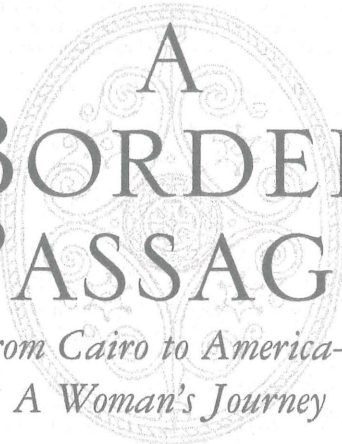


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*From Cairo to America—
A Woman's Journey*

Leila Ahmed



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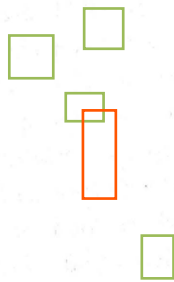
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Some names and the details of people's lives have been changed to protect privacy.

harm yourself rather than someone else, because it is easier to live with anything that happens to oneself than it is to live with the knowledge that you have harmed someone.

And I understood now how she had known that, understood the harm that she thought she had done to another and that she had lived to know was the greatest burden of all. My infant sister and I, I saw, in this new understanding that came to me, had been key to what my mother would come to believe was the most important thing of all in life, the most important thing of all to live by. It was thanks to us, in a way, that my brothers would be made to promise never to go to war.



HAREM

Looking out onto the garden, the trees that I had loved now gone, felled to make way for the marquees put up for the night's celebrations, I cried and cried. I cried for my trees, I cried for my childhood, I saw in the barren garden before me a picture of the life I must now live, bereft of everything I had loved and of everything companionable to me.

Huda Shaarawi (1889–1945),
Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist

I KNOW MY father's date of birth, November 13, 1889, but not my mother's. Hers fell in early May, perhaps the fifth. The year was 1909. My mother sometimes said it was the fifth when I pressed her as a child, but usually she just said May, early May. Why didn't she know? I've sometimes wondered. Could it be that they recorded the date according to the Islamic calendar and nobody got around to figuring it out in this other calendar? They must have had birth certificates in those days; otherwise, how was it Father knew his birth date? Or could it be that they kept records in Alexandria, where he was born, but not in the small country town where she came into the world?

At any rate, it was at Benisweif, on her grandfather's estate, that my mother first saw the light of day. She grew up partly in Cairo, in the house that I knew, and partly on her father's estate in al-Fayyum, the rich, fertile oasis a hundred miles or so southwest of Cairo. A place of fruit trees and orange-blossom scents and a veranda and roof garden that I also remember. Nearby was Birket Qarun, a vast gray lake, its edges dense with reeds, reeds that were alive with the shuffle and stir of birds—ducks and waterfowl.

By the time my mother was a child, change for women was well

under way in Egypt. Women's magazines were flourishing, feminists were writing newspaper columns, and French, British, and American schools for girls had opened and were attended by the daughters of the well-to-do. When she was an adolescent, Egypt won partial independence from the British, and in 1924 a new government, made up of the country's modernizing intellectuals, came into office, Egypt's first elected government. Although still locked in battle with the British for full independence, the new government began at once to effect changes in the areas under its control. Immediately it opened more schools, and soon also a modern university named after King Fuad. Almost from the start, it admitted women.

The women leading the way in education were from the ambitious, progressive, broad middle class, my father's class. My mother did not belong to this class. Among people of her class, formal education, whether for men or women, was not a matter of importance. They were not, though, wholly isolated from the changes afoot; my mother and her sisters were all sent to the *Mère de Dieu*, a school run by French nuns. But Mother, the eldest, was withdrawn from the school at the age of twelve and thereafter had private tutors at home. In that fast-changing world, by the time the sister next to her in age, just three years younger, reached that age, Grandfather had decided that there was no harm, after all, in allowing girls to complete their education at school.

It was about then, the mid-twenties, that Huda Shaarawi, returning from an international women's conference in Rome, would formally set aside her veil as she stepped off the boat in Alexandria. Photos of her unveiled face—this leader of the Egyptian feminist movement, whose husband was a prominent figure in the government—appeared on the front pages of the national papers. In the ensuing years European dress and no veil would increasingly become the norm among the middle and upper classes, and soon it would be the ordinary dress of the women of modern Cairo. Old Cairo and the towns and villages of the countryside were, of course, a different matter. But before long, if you saw outside the apartment blocks or mansions of modern Cairo a woman wrapped in the black *milayya* of

traditional dress, you would automatically know that she must be the maid or a nanny or the washerwoman.

Still, the veil might go, but not necessarily the attitudes that accompanied it—the habits of seclusion and the cultural conditioning about the meaning of seeing and not seeing, of being visible and invisible. My own parents did not see each other before marriage (in the late 1920s). Not only that, my father had proposed to another woman before proposing to my mother, but he had withdrawn his offer. He called at the woman's home after the marriage broker, Amina al-Turkiyya (Amina the Turk), had conveyed his offer and the family had agreed to receive him. On his way out he saw her trying to catch a glimpse of him from behind the *mashrabiyya*, the elaborate woodwork lattice that, in those days, shielded the windows of the women's quarters. Or perhaps someone told him that she had tried to get a glimpse of him, for how could he possibly have been sure it was she behind the lattice? In any case, he was shocked: if he was content to marry on the basis of a description and a photograph, she too should have been. Or possibly he decided that she was too interested in men and how they looked, and that seemed not to augur well.

Who would have thought, though, that a man who would one day send his daughters to college in England and who throughout his life would give his wholehearted support to women's rights would think a woman improper for wanting to sneak a glimpse of her future husband—so improper that he would withdraw an offer of marriage? Whatever he thought about women's rights clearly did not, in that moment of decision, weigh as much with him as some other understanding that he had, an understanding of life and its meanings and the significance of actions rooted not in intellect and the ideas to which he adhered but in some quite other order of things—feelings, intuitions, responses, potent and “irrational,” that now swept right out of the way whatever it was he thought he believed in.

Thinking about my mother's life, reading the memoirs of women of her era, I cannot find a life that seems parallel to hers. This is not to say that I find nothing in what I read that is evocative of her. On

the contrary, the reminiscences of Huda Shaarawi are so evocative that sometimes I hear my mother's voice in the words, particularly when Shaarawi allows her personal voice to break through her otherwise formal voice. In those moments Shaarawi is often speaking of gardens, remembering their loveliness and how she found solace in them, taking refuge there from some wound inflicted by the human world.

Shaarawi was from the same broad class background as my mother, though from a much wealthier family. For Shaarawi the wounds inflicted by the world were above all the wounds of being female. All her material needs were lavishly seen to, but she felt uncared for and unworthy of being loved, chiefly because her mother focused all her attention on Shaarawi's brother. Only her father's senior widow, whom Shaarawi called Mama al-Kebira, Great (Senior) Mother, was consistently kind to her. On one occasion, anguished at being yet again rebuffed by her mother, she asked Mama al-Kebira why it was that, though she was the eldest, her brother was always preferred over her.

"Haven't you understood yet," Mama al-Kebira gently replied, "the difference between you?"

This passage always brings to mind my mother, in particular the way she is in that photo I have of her standing under the trellis in her father's house. Something about her air, the way she stands, tells me that that question, "Haven't you understood yet?" would have been, for her, unnecessary. There's a photo of me too as a child, at a younger age, maybe only five or six, with exactly that same solitary, uncertain air. And also one of my eldest brother, a child in this photo of no more than three or four, and yet he too already looks profoundly uncertain of his place in the world.

My mother did not show any preference for her sons over her daughters. She passed on to us all equally her own deep uncertainty as to her welcome, her own childhood anguish at existence.

In the passage from Shaarawi's memoir with which I began this chapter, Shaarawi is recalling the morning after her wedding, when

she stood at the window looking out onto the barren garden below, the trees she had loved cut down to make way for the tents put up for her magnificent wedding.

She was twelve and had been forced into marriage to her guardian, a much older man who already had one wife.

These were not, of course, my mother's circumstances. Shaarawi was of an older generation and came from a somewhat different cultural tradition. For Shaarawi was half Egyptian, whereas my mother's family was entirely Turkish or Turco-Circassian (though this was the term used for this group of people, they were drawn from all over the Balkans and the regions around Turkey). And ethnic traditions differed in their customs regarding women.

I remember this, for instance. Someone, a visitor, mentioned to my mother that some other family had just had their daughter circumcised—that is, that she had just had a clitoridectomy. Could the visitor have been a midwife, someone who performed clitoridectomies? Somehow I do not think so: she was dressed as we were, and a midwife would probably have been dressed in a *milayya*. I remember the grimace that crossed my mother's face and her perceptible air of withdrawal. Still, it was a polite, restrained withdrawal.

