "Let's make some tea."

We go into the kitchen and she says "You rest," so I sit at the table while she fills the kettle. Abd el-Rahman follows us, back to crawling now because of his plastered leg. He settles on the floor in front of my father's tall dresser and opens the lowest drawer. This is where the coloured plastic clothes-pegs are kept.

"Look at this for me," she says while we wait for the tea-leaves to settle. She puts a large brown envelope in front of me. I open it and pull out an X-ray - no, a scan. I read the tiny English writing and look up at her tired, pretty face; the brown eyes lined with kohl, the eyebrows plucked thin, the blue kerchief tight across her forehead:

"Again?" I say, "Again ya Tahiyya?"

"By God I never wanted to," she protests. "We said four and we praised God and closed it on that. It's God's command, what can we do?"

"But hadn't you put the loop? I thought—"

"Yes, I had put it, but I had blood, blood coming down on me and they took it out and said take a rest for a while—and you know what men are like. Then God's command came to pass."

She tests the tea. It is the colour of burgundy and she pours it into our glasses and spoons in the sugar.

"There are some biscuits," I say, and she brings the plate to the table and hands a biscuit to her son.

"By the Prophet I can't keep up with them all," she says. "Yesterday the little girl had a temperature and was fretful all day and at night this boy kept me up all night coming and going. The plaster—you'll excuse me—makes his leg itch. All night I'm carrying him and patting him and calming him down until Madani was about to say to me 'may God help you!'"

"That's good of him," I say.

"What can he do, ya Daktora?" she asks. "All day he's working, and he's got diabetes. His health isn't what it used to be."

I can hear Isabel: his diabetes didn't stop him getting her pregnant. When his health was what it used to be did he wake up and soothe the kids at night? But is it Isabel? Or are these my thoughts in Isabel's voice? Of course termination doesn't even come into it. 'Haraam ya Daktora,' Tahiyya would say, 'It's a soul after all.'

"How far gone are you?" I ask.

"I'm not sure."

I look at the scan: "Eleven weeks," I tell her.

"Look at it for me," she says "and read it for me. Tell me everything it says."

"It says you're eleven weeks pregnant and the baby is normal."

"Praise God," she sighs.

"What does 'Am Madani say?"

"What will he say? He says 'how will we feed them?' and praises God."

"God provides," I say.

"It's known," she agrees, and gets up to wash the glasses.

"Yakhti, laugh," I say, "What do we take from it all?"

"Nothing," she says, "Man is destined for his God."

"And they'll be five in the eye of the enemy—"

The buzzer goes again and I get up to answer it.

Isabel comes in as Tahiyya is collecting the clothes-pegs and wiping the crumbs from the floor. They smile at each other.

"Hallo," Tahiyya says loudly in English, straightening up and smiling, raising her hand to her head, miming a greeting in case Isabel doesn't understand.

"Hello," says Isabel, "Izzay el-sehha?"

Tahiyya's eyes widen as she turns to me:

"She speaks Arabic!"

"See the cleverness," I say.

"Yakhti brawa 'aleiha. She looks intelligent," Tahiyya beams her approval. "Is she married?"

"No," I say.

"Like the moon and not married? Why? Don't they have men in Amreeka?"

"Maybe she doesn't want an American," I joke.

"Khalas," says Tahiyya, "We marry her here. You find her a good bridegroom among your acquaintance and we'll make her a wedding that shakes the whole country." She bends to pick up Abd el-Rahman: "Shall I do anything for you before I go?"

"Thank you, Tahiyya, there's nothing."

"Then I'll excuse myself," she says. She settles her son on her hip, manoeuvres his plastered leg around the door: "Salamu 'aleikum."

"She's always so cheerful," says Isabel, "and she works so hard."

"Yes she does," I say.

"She was washing down the stairs the last time I was here. Of the whole building."

"It must have been Thursday. Do you want—shall I get you a drink?" It's just after seven.

"I thought we might go out," says Isabel, "Let me take you out to dinner."

"I've got some stuff here—"

"Let's go out. Do you never go out?"

I shrug.

"There must be someplace you like?"

"Come to New York," Isabel says, "Come and stay with me."

"No," I say, "Thank you."

"You can do your own thing," says Isabel, "There's a lot of space. We'll only meet when you want to."

I shake my head.

"You can see your brother."

"I'll see him when he comes to Cairo."

"But he doesn't come often."

"I know."

"Have you taken a vow or something?"

"I just decided to come home. I've had enough of travelling." And would I go to New York without stopping in London? And would I stop in London without seeing my husband?

"You'll come one day. I'm sure of it."

"Will I?"

"You'll come when they're showing my film."

"Sure."

"I'm serious."

"Isabel. You don't even know the rest of the story yet. You don't know how it'll turn out."

"It doesn't matter. I can see it. The way you describe it, I can see it."

I shake my head. I seem to be always shaking my head. But it's brave of me to come even here, just across the river; to this restaurant where we had dined together. Where he had kissed my hands and I had pretended not to notice the stares of the waiters.

"You want to bet?" she asks.

"No."

"There you are, you see. You won't bet."

"How are you doing with your work? Your millennium?"

She glances up at me, and we pause as the waiter loads the table with stuffed vine-leaves, houmos with a sprinkling of oil, baba ghanoush, cheese and tomato salad, soft bread and toasted bread.

"Did I feel a loaded pronoun there?" she asks gently. I smile. 'She looks intelligent,' Tahiyya had said.

"Well, it *is* more yours than mine," I say.

Isabel helps herself to two vine-leaves and some houmos. "You know," she says, "I know there's an awful lot I don't know. That's a start isn't it?"

