

Ayousha | *Antiques in Khan el Khalili*

My husband died, and they wanted his brother to take me as another wife.
I didn't want that.

I didn't want to stay in Menia with my children, so I came to Cairo.
At first, I left my children back in my village, but now they are here with me.

I came here once before with my husband, to Khan el Khalili.
I always liked shoes...
My husband loved my feet...
He said they were beautiful.
We came to the bazaar and he bought me such beautiful shoes.

I took the microbus.
I left my children with my husband's brother.
I didn't know anyone at first.

The lady from the antique shop helped me.
I think she was the first woman to work in Khan el Khalili.
Now she runs the whole shop.
I got a job working with a man, with a shoe stall, near her place.
She taught me how to act, "Never be immodest.
Don't be flirtatious.
Don't be too friendly with the other merchants, only for business."
She has everyone's respect.

There is an ancient table on display in the front of her shop. It's very beautiful.
Old, worn, inscribed, covered in the many hours of people's lives that have used it.
I have never seen anything like it.
Many people have tried to copy this table, but of course they couldn't.
It never comes out right... always too new.

There is no way to make up for all the years of age.
I see that in her face too...
And, she is beautiful...

Dalia | *Five Suitors*

Well... her story is one that she cannot tell mama and baba, especially not mama... I'm her older sister, I know.

You know, it's become somewhat of a competition... Oh, you're laughing, it's not funny. Her and her friends do it, too. They do it all the time, they compete, but my sister, she's the clear winner.

You know... it all started way before University... if only she had just... if only she had just stayed at her old job... I wonder... And, my sister, she's a good girl. She's kind and she's pleasant and she doesn't want to hurt anybody. And she knows, she knows really there's nothing wrong with their choices. They make good choices, mama and baba.

The first one he was thirty three... she's twenty one... our brother's friend... She says, "He does not like my clothes... mama and baba don't have a problem with my clothes..." The second one, he was very conservative... The third, well, he was our cousin and of course she loved him... she loves our cousin, but, like our own brother.

Mama always says "God willing, love will come..."
I wonder? Maybe she really means, "God willing, children will come..."
And when children will come, that will be love."

You know... then there was the fourth. He's the one that I think she still remembers to this day... He was a very good, very handsome man. But, he didn't like the coiffure where she works and he doesn't want her to spend time with her friends. So what did she do? Every time he would stop by the house, she would make sure to go down to her job at the coiffure. If he set a time to see her, yes, she'd be home, but she'd tell one or all of her girlfriends to be there. And she would talk about how much she loves her job, how she loves working at the coiffure...
I don't know...

Then there was the fifth ... and ... I think about it sometimes. It must take so much energy to do what she does, to spook them away, kind of, like casting a spell and at the same time doing it very charmingly, using your womanly charms.

You know, as a girl, you wonder, "Will there ever be a time when you can just be yourself?" You spend so much time being bashful, being modest, and watching out for your reputation, trying like you don't want to be found, but you desperately are hoping someone finds you. And then, someone finds you, and it turns out, it isn't always the person you wanted to find you. And still, you're sitting there and you're waiting, and you're kind of lost. And you know, I see the years can go by, the years go by... it's like all along, you're... you're just hiding.

Deena | *A Trade Attaché*

I often think that Egypt has no sense for time, but that is what I love about it. It's like all the times are jumbled up together in one place.

I come out of my apartment and see something Pharonic with a line of people around it. And then I go work in a nineteenth century government building that looks Parisian. And inside, we are working in a big room that looks like the early twentieth century.

Eight phones for sixty people, intermittent emails... pencils... green forms...

So in my generation, there are only four of us working here, all on our mobiles, trying to make it happen. I work as a commercial attaché for the government trade organization. Before this I was in Kenya.

It makes me wonder about the all the things in life that matter, the things that we can not see, for which there is no measure... no value... no acknowledgement.

It is like Aid money... Who sees it? And where does it go? Or 'floating currency'... like a Chinese koan, but missing a few words...

I just got married, I am twenty-seven. My husband, I met him in China, five years ago. He is a trade lawyer. We have a lot in common. We both want to travel and we love adventures. Our parents 'arranged' that we meet. Well, we were both in China... I mean, how likely is it that you meet an Egyptian in China? So we decided to get married.