"That is not something that we do," was all that Mother said.

I did not know what circumcision was. The word in Arabic, *tuhur*, meaning "purification," sounded quite nice. I probably thought that because of Mother's strictness and her very clear sense of what it was that "we" did or did not do, my sister and I were yet again missing out on something special. In any case, clitoridectomy is not a common practice among the urban middle and upper classes.

There was another difference between Shaarawi and my mother. Shaarawi's mother, a Circassian, was her father's concubine, not his wife. Her financial insecurity (a slave woman who had borne her master children was free on his death but not entitled to an inheritance) probably made her more willing to force her daughter into marriage with the girl's powerful guardian.

Before slavery was outlawed in 1885, slave women were not at all uncommon in Egypt's Turkish upper classes. Often they were Cir-

cassian women who, renowned for their beauty, were especially prized as concubines. Slave women are there in my mother's family, too. My mother's grandmother, for instance, who was not Circassian but from Russian Georgia, had been "given as a gift" by the khedive to my great-grandfather. No one ever said openly when I was a child that she had been a slave, for by then having been a slave had come to carry a stigma. They just said that she'd been "given as a gift," without further explanation. Free women cannot be gifted away.

Several centuries back, in the Mamluk era, a good proportion of the upper classes in Egypt were slaves or the descendants of slaves. The Mamluks, a Turkish people who conquered Egypt in the thirteenth century, based their society and military system entirely on slavery (*mamluk* means "owned"). The ruling class was made up of men and women (and their descendants) originally captured as children, mainly from the Slav and Balkan regions, and brought to Egypt. The males were trained for the military; the theory was that young boys raised together with no family other than one another and the officers training them would feel utter loyalty to this group and consequently make the best soldiers. As they grew up, they were freed and married into the local Turkish aristocracy. Women were incorporated into this class as concubines or wives. Once a woman bore a free man a child, even if the father did not free or marry her, she became legally free on his death.

To us, with our notions of slavery grounded in the history of American society, the very idea that slaves constituted the upper classes is so counterintuitive as to seem almost nonsensical. But in the Middle East, slaves and slave origins were so fundamentally part of aristocratic and royal life that for over a thousand years nearly all caliphs, kings, and sultans in the region were the sons of slave mothers.

By the end of the nineteenth century, as slavery was slipping into the past, slave origin began to seem shameful. Shaarawi's mother, Ikbal (she had the same name as my mother), never admitted her status to her daughter, maintaining a complete silence about her past. For the same reasons, I expect, I do not know how many of my moth-

er's foremothers had been brought to Egypt as slaves. But no doubt a number of them were, for the family retained the memory that several of them had been Circassians, and slavery was the ordinary route by which Circassians came to be in Egypt.

In this era of change, the knowledge that their mothers had been slaves seemed to spark in some daughters a sense of outrage and a passionate desire to take a stand in their mothers' defense. Those daughters would grow up to take that same stand on behalf of all women. In a work of autobiographical fiction, Oot el Kouloub, an Egyptian feminist of Shaarawi's era and background, attributes the feminism of her heroine, Ramza, to the tales of slavery that Ramza heard as a child from her mother and aunt. It was these tales that "watered the seeds of revolt in my young heart" Ramza declares, even though her aunt and mother themselves expressed neither protest nor dissatisfaction with their former enslavement and even defended slavery (which had rescued the aunt from poverty), speaking of it as an entirely ordinary and acceptable part of their world.

In any case, by the time my mother was a child, the practices of concubinage ceased to be. But the attitudes underlying those bygone customs were not quite gone.

Even in my own childhood, Zatoun, my mother's paternal home, was a place palpably apart, imbued with some unnamably different order and way of being. The aura and aroma of those other times and other ways pervaded it still, in the rustle and shuffle of silks and the soft fall of slippers along hallways and corridors, in the talk and the gestures and in the momentary tremor of terror precipitated by the boom of Grandfather's voice, and then the quiet, suppressed, chortling laughter of the women as its boom faded and he passed into the recesses of the inner hall. The odor and aroma of another time, other ways, another order.

As a child, I found Zatoun at one and the same moment enticing, pleasurable, engulfing, and perilous—obscurely perilous. I could sense, in the way that children can sense such things, that once we had entered its portals, the doorkeeper slowly bringing together behind us the huge iron leaves of the gate he had opened to let in our

car, we had crossed into some other world. It was a world whose underlying rules and rhythms, profoundly inscrutable to me, were, as I also naturally sensed, quite known and familiar to my mother. This was the world in which, even more than in our own home, she was completely at home. This was Mother's true home, her true and native land.

Nor was my mother in any sense a rebel in this world. Its ways seemed to her to be completely natural and even deeply moral. Of course, those features that had sparked Ramza's and Shaarawi's rebellion—slavery and concubinage—were not in any direct sense part of my mother's reality. They were there only as distant facts, probably not quite understood, about a grandmother—instances of the strange things they did back then, in olden times.

Looking back now with the assumptions of my own time, I could well conclude that the ethos of the world whose attitudes survived into my own childhood must have been an ethos in which women were regarded as inferior creatures, essentially sex objects and breeders, to be bought and disposed of for a man's pleasure. But my memories do not fit with such a picture. I simply do not think that the message I got from the women of Zatoun was that we, the girls, and they, the women, were inferior. But what, then, was the message of Zatoun? I don't think it was a simple one. I can only set down what I remember of Zatoun and of Siouf in Alexandria, my mother's family's summer home.

It is quite possible that, while the women of Zatoun did not think of themselves and of us as inferior, the men did, although—given how powerful the cultural imperative of respect for parents, particularly the mother, was among those people—even for men such a view could not have been altogether uncomplicated. But men and women certainly did live essentially separate, almost unconnected lives. Men spent almost all their time with other men, and women with other women. It is entirely likely that women and men had completely different views of their society and of the system in which they lived, and of themselves and of the natures of men and women. Living differently and separately and coming together only momentarily, the

two sexes inhabited different if sometimes overlapping cultures, a men's and a women's culture, each sex seeing and understanding and representing the world to itself quite differently.

I spent a great deal of my childhood and adolescence among the women of Zatoun, whether at Zatoun itself or at the family home in Alexandria. My view of that world, and of the nature and meaning of life, I learned from the women, not the men. The men figured as dominant beings, naturally, but they were more like meteors, cutting a trail across our sky, causing havoc possibly, but present only briefly. It is for this reason, no doubt, that the novelist and Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz's *Palace Walk*, depicting a family similar to that of Zatoun, is to me both familiar and profoundly alien. For it is a portrait of that same world—but through the eyes and ethos of its men.

There was indeed, for a child anyway, as I have said, a distinctly perilous feel to Zatoun. I invariably felt a twinge of fear, along with feelings of pleasure and anticipation, when the car rounded the slight bend in the road and Zatoun's high ochre walls loomed into view.

Zatoun, which means "olives," took its name from the surrounding district. It was three miles from our house, down the straight road along the railway line toward Cairo. If you took the back route you would pass first through the heart of Matariyya, then through the center of Zatoun, both of them *shaabi* (popular) districts that gradually became, over the course of my childhood, more and more densely crowded.

Our car would draw up to the great iron gate of Zatoun as Amm Hasan the *bawab* (doorkeeper), an aged man whose white beard matched his white turban, first peered out from a smaller side door then slowly drew back the gate, one heavy leaf, then the other. Zatoun's garden, unlike ours at Ain Shams, was a formal garden of clipped hedges and precisely cubed shrubs and ordered flower beds. Perhaps the only touch or evocation of wildness in the entire front garden was the trellis with its clambering bougainvillea and loofah plant, where my mother had stood in that photograph and under which I remember playing. On the opposite side, over the garage, was

the *salamlek*, an apartment set aside exclusively for male guests. I remember hearing on rare occasions that some friend of my uncle's was staying there, but most of the time it stood empty. (I never even saw inside the *salamlek*, and I don't remember any male guests ever coming into the main house of Zatoun.) Then, along the garden wall on the right of the house (and opposite the kitchen), were the servants' quarters, a hedge screening them off from the rest of the garden. The back garden wall was as high as the house, protecting it from the eyes of the neighbors in the adjoining but quite invisible house.

Past the gate was a circular driveway of pressed red sand, which rose in a paved slope to the front door of the house, a large, heavy door of wrought iron and dense opaque glass. Over it was a high stone archway whose fluted recesses were stained with the excrement of bats. House and archway, like the garden walls, were a deep ochre.

Strangely, the birds at Zatoun were different from those of Ain Shams, perhaps because of the different kinds of gardens. At Ain Shams we had hoopoes and woodpeckers; at midday and particularly in the siesta hour, the soft cooing of mourning doves; then, at dusk, the call of the karawan carrying to us from the fields. At Zatoun, besides the circling and swooping of bats at twilight (we had them at Ain Shams, too, but perhaps not in such great numbers), the characteristic sight and cry over the garden was that of kites, their high, slow circling and their sharp, distinctive cry contributing to the particular quality of specialness and eeriness that seemed of the essence of Zatoun.