"Yes," I say, "I'm sorry." And I am, for I - with my banners of 'fairmindedness', of 'no prejudgement'— have been always, primarily, seeing her as 'the American'.

"How is it going, though, your paper?" I ask.

"I'm not sure. People I've spoken to have been very cautious. They talk mainly of technology and I have this feeling they're not telling me what's really on their minds."

"It's very difficult."

"But why? Why is it so difficult?"

"Because you're American."

"But I can't help that."

"Of course you can't. But it makes it difficult to talk to you about some things."

"But it shouldn't. I have an open mind. What kind of things?"

"It'll be OK. Listen, we'll find a way," I promise.

"Anyway," Isabel says after a short silence, "I've gotten interested in so many other things now. I'm not giving up on it—but there are other things I want to do."

"But, Isabel, may I ask you this? You—you manage? With all this travelling and everything?"

"Oh, my dad left me some money. And I'm selling my parents' apartment. I'm not wealthy, but—" she smiles and her perfect teeth sparkle in the light of the glass-covered candle on the table.

A candle-shade of opaque glass. Bell-shaped. Frosted. It was Anna's brush which, dipped in aquamarine ink, traced the cunning, curving letters: gliding with the stem of an 'alef' bursting into flower, following the tail of a 'ya' as it erupts into a spray of fireworks that scatter the text with diachritics. She knew enough by then to make out the characters, but she could not yet readily tell where one word ended and another began.

I lift my head and look at Isabel, beautiful in her dusty pink velour top across the table. A dead father and a mother as good—or as bad—as dead. We are both orphans she and I. A dead brother and an absent brother - I touch the underside of the wooden table quickly, secretly: my brother is absent but alive. A broken marriage—we share that too.

"You know," I say, sounding casual, trying it out, "We used to come here, my husband and I, whenever we came to Cairo. It was our favourite restaurant. This is the first time I've been here without him."

"You're divorced?"

"No. But we've been separated for a long time."

But I have sons and she hasn't. Though my sons are not with me and I try not to spend my days waiting for them—waiting for the phone call: 'Mama, I thought I might come and see you—' Isabel's hair falls glossy and straight to just below her jawline, and around the graceful neck lies a thin silver chain. She is at her beginning and I am close to my end. I smile at her.

"You know, I'm really glad I got to know you," she says.



I reach out for a moment and pat the hand lying on the table between us.

"You amazed Tahiyya with your Arabic," I say.

"I've learned the alphabet and they're giving me lists of words," she says, "But—"

"But?"

"I haven't got a handle on it. How it works."

"Listen," I say, "you know the alphabet and you've got a dictionary. Everything stems from a root.

And the root is mostly made up of three consonants—or two. And then the word takes different forms.

Look—" The old teacher in me comes to life as I hunt in my handbag for paper and a biro: "Take the root q-l-b, qalb. You see, you can read this?"

"Yes."

"Qalb: the heart, the heart that beats, the heart at the heart of things. Yes?"

She nods, looking intently at the marks on the paper.

"Then there's a set number of forms—a template almost—that any root can take. So in the case of 'qalb' you get 'qalab': to overturn, overthrow, turn upside down, make into the opposite, hence 'maqlab' a dirty trick, a turning of the tables and also a rubbish-dump. 'Maqloub': upside-down, 'mutaqallib': changeable and 'inqilab': a coup—"

So at the heart of all things is the germ of their overthrow, the closer you are to the heart, the closer to the reversal. Nowhere to go but down. You reach the core and then you're blown away—

"Is there a book that tells you all this?" Isabel asks.

"I don't know. There must be. I kind of worked it out."

"That's really useful."

"I think so. It gives you a handle."

"So every time you use a word, it brings with it all the other forms that come from the same root."

Yes, they come swimming along in a cluster, like ovae: the queen in the centre, and all the others eggs, big and little who will not, this time, be fertilised—

"Yes. Vaguely. Yes. Always look for the root: the three consonants. Or two."

"I'm going to work on this," she says.

"Tell me what you come up with."

Isabel folds the paper and puts in her handbag—her 'purse' she would say.

Outside the plate-glass windows night has fallen and along Maspero the cars are fewer and the trees no longer look dusty. The lights of the Bateau Omar Khayyam and el-Basha gleam on the river. The odd small boat drifts quietly along, and by the railings couples linger; the men in short-sleeved shirts, the girls in big headscarves. Single young men walking by turn their heads to stare.

When we leave the restaurant we walk in single file along the narrow pavement to where the car is parked by the Rameses Hilton. I decline Isabel's offer of a drink. I've laid enough ghosts for one day. I want to get back to my flat, to my room.

We do a U-turn in front of the television building, still barricaded with sand-bags since '67, and head back towards Qasr el-Nil bridge.

"How's Anna doing?" Isabel asks.

"You're out of touch," I say.

"I am not. You said she'd gone to Egypt—come to Egypt. I've read the Alexandria bit."

"Well, she's in Cairo now, and she's very much with the English set. The Agency and all that. The British Embassy. She wants to learn Arabic."

"Who's she going to get to teach her?"

"I don't know yet. James Barrington knows Arabic."

"Has she found what she's looking for—the Lewis stuff?"

"Only a little bit; in the Bazaar. But not really, no."

"Will she? Find it?"

"I don't know. I hope so. But she stays a long time, so she must have."

"So there's a scene in the Bazaar?"

"Yes, complete with donkeys, and little old artisans and street cries and a frightened, disapproving lady's maid and urchins yelling for baksheesh—"

"You're making fun of me."

"Only a little. And nicely."

"You know, you're terribly like your brother."

Ah. I'd wondered when we would get back to him. My brother.