In a year, he may be posted in China. And I may have to go to Spain. In all our time together, we've only been in the same city for a few months. Yes, it seems odd; my friends seem to think so. His family wants me to quit working, while my father wants me to continue for security... But I am the happiest that I have ever been...

Fathiya | *Woman of the Lane*

I tell you about me.
I'm not always old.
I was young, like this street!
But now... not that old.
There are cars when I was born.
What I tell you?
About me...
What you want to know?

You know, God loves me. And I love God. God be praised. I pray five times a day.
God... wants me to Haj, go to Haj, yeah. But, I am old, but God still loves me,
God is like that. He is very big. Give me two hundred pounds so I can go to Haj.
God bless your child.

I have something for you... you come work here when I am not here at this kiosk. You
not stealing, I know. They don't know you here. So you are perfect for this job. And, eh, I
can go...

Feel this, feel how cold, the coldest one in Cairo. How much you pay me for this soda...
hmm, hmm. I have to teach you everything, hmm, everything... It's ok.
You come to the right place.

See that man, he nice, he give me money, but now he give me evil eye. He think I don't
see him, but I see him. He give me money for my operation last year, but I don't do the
operation, and I don't give him his money. But you know, important now for me to go to
Haj.

Because I see it all... I see the last days of the King... Abdul Nassar die. God be
praised. No, I don't like him, no, no, no... Everything lost... Everything gone...
My family lost. My husband... no job. We hurt a lot. No, no, no, no...and my...
my children, they go, too. My husband, my husband... He... He hurt a lot.
God be praised.

When Sadat came, eh, we bought this kosh. Yes. God only protect us. And, eh, maybe,
you know, we have something, but...But then, my husband die.
God be praise...

...Look how I take care of this place... Feel, feel how cold. NO, this one, not the one in
your hand. This one. Buy, please buy, and this one, too. This piece of chocolate, see,
yes for later when you are hungry... Look this is all I have and I give to you. Where are
you go? Come back... You give me now twenty pounds. Pay now... This is not a gift
from Aunt Fathiya.

Layla | *New Cairo Maid*

We all have our shares in life, God willing...
You got dealt yours. I got mine. My sisters theirs...
God willing... My husband. My children...
Everyone gets their share...
But you got to make it what you can...

My share...

I've been married three times! I married at eighteen, but I wish I waited till thirty.
My husband, he's good man. He treat me well, but the other two...
They were after my money, can you believe that!

The other two husbands, they treated me badly, so I divorced them.
They were after my money, but all the men are.
There is no work. I work. And that is that.

With this husband... I worry about him, too. But something suddenly happened. My
share of life, God willing, has suddenly just improved.

The people I work for moved out of Zamelek into New Cairo, not Heliopolis, but beyond,
into the desert full of new villas. But I live near Dokki, so this is very far. When they
moved, they expected to spend more time there than they do.
But, they didn't. There's no street-life, there's no cafes, no friends. So everyday,
everyone comes downtown... And there is only one road, and that means traffic.

When they drive downtown, there's nowhere to park their car. So, they have made my
husband their driver. Now he drives them all around and he waits for them. Then, he
drives them home and drives himself home.

And in the morning, we drive to work together!

Just yesterday, they asked about my daughter...

Mariam | *Wahiba and Soad are so happy*

Every so often I stop at the teashop for some tea before work.
And every morning, I see these two little girls...
Their names are Soad and Wahiba.
They're so happy!
So finally I asked what they do.
And this is what they said:

Wahiba: We work in the teashop across the street...
Soad: But we don't sell the tea.
Wahiba: The tea boys do that.
Soad: We burn the incense, to keep the bad spirits away...
Wahiba: We do it for all the people who want us to.
Soad: We have a burner and just set it up. We follow the tea boys.

In unison: We go school.
Soad: I go to school.
Wahiba: So do I.
Soad: She doesn't...
Wahiba: No. You don't...
Soad: I go to school sometimes. But I'm really going to school someday.

Wahiba: My mother needs me to work.
Soad: So does my mother...

Wahiba: Soad's my cousin. We live right next to each other.
We both come into Cairo very early on the Metro from Giza when it is still dark.
Soad: It takes a long time sometimes.
Wahiba: Around two in the afternoon, we go home.