Now, in retrospect, it is the pleasures of Zatoun and in particular the warmth of the women's gatherings in Grandmother's room that stand out in my mind, but when I was a child the terrors of Zatoun were also intensely real. The main focus of my childhood terror was the Locked Room, but there was also the *badraun*, the basement, an entire empty replica of the house upstairs, with its two grand halls and its various rooms going off them. Here, downstairs, was the *offees*, the pantry, with its sacks of rice and tall jars of oil, and in the cupboards sugar, coffee, and other things, the keys held by Grandmother

and given daily to Umm Said, Grandmother's personal maid, with instructions as to what she was to dispense to the cook. There was another pantry upstairs, off the dining room, whose keys also were held by Grandmother. I don't recall what was in it, but this Grandmother would open herself, dispensing things to Umm Said.

The basement was identical to the upper floor except that, while the upstairs halls and rooms were carpeted, the halls downstairs and some of the rooms were tiled with diamond-shaped dark-red and white tiles. Down here, too, the rooms were furnished differently. Upstairs, except for Grandmother's visiting room, the furniture was "ordinary" European-style furniture. Austerely simple, the overall impression at Zatoun was of dark, polished wood and white walls, bare of decoration, the only color imparted by the glow of the carpets. Downstairs, the rooms, other than the pantry and kitchen, were lined with sofas along the three walls, with varieties of rectangular and elongated circular cushions—some of which were ideal for building "shelters" while others made excellent "torpedoes" in the battles we children staged down there. It was always dim; upstairs, a dome of thick opaque glass in the ceiling meant that in the daytime the inner hall was always suffused with a gentle, watery light, but in the basement daylight only penetrated in distant glimmerings. Downstairs, I would frighten myself with the echo of my footsteps and with what I imagined might be coming at me from the dark edges of the diagonally receding tiles.

My mother went to Zatoun daily or almost daily, setting off every morning almost as regularly as Father set off for work; on days when we were not at school, she sometimes brought us with her. Father would occasionally drop Mother off on his way to work, but this was usually too frantic. Father would send us in from where he sat in the car, clicking his tongue, to tell Mother to hurry up. She would be having a last-minute conference with the cook. "*Tayeb! Tayeb!*—Okay! Okay!—Tell him I'm coming!" Usually, though, Grandfather's car would come for her about midmorning and bring her back a couple of hours later, well in time for when Father arrived for lunch. If we were not at school, we would have had our lunch, but we would sit

with them, listening to their talk, taking an interest, too, in the contents of the brown bags of fruit—bananas, guavas, melons—that Father purchased from the fruiterers of the city on his way home. These were unpacked, washed, and brought to the side table.

All the aunts came nearly daily to Zatoun, sometimes with their children. Going to Zatoun and spending a couple of hours with Grandmother and with other women relatives was no doubt an enormous source of emotional and psychological support and pleasure. It was a way of sharing and renewing connection, of figuring out how to deal with whatever was going on in their lives with husbands, children, and the people who worked in their homes. All five sisters had married men they had never met, and no doubt these daily sessions in which they shared and analyzed their lives were vital to adjusting to what must have been at times enormously trying circumstances. Their meetings surely must have helped them keep their homes and marriages running reasonably smoothly; three of the five, including my mother, managed to have tranquil, happy marriages. But there were many other lives to be overseen. There were the other people of their community, as well as the women relatives who gathered here with them occasionally and those women's menfolk; everyone's issues and problems had to be analyzed, discussed, and resolved. And there were, too, the lives of the workers, the servants, who were in some sense under their jurisdiction. Generally speaking, the women of Zatoun knew intimately the personal details of the lives of those who worked for them, particularly their women servants, all of whom had been with the family, in one household or the other, for many years and many of whose mothers also had. Discussing and resolving these people's problems when they could, delegating this sister or that relative to talk to her lawyer husband or doctor husband were intrinsic parts not only of their conversations but, to them, of their responsibilities.

The atmosphere in Grandmother's receiving room was always wonderful. I do not remember a single occasion when it was not a pleasure to be there with the women. Relaxed, intimate, affectionate, rarely solemn, their conversations and exchanges were often extremely

witty and sharp and funny. My aunt Aisha in particular, the youngest and the most irreverent, would reduce us all to helpless laughter. She and Farida were particularly good at imitations and could do hilarious renderings—exaggeratedly grand, authoritarian, and pompous—of Grandfather.

The room was furnished with deep, wide sofas all the way round. Grandmother, always on her particular sofa, always in the same corner, would sit cross-legged or with her legs tucked up beside her under her black robe. On the carpeted floor beside her sat Umm Said, joining in the conversation when moved to do so or when invited to comment. Generally, though, she sat quietly listening, gently massaging Grandmother's feet and lower legs. This kind of massage, called *takbees*, was much valued in that part of the world. Umm Said, about the same age as Grandmother, had been with her since girlhood and had come with her to her new home when Grandmother married. Her own marriage had been arranged by Grandmother's family: her husband, once a worker on Grandmother's family estate and now a butcher, after a few years of marriage—and two sons by Umm Said—had taken another and younger wife. He had not divorced Umm Said and she did not press for divorce—although he sometimes came back and harassed her for money—because, ambivalent and at times deeply scornful of him though she often was, occasionally she would also wonder, somewhat wistfully, whether he might not yet see sense one day and come back to her. Being permitted to sit with the women, privy to their conversations and intimate revelations, was a privilege granted only, among the servants, to Umm Said. Other women working in the household came to bring in or take away, for instance, coffee cups, but they did not remain or share in the conversation.

The rest of the company sat, cross-legged or legs drawn up beside them, on the sofas all around. They would drink Turkish coffee, smoke (although not all of them, and never Grandmother), and munch on *lib* (a salted, roasted seed that has to be cracked open) as they talked. Grandmother's receiving room was the first room on the left at the top of the stairs as one came in at the front door; on the other side of the stairs, on the right, was Grandfather's "study" (al-

though he never studied and was rarely there anyway), which smelled faintly and deliciously of cigars, the handsome empty boxes of which we children sporadically collected.

Sometimes Umm Said would read the women's coffee cups after the coffee dregs had been duly swirled and the cups overturned in the requisite manner, but she did not have the reputation of being a particularly gifted coffee-cup reader. Occasionally one of the visitors who knew how to read cups would read them or someone visiting downstairs (a relative of one of the servants) who was thought to be gifted would come and read them, but it was not something that people took seriously. If, for example, the coffee-cup reader said, "I see you coming to a road that forks, and down one of the forks I see a stranger," someone would usually jump in with a bit of jocular speculation.

I used to love running in to Grandmother and, after greeting her, resting my head in her lap as she gently stroked my hair. Her eyes, a kind of green-gold that we call *asali*, honey-colored, looked down from under wide, unplucked eyebrows with love and without artifice. I was often told as a child that I looked like her and that I was in fact just like her, and so I would lie looking up at her, studying intently, upside down, the planes and curves of her face, searching it to see who I was and what exactly I was like.

But we children could only stay with them a short while. We were soon told to go out and play or, on the rare occasions when it was raining, to go down into the *badraun*. Obviously our presence would have inhibited the freedom with which they could talk.

Grandfather was only occasionally at Zatoun. He spent four or five days a week, sometimes longer, on his farm at al-Fayyum. His land was given over to the farming of fruit, grapes especially but also oranges, lemons, bananas, and tangerines. Sometimes, though less as I got older, we would visit al-Fayyum for a few days. He had a lovely house there, with orange and lemon trees planted all around, their blossoms scenting the air in the spring.

Grandfather was an astute and dedicated farmer who devoted much of his time to attending to the land. But he also had other

pastimes at al-Fayyum as well, like playing cards with other landowners at a club on Lake Qarun near his farm.

When Grandfather returned to Zatoun from one of his sojourns at Fayyum, a message would somehow run through the household, a whisper like a breath of wind through wheat, that he had arrived: "*El-bey el-kebir! El-bey el-kebir geh!*" ("The senior master! The senior master is here!") or "Baba!" ("Father!") or "Grandpapa!" depending on who was speaking. Servants would scurry off to do whatever they were supposed to be doing, and everyone—my aunts and mother and whoever was there visiting with Grandmother—would rearrange how they sat, adjust themselves, stifle their laughter. Not that Grandfather ever entered Grandmother's receiving room. No man, not even Grandfather, ever set foot there, to my knowledge: his presence would have been a violation of the seclusion rights of any woman present who was not his wife or daughter or close relative. (My brothers and cousins, so long as they were mere boys, were of course a different matter.)