Soad: My favorite thing is stories.
If I could hear stories all day that is what I would do.

Wahiba: We are going to marry the same person.
Maybe it will be Karim. He is our cousin and he is fourteen...
Soad: and live together always and...

Wahiba: tell each other stories all day long.
Soad: What do the stories always say?

Just wait and see...

Mona | *The Translator*

In Egypt there is a saying about how you have to train your husband and your son. For example, how to train them to use a hanger to hang up their clothes, so they're not always lying around. Or, maybe... it's a hanger to put their problems on...

I am born in Paris and have lived in Egypt for a long time. I work as a translator for movies, mostly comedies, so I'm always looking for the Egyptian meaning of things, the double, triple entendre and to get it through the censors, too.

For example, you can't translate into Arabic, "He slipped on a banana peel." It would not be funny. What is funny is, "He slipped on an eggplant." Because of the word play. But, it's not funny at all in English, of course.

So the saying goes:

"Your son becomes what you bring him up to be. Your husband becomes what you get him used to doing." As a wife you have to train your husband and your son, both will do what you train them to do.

I don't know what they say about daughters. My daughter, she says that I made her my confidant at a too early age, that she doesn't have a mother, even though I am her best friend.

I guess I'm not a very good translator for my son either. He lives with me at home, but he is just like his father. He doesn't speak to me...

Nadar | *A Woman's Rights*

Women are the secret wealth in Cairo... Women are the secret wealth of the world... Sometimes I say that to myself over and over again. I tell it to myself to keep going. I say this because I know women cares about different things than men. I am sixty two now. I've spent most of my life among the working poor and especially women in Cairo.

Did you ever wonder why family is so important here? What else is there? It is the only stability. And women keep it going. The people you see, the women you see in people's homes, doing menial jobs, they are the main providers for their families. Not the men. They pay more than the menial jobs for men and they pay much more than the police or army work the men get. The women that work for women, they pay them well because they understand their position in their families as the main earners. They recognize this. And after awhile you consider them as part of your family and you care about them as family.

Every year two hundred thousand young people enter the work force. And every year at most only sixty thousand new jobs. College tuition is free if you can get into college. The primary education is compulsory. So, things are getting better for women because more and more register, so that means they can practice their rights.

It is at the same time getting more conservative. It is the Year of Women, although all the male judges voted to ban women from becoming judges even though the constitution says that men and women have to be treated equal. This is really much more telling to me than that many women now wear head scarves. You might think 'head scarf' means conservativeness... not for all... Many women wear head scarves for many, many different reasons, so you can't judge by the scarf. It can be for different things.

Perhaps, the women say they have tried the Western way. It didn't really work for them, so they decided to do something different.

Perhaps the message in all of this is that we have a number of contradictory factors at work in our culture right now. Is the message contradictory? Or, the culture contradictory? Or both?

Nadia | Harassers

I did see them once! Salaam, my name is Nadia and I am a student at AUC.

When I was a little girl my mother took me all over Cairo. She loved to walk and discover things. She's an Egyptologist, so part of her work is giving tours, so walking is kind of like her job. But, only through the agency, not on the streets. No, no, no. She doesn't do the boats. My father would never allow. And, she sometimes taught at Cairo University.

All my life I've been hearing about these women. And, I didn't know if this was true or just a myth. You know, one of those things that people always talk about, but then when you try to find it, you can't...

When I was a little girl, my mother took me all over downtown. We would take the Metro to Tahrir Square, do some shopping, go to the Museum, or even the library. She, she was a very beautiful woman and this was during the time, before the hajib, before anybody was covered. She would always tell me, "Keep your head down, don't look at anyone, especially the boys."

You know, it's very crowded downtown. You have to squeeze through the people, through the men and the boys, even. And one of them would... would try to talk to my mom, and yell things. She would get so mad! And that's when she told me about them. What you do is you hire two or three women and they would go yell at the man for you. A conspiracy against the men! Totally private, you know, so that there's no gossip.

So, I saw them once. There were three of them, and they were yelling at this man in front of the Ful shop. They were telling him that he was a bad man for harassing this woman so many times that she had to resort to them. It was great to watch.