My aunts and mother and uncle were very formal and deferential in Grandfather's presence. If he came into a room where they were sitting, they would scramble to their feet, the very hurriedness of their motion probably being part of the appearance of respect that was due him. They would then present themselves to him and make to kiss his hand in greeting, whereupon at almost the same instant and before his hand touched their lips, he would draw them to him instead and plant a kiss on their heads. The sight of my mother, herself such an august figure, standing before Grandfather, head bowed, eyes lowered until he invited her to sit down, was always astonishing to me. We grandchildren were not obliged to observe this code, although we were required to troop in to greet Grandfather when he arrived. He would take the small ones on his knees and give them loud, smacking kisses, often on the lips, then put them down. Even the older grandchildren got those loud kisses. I remember still how big and blubbery his lips seemed to me, and his nose and his entire face, and his domed, knobbly, clean-shaven head. He was very big and tall but also *svelte*, with a hawk nose and piercing blue eyes. An athlete once, he

had regularly swum the length of the Alexandria coastline as a young man. He had a loud, resonant, and naturally booming voice. I never heard him shout at anyone, except (rarely) at his valet, who went everywhere with him. This man, Abdel Athim, held himself aloof from the rest of the servants, considering himself a rank apart. He dressed differently from the other servants, in particularly fine brocaded caf-tans, cummerbunds, and turbans.

Grandfather himself dressed, always very elegantly, in European-style suits; outdoors, he wore his red felt tarboosh. Grandmother invariably wore a long black robe and a black head veil that closely framed her face. On occasion, when she was at prayer, she might wear a softer-shaped white head veil. She never left the house, as far as I know, except to travel in the summer to Alexandria and, in her younger days, to Fayyum and, once that I remember, to attend a funeral. (I remember noticing her stern, handsome, buckled black shoes—I was used to seeing Grandmother only in slippers and stockinged feet.) I don't believe that she ever even went to the cinema. On those rare occasions when she stepped outdoors, she traveled always in Grandfather's main car, its curtains drawn.

Observing this strict etiquette of deference, Grandfather's children nevertheless made him the butt of their humor in private. But they were also quite fond of him. My two surviving aunts, Aisha and Nazli, speak lovingly of Grandmother and of my mother and their other siblings and of how they look forward to meeting up with them soon. And they even look forward to seeing Grandfather again. When I visited recently, Nazli said, "I always mention him in my prayers, along with everyone else." "Me too," said Aisha. Then Aisha said that she had been wondering recently whether it was a sin to ask at the end of salat (formal prayer) for God to take one. "It's enough now," she said, "enough." Nazli thought it was a sin; it was up to God to decide when one's time was up. Aisha was depressed—things had been hard the last few years. Her husband, in his eighties, had been suffering for several years from what was probably Alzheimer's, and she alone had been looking after him, although someone came in two days a week to cook and clean. Then, the subject of death still on our

minds, Aisha said that Amm Saleh, the Nubian head servant at Zatoun and Alexandria, whom everyone had been very fond of and who had retired to a small plot on Aisha's land, had been to see her a few days before he died and had told her that he knew for certain that he was going to die very soon, although he was in good health. "How do you know?" she had asked him, and Saleh had replied that for several nights in a row he had dreamed that Grandfather was calling out to him in his great booming voice, "Saleh! Saleh! Come here! Saleh, come here!"

"Are there going to be servants up in heaven, too?" I asked. "Is Saleh doomed forever to be a servant?"

"How do we know?" said Aisha. "I am just telling you what happened."

"Did Grandmother ever hit you when you were children?" I had been asking my aunts to tell me about their childhoods and I returned now to the subject.

"Never! Don't you remember her? How gentle and loving she was?"

"What about Grandfather, did he ever hit you?"

"Hit us! He had a doctorate in hitting! His brother Halim—do you remember him?—he was a gentle, sensitive man. He would call your grandfather whenever his children misbehaved and needed a beating."

"But," said Nazli, "we always deserved it—we were very mischievous children."

"What did you do?" I wanted to know. But I got no answer.

Only Grandmother was exempt from making the show of deference and obedience with which everyone treated Grandfather, at least to his face. The relationship between the two of them was extremely courteous and formal, but it was a relationship—at least in outward conduct and manners—of equals. If anything, it was Grandfather who deferred to Grandmother, treating her with a more humble courtesy than she him. Grandmother, for her part, although always utterly civil and courteous, held herself aloof. And he, in the way that he looked

at her sometimes, seemed contrite, as if imploring her forgiveness.

As a child, I did not know the story behind this. I did not know that their son Fuad had committed suicide and that Grandmother believed, and in retrospect Grandfather perhaps concurred, that it had been Grandfather's stubborn hardness of heart that had driven his son to it. I was told that the young man had died of typhus when he was a student in Vienna. Grandmother had seen him in a dream, I was also told, the night of his death. He had come on a white horse to bid her adieu. The telegram bringing news of his death arrived the next day, and then his coffin was brought home.

I finally learned the truth sometime in my teenage years. Fuad, who was the next child after my mother, had been a student in Vienna and had fallen in love with an Austrian girl and wanted to marry her. Grandfather was adamantly set against the marriage and steadfastly refused to permit it.

It was this tragedy that lay behind the mysterious and terrifying Locked Room of Zatoun. This was Fuad's room, kept exactly the way it was when he was alive. Grandmother kept the key with her always and entered it at regular intervals with Umm Said to dust. I never caught even a glimpse of the inside, and if I happened to pass the sealed white door, I would run by as fast as I could.

Grandmother was in perpetual mourning. That was why Mother and my aunts needed to spend so much time at Zatoun with her, because without them her grief would be unendurable. Although she had always been pious, Fuad's death had transformed her, they said, from a cheery person who had laughed easily to a quiet, often sad person, who performed many extra prayers besides the required five and always dressed in black. Her voice was soft now (in the old days she could be as sharp as anyone, they said) and her laughter, in the rare moments when she laughed outright, was also quiet and gentle.

No one seemed to think that Grandmother's unending mourning was strange. (I found myself thinking about this just the other day, watching a program on American television in which a woman was

consulting a psychiatrist because her daughter had been dead six months and she was still grieving.) It seemed, on the contrary, to be accepted as a terrible but appropriate grief, a grief that did honor to the depths of her feelings as a mother. And it was dogma that nothing, no loss or suffering, equaled the suffering of a mother who had lost a child. I seem to remember that my father once or twice cautiously broached the idea that perhaps it was time that Grandmother put the past behind her just a little. My mother would agree that it was hard that she still suffered so much, but how could my father say such a thing? What did he know of a mother's heart?

Motherhood was mysterious. It was sacred, but it had little to do, apparently, with actually looking after or tending to one's children. It was, I suppose, about having one's children around one, under one's broad physical and moral guardianship and protection—even if, in the routines and practicalities of daily life, it was someone else who actually looked after them. And it connoted also some powerful, unseverable connection of the heart. Everything my mother did seemed to be an expression of this notion of motherhood, from her apparent lack of interest in the dailiness of our lives to the scenes she made at the quayside in Alexandria, waving her large white handkerchief in a tear-drenched goodbye as one or another of us and sometimes several of us left for England.

I remember now, recalling her there at the quayside, a song my mother sang. It was one of Asmahan's. "*Adi'l habayib 'al gambein,*" the song went. "With my loved ones all around me, what sweeter joy has heaven to offer?" My mother would croon it to herself on those increasingly rare occasions when all of us—all her children—were back in Egypt at the same time.

For my mother, these were some of the hidden, uncounted costs of colonialism: her children's growing up speaking a language she did not understand and going off in their teens to college in a faraway land and a culture that would eventually steal them away. Among other things, there were hard, practical consequences. The children would not be there in the way that children traditionally (and accord-

ing to both the Bible and the Quran) were supposed to be there when parents grew old and frail.

The Alexandria house at Siouf, where all of us—my mother and her sisters and their children and Grandmother—summered together, had all the pleasures of Zatoun and nothing of its atmosphere of somberness and sorrow or its sense of hidden impending danger. At Siouf, even Grandmother's constant prayerfulness was mysteriously transformed. The sight of her at prayer, standing, hands folded, her white veil draped over her head and lightly across one shoulder, then kneeling and bowing in the ritual motions, touching her head to the ground and rising again—all this, instead of reminding one of death and mourning, as it did at Zatoun, was profoundly reassuring. Perhaps because here we lived with her and so observed the regularity with which these moments of prayer occurred and their harmony with the rhythms of the day and of life, we were less inclined to imagine them, as perhaps we did at Zatoun, as merely marking an overflow of sorrow. At Zatoun, the sight of Grandmother at prayer accentuated her connectedness with the realm of spirits, a realm that seemed to hover so dangerously close as to always be on the verge of breaking through. At Alexandria, Grandmother seemed instead to have connections and influence among another set of unseen powers, powers that had the capacity to bless, and so living in this house over which she presided, I felt safe, reassured, as if we were all there under her—and consequently under their—protection. My memory of the night she took me up on the roof to watch for angels was just one instance of the feelings of wellbeing and safety, and the sense I had of the imminent nearness of the marvelous, that being at her side could engender.

The Alexandria house itself was also different from Zatoun. It was lighter, more open to the world, to the garden around it. Certainly there was no Locked Room in Alexandria. It may even be that my grandparents did not own the house during Fuad's lifetime, for I believe that Grandfather bought it specifically so that his daughters and their growing numbers of children could spend their summers together. Grandfather himself rarely came there, perhaps no more than

twice in an entire summer, each time for just a few days. Similarly, the husbands, including my father, came only intermittently, for weekends usually, though sometimes for longer. Even when they were there, though, they were marginal figures. The moods of the Alexandria house and the rhythms and currents of its life were ours, those of my aunts and mother and grandmother and us children.

An essential element of the pleasure of being in Alexandria was that of being part of that large household and above all of being with the aunts. Those we were closest to were Aisha and Nazli, though we loved them all. The five sisters were extraordinarily different in both looks and personality, except that all were tall and two, Aisha and Aida, very tall. Aisha was a tawny redhead with brown eyes and Aida, considered, along with Farida, the beauty of the family, had liquid black eyes and black hair. Farida was a dark blond with blue eyes, and my mother and Nazli, who looked alike, had black hair and gray-blue eyes. All were exceedingly handsome.

Aisha, the youngest, was a wonderful athlete and swimmer, and always fun and funny and full of life. She was my favorite. She was everyone's favorite.

Grandfather had decreed that all the sisters were to marry at twenty, a fairly late age. And all except for Aisha were married to native Egyptian men like my father, self-made professionals. Grandfather had taken a dislike to the "wastrels" of his own well-to-do class and had vowed not to marry his daughters to them or to anyone who had inherited wealth. But by the time Aisha's marriage came along he had relented a little as to the last condition. Aisha's husband was a professional man of Egyptian, not Turkish, background, but he was from a landed family. He was about twelve years older than she and doted on her, his face lighting up whenever he set eyes on her. She, in turn, was clearly fond of him. They had three children.

Nazli, too, had a happy marriage. She had wanted at least one daughter but kept producing boys, so she continued trying till, the fifth time around, she got a girl. Nazli was the unofficial family medic, "specializing" in children's illness, appearing at our bedsides the moment any of us was sick, prescribing what should be done. She was

also the most tenderhearted of all the sisters. It was she who, if any of us was crying, would be the first to gather us up in her arms to soothe us. Even if she was punishing her children or one of the rest of us, she would melt the moment we looked woeful and would immediately give up and kiss us. She involved herself in every detail of her children's lives, from supervising what they ate, to sitting with them through their homework, to insisting that they retire for a siesta in the middle of the day, a matter they resisted daily. Aisha was equally involved in her children's lives. Both sets of children, as the rest of us witnessed in our shared life in Alexandria, bawled loudly and cried real tears every time their mothers went out. We found this astonishing.

Farida's husband, after a few years and five children, secretly took a second wife. When Farida learned of it she was distraught and resorted to all sorts of methods—including consulting sorceresses and performing odd practices on their instruction (brewing certain teas and putting potions in his drink)—to cause him to divorce his new wife. All this earned her the reputation in the family of being a rather silly, credulous person. Eventually, as her husband tired of her various schemes and machinations, he divorced her, which Farida had not wanted either. Their last child, a daughter named Nair, arrived when her mother was in the throes of these troubles, and I spent many summer hours as a young teenager playing on the veranda with this excruciatingly shy and lovely child and teaching her to walk and talk.

Farida married twice afterward, both times briefly and, obviously, unhappily. She was destined, like her mother, to suffer the "worst of all fates," the loss of a child. One of her sons, a lovely, dreamy-eyed boy, Ali, became a sailor in the navy and drowned in his twenties when his ship went down in a freak accident in the Strait of Messina. I never saw her again, but people told me that, like Grandmother, she became a prayerful, religious woman, making many pilgrimages to Mecca. Unlike Grandmother, though, she always dressed in white. In fact, all my aunts became more pious as they grew older—the ones who survived to late middle age, that is. This was, I believe, a cultur-

ally sanctioned progression in that society: as people fulfilled and left behind the duties of their younger years they gradually gave themselves more fully to piety and to the rhythms and preoccupations of religious life.

In Alexandria, we spent the mornings on the beach, each group of children with its "dada," or nanny, setting off at its own pace, arriving at the beach, where we had cabins, at different times. (My siblings and I were the only cousins with a foreign nanny.) The aunts and my mother, if they came to the beach, would arrive together in midmorning and would sit on the main family cabin deck, chatting, the sea wind snapping the canvas drapes around the cabin. We would be out swimming or playing on the beach. Only Aisha, among the adults, swam, but she did so only in the afternoon, at about sunset, when some of us (having gone home for lunch) would return with her to the beach. Aisha would wear a burnoose—a terry-cloth bathrobe—down to the edge of the sea. Handing it to her maid, who had accompanied her down specifically for that purpose, she would run into the sea and dive into the waves. The maid, remaining on the beach, would keep a lookout for when Aisha was ready to emerge, whereupon she would meet her at the water's edge holding up the burnoose. My sister, too, had to adopt the burnoose on reaching puberty, going down to the sea's edge in it and then tossing it on the beach and running in. We were not supposed to be seen in bathing suits by strange men. When I reached that age there was a discussion as to whether I needed to take on the burnoose, and I wore it for one summer or perhaps half a summer and then it was decided that these things were too old-fashioned.

Often I would go in the water with Aisha, but she was a powerful swimmer and I could not keep up with her. After our swim we would shower and dress and Aisha would set off on her walk, sometimes joined by a band of us—her daughter, my sister, and me. A five- or six-mile walk along the Corniche was for her just an ordinary walk, but when we were with her we did not walk that far. Sometimes we

would buy the corn that was roasted on embers and sold all along the Corniche and would sit for a while looking out to sea, talking and eating.

Sometimes we went on day trips and picnics, organized usually by Aisha. We would take boat trips to Agami, for instance, down the coast from Alexandria, in those days an almost empty shore where the sands were white and the sea an azure blue and where fig trees grew almost up to the beach. We would anchor at sea and go over the side of the boat into the turquoise water and swim to shore, Aisha joining us. Then we would swim back to the boat for a wonderful picnic lunch of stuffed vine leaves and stuffed peppers and tomatoes and cold chicken and salads. Aisha took us on such outings in Cairo also, to the Barrages gardens along the Nile, for instance, where she would play tag with us, running as fast as we did. I remember in particular her taking us to Alexandria one spring and our stopping at the rest house in the desert halfway there; the desert silence was so profound that our words seemed scarcely to disturb it, as if they were mere ripples in an ocean of stillness. I remember this outing because I had never until then seen the desert in spring and never witnessed how its usually harsh, barren surface could become covered in tiny delicate flowers, flowers that formed slashes of vivid color on the dunes in the distance and even more vivid pools of color, purple and gold, in their dips and hollows. It was astonishing and marvelous to see that the desert was capable of nurturing such a fragility of life. And even now, whenever I hear inhabitants of lush, green lands speak dismissively of a place as "just desert, nothing but barren desert," I think of this—and of how little they know of the miraculous loveliness of the desert.

It was Aisha, too, who would take us in the evening to the amusement park, riding with us on the Ferris wheels and the bumper cars and the Ghost Train, screaming as much as any of us at the luminous skeletons, scaring us even more. And buying us cotton candy.

Some evenings the aunts went out, occasionally taking the older children with them and sometimes going on their own, to see a play perhaps or visit friends. And sometimes they took some of us younger

ones on rides along the Corniche, in open carriages drawn by horses, to Délices in the main square by the Cecil Hotel, where we would buy ice cream. Usually, though, they would stay home. Joined on occasion by various women friends and relatives, they would sit together with Grandmother out on the upstairs veranda, a veranda onto which all the rooms at the front of the house opened. The front of the house was rounded, like the prow or bow of a ship. We would sit with them, those of us who felt like it, listening to their talk, joining in their laughter, on nights that were always bright with starlight and sometimes brilliant with the light of a moon that cast shadows sharper and blacker than the sun's.

I must sometimes have slept in one of those upstairs rooms, because I remember the pleasure, the veranda door open, of relinquishing myself to sleep to the murmur of their voices drifting in to me from where they sat chatting under the stars, smoking, drinking lemonade, the ice in their glasses clinking faintly.