But now, society has advanced. We have HarassMap... What you do is you send email or SMS and they put a point on the map, so you know what streets to avoid. But you know what would be really gratifying is if they use this information and passed anti-harassment laws. That way we can protect our people, our squares, and our streets! People have to realize that our streets are our communities!

Nadine | *Revolutions in the Square*

When night comes in the square, suddenly everything feels very calm... As I walk around, I see men sleeping by the fires, trying to keep warm. They are sleeping under the tanks, on plastic, on blankets... But few women sleep. Most of them are keeping a wary eye out of the tents, being aware of their surroundings. Some are in the KFC taking care of the injured people.

When I walk around the square, I hear bits of conversations, and I hear one man, named Abdel, I hear him say:

"My vision goes much further than what my eyes can see."

Then I walk up to a group of women. I hear one reading out loud from an interview with the famous novelist, Ahdaf Soueif, and I hear her when she is saying:

"Something beautiful is being born here. A non-violent grass root, democratic movement that even in times of extreme crisis promotes the ideals of public service, non-violence, courtesy, and creativity.... What can I say? This movement is not just Egyptian; it is for everyone in the world who believes in the idea that we can all live together in a better way."

A twenty six year old protester named Mohamed ambles by. And I hear him say something like:

"The words of the people are much stronger than any weapons."

As I continue walking in the square, the dawn comes, and when this happens you feel the life come back to the people in the square. The bloggers are all huddled together busy typing away on their computers. You see the volunteers make cheese sandwiches and pass out tea to the people. And the pharmacists are even helping and giving out Betadine to anyone who needs.

Tahrir Square has become the capital of Cairo...

It is funny because nobody wants to give up even a single moment that can be imbued by the idea of defiance. And yes, we may be weary, but when the morning comes, we will breathe freedom.

Nagham | *Doing what you want*

I love Cairo, but I needed to find out how I could come back here and really be able to do something here. I didn't know any of this at twenty when I finished my studies. So I did what all of us do who don't want to get married, and who don't know what to do, do... I left, and I went to graduate school.

I always knew that I loved Cairo and that I would be back one day...
But in order to find this love, to know what it was, I had to leave.

I was gone for a long time...
Long enough to find what I wanted to do... Writing novels...
Long enough to meet my husband, an Egyptian, and an academic...
Long enough to have my children...

Even so, when I first came back, ten years ago, I almost found it impossible to be here. I thought it was a terrible mistake. Cairo is chaotic, the honking is everywhere... Where would I find the peace to write?

I had to make some difficult decisions, which might seem selfish to you. The most important was that I would only do what I wanted to do and that I would not do what I was expected to do. This was very hard... I didn't know it would be that hard at the beginning. But after trying, and after a year or so, I could stick to what I did.

So what did I do...

You could say I am lucky, privileged. I don't have to go to the market. I don't have to do errands. I don't do any of the cleaning or washing. I could hire people to do all the things that I don't want to do, so that I can do the things I do want to do. That is how I can live in Cairo and love it. It is how I can be here and do what I need to do. I no longer think this is selfish. I think it is necessary.

Nawal | *Pregnant at the Revolution*

There is no need to be afraid anymore. We have broken the barrier of fear. If I were not seven months pregnant, I would not have gone down. I would've just stayed at home. But I really felt like that I owed this to my son, for him to have a future in this country and for him to have choices.

When I saw Asmaa Mahfouz's video asking people to come to Tahrir and to join in the protests for the Day of Rage, I was convinced. I am not political. I am not an activist, but this was so much bigger than both politics and activism. She said that if we all had no hope in the country, and no hope that things could change, we would maintain the status quo, and that there would be no hope. But if we all went down to Tahrir and we took a strong stance for change. Then we could be optimistic.

And she was right. There is a level of optimism in Egypt today that I have never felt in my lifetime. A new Egypt was being born. Everyone was supportive. Everyone wanted a role. If one person fell down, a million hands would reach to pick them back up. There was no sexual harassment of any sort. Only optimism! So much happiness in the street! Ecstasy even! Our hope had united us.