Of course, too, my mother's family had its share of tragedies.

Grandmother, fortunately, did not live to see the early death of Yusef, her only surviving son. She died when I was ten, quietly, gently, as she did everything, after an illness of just a few weeks. When it was clear that the end was near, we were taken to say goodbye. She was half sitting up, resting on a bank of pillows, wearing an oxygen mask, and was as sweet and loving as ever, more concerned about our frightened faces than she was about herself.

Within about a year we were taken to Zatoun once more to say a last goodbye, this time to her son, who had moved back there for his last illness. I remember his agonized cries coming to us muffled from behind the heavy white door to where we waited in the hall. We were sent out into the garden to wait for a quieter moment, when the morphine had taken effect and he was more able to receive children and presumably also so that our last glimpse of him would not be so dreadful.

He was only thirty-six and was dying of lung cancer. But the last year of his life was packed with heart-wrenching tragedy over and

above his illness. Yusef was the last male of the line, the last bearing the Ramzi name, and he was childless. His wife, Colette, was infertile. Colette was French, and they had been married for twelve years and loved each other enormously. They had met and fallen in love in France and Colette, who they said was from a "good" French family, surprised and moved everyone by converting to Islam. (While it is legally required that men convert to Islam if they marry Muslim women, women are not legally required to convert to marry Muslim men.) She learned Arabic and came to speak it beautifully, with just a slight accent. She was very much loved in the family, and everyone, Grandmother in particular, was moved by the sincerity of her devotion to Islam, which she spoke of as being (as in fact Muslims believe) what Christianity ought to be, what it was meant to be. But everyone was touched more than anything else by her love for and loyalty to Yusef, who, though a handsome and engaging man (in looks he and Colette were well-matched), distinctly had his problems. He was an alcoholic and a compulsive gambler, repeatedly losing at the tables large sums of money. But he had periods, months at a time and once a stretch of years, of sobriety, and in those times he and Colette would briefly appear in our lives, at Zatoun or Alexandria, laughing a lot, talking about their travels and parties and their glamorous lives.

When he was diagnosed with cancer the issue of his having no offspring, and specifically no son to carry forward the family name, became something of major importance, apparently for him and Colette as well as for Grandfather. I can only assume that to have been the case, because I cannot otherwise understand or explain what then happened. It was decided that Yusef must have a son immediately, and since Colette was infertile (they had determined this medically), he had to take another wife and divorce Colette. Both were bereft at the idea, but they went through with it. I do not know why Yusef's taking an additional wife, without divorcing Colette—as of course Islam permits men to do—was not an option, but apparently it was not.

Yusef's health immediately deteriorated and he moved back to Zatoun. Colette came daily to be with him, then simply moved to

Zatoun herself, though she did not share Yusef's suite and did not, as she made clear, live with him as his wife. She cried a lot. Meanwhile arrangements for his remarriage went ahead. Finally a woman thought to be suitable was found, although it was clear too that for both the bride and her family this was a practical, financial transaction, since it was plain now that Yusef was dying. The marriage obviously would not last, but Yusef might have a child, hopefully a son, and she would be his widow and heir. The marriage went forward and then was immediately terminated. The young woman, who was twenty, apparently was not a virgin, and Yusef at once divorced or anyway separated from her, presumably thinking that any child that came would not necessarily be his.

Colette stayed with him through the remaining time that he had and was at his side when he died.

And then there was the tragedy of my aunt Aida. She had, I know, an unhappy marriage. The details were kept from us. I saw her arrive at Zatoun once in tears, looking as if she had thrown on her clothes and fled there. We children were instantly shooed out, the way we had been on one occasion when my uncle Yusef had come home openly drunk. I know that Aida wanted a divorce and that her husband refused to give her one and that when she appealed to Grandfather he said categorically that divorce was not a thing he permitted in their family. Farida, her sister, had been divorced but that had been entirely her husband's decision and Grandfather could not have prevented it. I know that at one time Aida's marriage had seemed totally unendurable to her and that she had become deeply depressed and that her husband, who was in the medical profession, arranged for her to see a psychiatrist, who gave her electric-shock treatment. For a time after that she was strange and developed a facial twitch. But then she returned to herself. She was most like Aisha among her sisters, often funny and witty like her, but quicker and more mercurial. She took a lot of pills and was seeing a psychiatrist at the time she took her life.

She jumped from the bathroom window of their fifth-floor apart-

ment one day when she and her husband were at lunch. They were having an argument. She had said again that she wanted a divorce and he had refused. That is all I know. She ran from the table and locked herself in the bathroom. He had had no idea, he said later, weeping out loud, that what she was doing was climbing out the window.

I remember going to their apartment the day after her death for 'aza (condolence). She had survived for only a few moments on the pavement, a crowd forming round her as she moaned in great pain, and then had died, no one she knew at her side. She was buried the same day. She was forty-two.

I almost could not bear to offer my sympathies to her husband, as I was required to do, going into the room where he sat with the men, receiving condolences, his face looking stricken and shriveled.

And I found myself angry also at her sisters, my mother and aunts, their eyes swollen and red, receiving condolences in the rooms for women. Why are you crying now? I thought. What's the point of that? Why did you do nothing to help her all this time, why didn't you get her out of that marriage? I thought it was their fault, that they could have done something. If they had cared enough they could have done something.

That is what I thought then. Now I am less categorical.

Grandfather lived into his nineties, dying just as the new revolutionary government enacted the Land Reform Laws, redistributing the land once owned by the "feudalists" to its legitimate owners, the Egyptian peasantry.

By some process the details of which I do not know, Zatoun was taken over ("rented" for a nominal sum) by the government and put to use as a school. That is what Zatoun is today.

It is easy to see now that our lives in the Alexandria house, and even at Zatoun, were lived in women's time, women's space. And in women's culture.

And the women had, too, I now believe, their own understanding of Islam, an understanding that was different from men's Islam, "of-

ficial" Islam. For although in those days it was only Grandmother who performed all the regular formal prayers, for all the women of the house, religion was an essential part of how they made sense of and understood their own lives. It was through religion that one pondered the things that happened, why they had happened, and what one should make of them, how one should take them.

Islam, as I got it from them, was gentle, generous, pacifist, inclusive, somewhat mystical—just as they themselves were. Mother's pacifism was entirely of a piece with their sense of the religion. Being Muslim was about believing in a world in which life was meaningful and in which all events and happenings were permeated (although not always transparently to us) with meaning. Religion was above all about inner things. The outward signs of religiousness, such as prayer and fasting, might be signs of a true religiousness but equally well might not. They were certainly not what was important about being Muslim. What was important was how you conducted yourself and how you were in yourself and in your attitude toward others and in your heart.

What it was to be Muslim was passed on not, of course, wordlessly but without elaborate sets of injunctions or threats or decrees or dictates as to what we should do and be and believe. What was passed on, besides the very general basic beliefs and moral ethos of Islam, which are also those of its sister monotheisms, was a way of being in the world. A way of holding oneself in the world—in relation to God, to existence, to other human beings. This the women passed on to us most of all through how they were and by their being and presence, by the way *they* were in the world, conveying their beliefs, ways, thoughts, and how we should be in the world by a touch, a glance, a word—prohibiting, for instance, or approving. Their mere responses in this or that situation—a word, a shrug, even just their postures—passed on to us, in the way that women (and also men) have forever passed on to their young, how we should be. And all of these ways of passing on attitudes, morals, beliefs, knowledge—through touch and the body and in words spoken in the living moment—are by their very nature subtle and evanescent. They pro-

foundly shape the next generation, but they do not leave a record in the way that someone writing a text about how to live or what to believe leaves a record. Nevertheless, they leave a far more important and, literally, more vital, living record. Beliefs, morals, attitudes passed on to and impressed on us through those fleeting words and gestures are written into our very lives, our bodies, our selves, even into our physical cells and into how we live out the script of our lives.

It was Grandmother who taught me the *fat-ha* (the opening verse of the Quran and the equivalent of the Christian Lord's Prayer) and who taught me two or three other short suras (Quranic verses). When she took me up onto the roof of the Alexandria house to watch for angels on the night of the twenty-seventh of Ramadan, she recited the sura about that special night, a sura that was also by implication about the miraculousness of night itself. Even now I remember its loveliness. It is still my favorite sura.

I remember receiving little other direct religious instruction, either from Grandmother or from anyone else. I have already described the most memorable exchange with my mother on the subject of religion—when, sitting in her room, the windows open behind her onto the garden, the curtain billowing, she quoted to me the verse in the Quran that she believed summed up the essence of Islam: “He who kills one being [*nafs*, self, from the root *nafas*, breath] kills all of humanity, and he who revives, or gives life to, one being revives all of humanity.” It was a verse that she quoted often, that came up in any important conversation about God, religion, those sorts of things. It represented for her the essence of Islam.

I happened to be reading, when I was thinking about all this, the autobiography of Zeinab al-Ghazali, one of the most prominent Muslim women leaders of our day. Al-Ghazali founded a Muslim Women's Society that she eventually merged with the Muslim Brotherhood, the “fundamentalist” association that was particularly active in the forties and fifties. Throughout her life she openly espoused a belief in the legitimacy of using violence in the cause of Islam. In her memoir, she writes of how in her childhood her father told her stories of the heroic

women of early Islam who had written poetry eulogizing Muslim warriors and who themselves had gone to war on the battlefields of Islam and gained renown as fearless fighters. Musing about all this and about the difference between al-Ghazali's Islam and my mother's pacifist understanding of it, I found myself falling into a meditation on the seemingly trivial detail that I, unlike al-Ghazali, had never heard as a child or a young girl stories about the women of early Islam, heroic or otherwise. And it was then that I suddenly realized the difference between al-Ghazali and my mother and between al-Ghazali's Islam and my mother's.

The reason I had not heard such stories as a child was quite simply that those sorts of stories (when I was young, anyway) were to be found only in the ancient classical texts of Islam, texts that only men who had studied the classical Islamic literary heritage could understand and decipher. The entire training at Islamic universities—the training, for example, that al-Ghazali's father, who had attended al-Azhar University, had received—consisted precisely in studying those texts. Al-Ghazali had been initiated into Islam and had got her notions as to what a Muslim was from her father, whereas I had received my Islam from the mothers, as had my mother. So there are two quite different Islams, an Islam that is in some sense a women's Islam and an official, textual Islam, a “men's” Islam.

And indeed it is obvious that a far greater gulf must separate men's and women's ways of knowing, and the different ways in which men and women understand religion, in the segregated societies of the Middle East than in other societies—and we know that there are differences between women's and men's ways of knowing even in non-segregated societies such as America. For, beside the fact that women often could not read (or, if they were literate, could not decipher the Islamic texts, which require years of specialist training), women in Muslim societies did not attend mosques. Mosque going was not part of the tradition for women at any class level (that is, attending mosque for congregational prayers was not part of the tradition, as distinct from visiting mosques privately and informally to offer personal prayers, which women have always done). Women therefore did not

hear the sermons that men heard. And they did not get the official (male, of course) orthodox interpretations of religion that men (or some men) got every Friday. They did not have a man trained in the orthodox (male) literary heritage of Islam telling them week by week and month by month what it meant to be a Muslim, what the correct interpretation of this or that was, and what was or was not the essential message of Islam.

Rather they figured these things out among themselves and in two ways. They figured them out as they tried to understand their own lives and how to behave and how to live, talking them over together among themselves, interacting with their men, and returning to talk them over in their communities of women. And they figured them out as they listened to the Quran and talked among themselves about what they heard. For this was a culture, at all levels of society and throughout most of the history of Islamic civilization, not of reading but of the common recitation of the Quran. It was recited by professional reciters, women as well as men, and listened to on all kinds of occasions—at funerals and births and celebratory events, in illness, and in ordinary life. There was merit in having the Quran chanted in your house and in listening to it being chanted wherever it was chanted, whereas for women there was no merit attached to attending mosque, an activity indeed prohibited to women for most of history. It was from these together, their own lives and from hearing the words of the Quran, that they formed their sense of the essence of Islam.

Nor did they feel, the women I knew, that they were missing anything by not hearing the exhortations of sheikhs, nor did they believe that the sheikhs had an understanding of Islam superior to theirs. On the contrary. They had little regard, the women I knew, for the reported views and opinions of most sheikhs. Although occasionally there might be a sheikh who was regarded as a man of genuine insight and wisdom, the women I knew ordinarily dismissed the views and opinions of the common run of sheikhs as mere superstition and bigotry. And these, I emphasize, were not Westernized women. Grandmother, who spoke only Arabic and Turkish, almost never set

foot outside her home and never even listened to the radio. The dictum that “there is no priesthood in Islam”—meaning that there is no intermediary or interpreter, and no need for an intermediary or interpreter, between God and each individual Muslim and how that Muslim understands his or her religion—was something these women and many other Muslims took seriously and held on to as a declaration of their right to their own understanding of Islam.

No doubt particular backgrounds and subcultures give their own specific flavors and inflections and ways of seeing to their understanding of religion, and I expect that the Islam I received from the women among whom I lived was therefore part of their particular subculture. In this sense, then, there are not just two or three different kinds of Islam but many, many different ways of understanding and of being Muslim. But what is striking to me now is not how different or rare the Islam in which I was raised is but how ordinary and typical it seems to be in its base and fundamentals. Now, after a lifetime of meeting and talking with Muslims from all over the world, I find that this Islam is one of the common varieties—perhaps even *the* common or garden variety—of the religion. It is the Islam not only of women but of ordinary folk generally, as opposed to the Islam of sheikhs, ayatollahs, mullahs, and clerics. It is an Islam that may or may not place emphasis on ritual and formal religious practice but that certainly pays little or no attention to the utterances and exhortations of sheikhs or any sort of official figures. Rather it is an Islam that stresses moral conduct and emphasizes Islam as a broad ethos and ethical code and as a way of understanding and reflecting on the meaning of one's life and of human life more generally.

This variety of Islam (or, more exactly perhaps, these familial varieties of Islam, existing in a continuum across the Muslim world) consists above all of Islam as essentially an aural and oral heritage and a way of living and being—and not a textual, written heritage, not something studied in books or learned from men who studied books. This latter Islam, the Islam of the texts, is a quite different, quite other Islam: it is the Islam of the arcane, mostly medieval written heritage in which sheikhs are trained, and it is “men's” Islam.

More specifically still, it is the Islam erected by that minority of men who over the centuries have created and ~~passed on to one another~~ this particular textual heritage: men who, although they have always been a minority in society as a whole, have always been those who made the laws and wielded (like the ayatollahs of Iran today) enormous power in their societies. The Islam they developed in this textual heritage is very like the medieval Latinate textual heritage of Christianity. It is as abstruse and obscure and as dominated by medieval and exclusively male views of the world as are those Latin texts. Imagine believing that those medieval texts on Christianity represent today the only true and acceptable interpretation of Christianity. But that is exactly what the sheikhs and ayatollahs propound and this is where things stand now in much of the Muslim world: most of the classic Islamic texts that ~~still determine Muslim law in our day date from~~ medieval times.

Aurally what remains when you listen to the Quran over a lifetime are its most recurring themes, ideas, words, and permeating spirit, reappearing now in this passage, now in that: mercy, justice, peace, compassion, humanity, fairness, kindness, truthfulness, charity, mercy, justice. And yet it is exactly these recurring themes and this permeating spirit that are for the most part left out of the medieval texts or smothered and buried under a welter of obscure and abstruse "learning." One would scarcely believe, reading or hearing the laws these texts have yielded, particularly when it comes to women, that the words "justice," "fairness," "compassion," "truth," ever even occur in the Quran. No wonder non-Muslims think Islam is such a backward and oppressive religion: what these men made of it is largely oppressive. Still—to speak less judgmentally and, in fact, more accurately—the men who wrote the foundational texts of official Islam were living in societies and ~~eras rife with chauvinism, eras when men believed as a matter of categorical certainty that God created them superior to women and fully intended them to have complete~~ dominion over women. And yet, despite such beliefs and prejudices, ~~here and there in the texts they created, in the details of this or that law, they wrote in some provision or condition that, astonishingly,~~

does give justice to women. So, even in those bleak days, the Quran's recurring themes filtered through. They did so, however, only now and then in a body of law otherwise overwhelmingly skewed in favor of men.

I am sure, then, that my foremothers' lack of respect for the authority of sheikhs was not coincidental. Rather, I believe that this way of seeing and understanding was quite common among ordinary Muslims and that it was an understanding passed on from mothers and grandmothers to daughters and granddaughters. Generations of astute, thoughtful women, listening to the Quran, understood perfectly well its essential themes and its faith. And looking around them, they understood perfectly well, too, what a travesty men had made of it.

This ingrained low opinion that they had of sheikhs, clerics, and ayatollahs stemmed from a perfectly just and astute understanding of their world, an understanding that they passed on to their daughters and indeed their sons.

Leaving no written legacy, written only on the body and into the scripts of our lives, this oral and aural tradition of Islam no doubt stretches back through generations and is as ancient as any written tradition.