I went down to Tahrir with my mobile. And I felt like the whole world was watching us and was supporting. When they started throwing tear gas, I got messages saying to put onions and to put vinegar underneath my scarf and to put Pepsi in my eyes to wash out the chemicals. When there was violence, they reminded us to maintain passive resistance because we wanted this protest to be peaceful.

Nobody cared that day...

Nobody cared those eighteen days...

About religion, social class or gender...

We were all just Egyptian...

And we were all there for the same reason.

Now is really the time to dream!

Nimet | *Beirut to Cairo... wars*

You asked me what was taken and what still remains...

My hopes were big before the war ended in Beirut.

Now that it is over I have to revise everything I was thinking.

My plans for my life were so much greater then.

It's like even my dreams have been scaled back to something so much smaller.

It's not that I am nostalgic for the war, but the war gave us something...

Even as it took so much away.

That heightened state of existence, that moment when you know that...

Everything... every single thing... Really does matter...

It really is life and death...

It was all so much more than anything seems now.

I could dream bigger dreams, think bigger thoughts, imagine so much more...

Now that I am here, away from all of that, it's like everything is so much smaller.

I have to revise what I was thinking and scale down my dreams.

Before I thought, if I can do this, I can do anything...

There's nothing I can't do!

Now, it's like I can't even do the simplest things...

Something broke in me there.

It's still broken here.

Rasha | *If you know what I mean...*

I love speaking different languages. What I love is that whenever I speak a different language, I am a different person. If I could, I would speak every language in the world. There is something about speaking another language that allows you to try things on, to try things out. You have a different personality in another language. Your voice is different... You are different... To speak many languages is like a kind of endless story that you invent for yourself as you go along, bit by bit, like Scheherazade, but in fact, you never find out the ending.

I was born in Lebanon, and I didn't study Arabic until college. But, Arabic is the language I enjoy speaking the most, the language of the street.

My parents wanted me to be a citizen of the world, so they sent me to many schools to learn different languages. I began at the French school. I remember how excited I was hearing fairy tales in French, those classic fairy tales from Europe that Charles Perrault collected. I didn't want to be Sleeping Beauty or Little Red Riding Hood. I hated to go to bed and I was afraid of the dark but I was charmed by the poetry in the language, even though I couldn't understand why none of the girls in the stories ever spoke.

When I was ten and a half, I went to German school. Suddenly it was all precision in language, endless suffixes and predicates, a language more meticulous than French, infinitely expandable. But, I loved Grimm's fairy tales. They were so frightening. And I loved how they didn't make sense, and I could read them again and again trying to puzzle out their meanings.

For the first part of high school, I went to the English school. And I graduated to novels. Jane Austen. George Elliot. Henry James. And even more adult novels. I didn't always understand exactly what was happening in the novels either... The nuances, the innuendos, what couldn't be said... All the things left unsaid...

Only gradually did I come to understand that what you don't say is just as important as what you do say. But, we have that in Arabic, too...

We are constantly saying "yanni" which translates to "I mean" or "you know". We say that often..."yanni"...without ever having to say exactly what we mean, it's a way to answer a question without ever having to really answer...

If you know what I mean... Yanni...

Suliya | Sewing

Sewing!

Sewing what bring me here.

You know, my mother she could make anything. She was best seamstress in the village. And I used to help her. My father, a farmer, he work on a land two hundred kilo, far from Luxor, but then my mother die, and I could not live with my father. And, uh, we don't have money for the dowry, you know, to get married.

But, he send me to my mother's sister in Cairo. I live with her in Basatian... Basatian is a lot of people, you know, very crowded. But the work, the work is very good. I start in embroidery. So I was twelve years old living in Cairo, and have my own money! Because you know, my aunt, give me money.

I want to go back to school, because I left when I was seven to help my mother. But to go to school in Cairo you need ID, and I get ID where? I cannot read.

And then, I get sick. The operation my aunt do for me, make bleed. And then, make infection. And very hot, high fever. I was going to die. So my aunt bring me here. In a beginning, she worry. But after they see me... I did very good.

I am very good now.

So Sewing!

Sewing is what bring me here. And is what save my life! The doctor here help me get ID, too... And now I am in school.

I don't know what I want to be, maybe a doctor, maybe fashion designer... I don't know.

You know, the future is ahead of me... You know?