One could even argue that an emphasis on an oral and aural Islam is intrinsic to Islam and to the Quran itself, and intrinsic even to the Arabic language. Originally the Quran was an aural, and only an aural, text recited to the community by the Prophet Muhammad. And it remained throughout his life, and indeed for several years after his death, only an aural text. Moreover, a bias in favor of the heard word, the word given life and meaning by the human voice, the human breath (*nafas*) is there, one might say, in the very language itself. In Arabic (and also Hebrew) script, no vowels are set down, only consonants. A set of consonants can have several meanings and only acquires final, specific, fixed meaning when given vocalized or silent utterance (unlike words in European script, which have the appearance, anyway, of being fixed in meaning). Until life is literally breathed into them, Arabic and Hebrew words on the page have no particular meaning. Indeed, until then they are not words but only potential

words, a chaotic babble and possibility of meanings. It is as if they hold within them the scripts of those languages, marshaling their sets of bare consonants across the page, vast spaces in which meanings exist in a condition of whirling potentiality until the very moment that one is singled out and uttered. And so by their very scripts these two languages seem to announce the primacy of the spoken, literally living word, and to announce that meaning can only be here and now. Here and now in this body, this breath (*nafas*) this self (*nafs*) encountering the word, giving it life. Word that, without that encounter, has no life, no meaning. Meaning always only here and now, in this body, for this person. Truth only here and now, for this body, this person. Not something transcendent, overarching, larger, bigger, more important than life—but here and now and in this body and in this small and ordinary life.

We seem to be living through an era of the progressive, seemingly inexorable erasure of the oral and ethical traditions of lived Islam and, simultaneously, of the ever-greater dissemination of written Islam, textual, “men’s” Islam (an Islam essentially not of the Book but of the Texts, the medieval texts) as *the* authoritative Islam. Worse still, this seems to be an era of the unstoppable spread of fundamentalist Islam, textual Islam’s more narrow and more poorly informed modern descendant. It is a more ill-informed version of old style official Islam in that the practitioners of that older Islam usually studied many texts and thus at least knew that even in these medieval texts there were disagreements among scholars and many possible interpretations of this or that verse. But today’s fundamentalists, literate but often having read just a single text, take it to be definitive and the one and only “truth.”

Ironically, therefore, literacy has played a baneful part both in spreading a particular form of Islam and in working to erase oral and living forms of the religion. For one thing, we all automatically assume that those who write and who put their knowledge down in texts have something more valuable to offer than those who simply live their knowledge and use it to inform their lives. And we assume that those

who write and interpret texts in writing—in the Muslim context, the sheikhs and ayatollahs, who are the guardians and perpetuators (perpetrators) of this written version of Islam—must have a better, truer, deeper understanding of Islam than the non-specially trained Muslim. Whereas the fact is that the only Islam that they have a deeper understanding of is their own gloomy, medieval version of it.

Even the Western academic world is contributing to the greater visibility and legitimacy of textual Islam and to the gradual silencing and erasure of alternative oral forms of lived Islam. For we too in the West, and particularly in universities, honor, and give pride of place to, texts. Academic studies of Islam commonly focus on its textual heritage or on visible, official institutions such as mosques. Consequently it is this Islam—the Islam of texts and of mosques—that becomes visible and that is presented as in some sense legitimate, whereas most of the Muslims whom I know personally, both in the Middle East and in Europe and America, would never go near a mosque or willingly associate themselves with any form of official Islam. Throughout history, official Islam has been our enemy and our oppressor. We have learned to live with it and to survive it and have developed dictums such as “There is no priesthood in Islam” to protect ourselves from it; we’re not now suddenly and even in these new lands going to easily befriend it. It is also a particular and bitter irony to me that the very fashionableness of gender studies is serving to disseminate and promote medieval men’s Islam as the “true” and “authentic” Islam. (It is “true” and “authentic” because it is based on old texts and represents what the Muslim male powers have considered to be true for centuries.) Professors, for example, including a number who have no sympathy whatever for feminism, are now jumping on the bandwagon of gender studies and directing a plethora of dissertations on this or that medieval text with titles like “Islam and Menstruation.” But such dissertations should more aptly have titles along the lines of “A Study of Medieval Male Beliefs about Menstruation.” For what, after all, do these men’s beliefs, and the rules that they laid down on the basis of their beliefs, have to do with Islam? Just because

they were powerful, privileged men in their societies and knew how to write, does this mean they have the right forever to tell us what Islam is and what the rules should be?

Still, these are merely word wars, wars of ideas that, for the present anyway, are of the most minor significance compared with the devastation unloosed on Muslim societies in our day by fundamentalism. What we are living through now seems to be not merely the erasure of the living oral, ethical, and humane traditions of Islam but the literal destruction and annihilation of the Muslims who are the bearers of those traditions. In Algeria, Iran, Afghanistan, and, alas, in Egypt, this narrow, violent variant of Islam is ravaging its way through the land.

*If a day won't come
when the monuments of institutionalized religion are in ruin
. . . then, my beloved,
then we are really in trouble.*

Rumi

It has not been only women and simple, unlearned folk who have believed, like the women who raised me, that the ethical heart of Islam is also its core and essential message. Throughout Muslim history, philosophers, visionaries, mystics, and some of the civilization's greatest luminaries have held a similar belief. But throughout history, too, when they have announced their beliefs publicly, they have generally been hounded, persecuted, executed. Or, when they have held fast to their vision but also managed to refrain from overtly challenging the powers that be and thus avoided violent reprisal, they have been at best tolerated and marginalized—accepted as eccentrics outside the tradition of “true” Islam. From almost the earliest days, the Islam that has held sway and that has been supported and enforced by sheikhs, ayatollahs, rulers, states, and armies, has been official, textual Islam. This variant of Islam has wielded absolute power and has not hesitated to eradicate—often with the same bru-

tality as fundamentalism today—all dissent, all differing views, all opposition.

There has never been a time when Muslims, in any significant number, have lived in a land in which freedom of thought and religion were accepted norms. Never, that is, until today. Now, in the wake of the migrations that came with the ending of the European empires, tens of thousands of Muslims are growing up in Europe and America, where they take for granted their right to think and believe whatever they wish and take for granted, most particularly, their right to speak and write openly of their thoughts, beliefs, and unbeliefs.

For Muslims this is, quite simply, a historically unprecedented state of affairs. Whatever Islam will become in this new age, surely it will be something quite other than the religion that has been officially forced on us through all these centuries.

All of this is true.

But the fact is that, however genuinely humane and gentle and pacifist my mother's and grandmother's Islam was, it left them and the women among whom they lived wholly accepting of the ways of their society in relation to women, even when those ways were profoundly destructive. They bowed their heads and acquiesced to them even when the people being crushed were their nearest and dearest. Tradition and the conviviality, warmth, companionship, and support of the women of the extended family were rich and fine and nourishing and wonderful so long as things went well and so long as these women were dealing with men whom they loved and who loved them. But when things went wrong, the women were powerless and acquiescent in a silence that seemed to me when I was young awfully like a guilty averting of the eyes, awfully like a kind of connivance.

This, in any case, seems to me to be what my aunt Aida's story points to.

Aida's marriage was absolutely miserable from the very start, but divorce, according to Grandfather, was simply not a permissible thing in his family. And yet his own niece Karima, my mother's cousin twice

over (her parents were Grandmother's sister and Grandfather's brother), had divorced twice, and each time by her own volition. The difference was that Karima was an heiress, both her parents having died when she was young. Independent and wealthy, she had married on her own terms, ensuring always that the *'isma*, the right to divorce, was placed by contract in her own hands. (The Islamic legal provision permitting women to make such contracts is one of those details that I mentioned earlier that are written into and buried deep in what is otherwise a body of law overwhelmingly biased in favor of men. Generally only rich women and women with knowledgeable, protective families are able to invoke these laws. Many people don't even know of their existence.) Aunt Aida had not inherited anything as yet and was financially dependent on her husband and her father.

Grandmother, grieving all her life over the cost of Grandfather's intransigence toward their son Fuad, was powerless to alter his decision about Aida. For all I know, Grandmother even acquiesced in the notion that divorce was so great a disgrace that, despite her daughter's misery, she could not bring herself to advocate that course or attempt to persuade Grandfather to relent. Karima, her own niece, always received, of course, with warmth and unconditional affection in their home, was nevertheless regarded by Grandmother and her daughters as somewhat scandalous, or at any rate as someone who was rather unconventional and living dangerously close to the edge of impropriety. Aunt Karima further added to her reputation for un-conventionality when she founded an orphanage for illegitimate children. It was scandalous to men like Grandfather for respectable women even to mention such a subject, let alone to be founding a society and openly soliciting funds from him and his cronies to support an organization addressing the matter. She raised substantial funds for it over the course of her life as well as for another society, which she also founded, for the care and training of the blind. Both still flourish today and honor their founder. A bust of her stands in the front garden of the Society for the Blind.

Grandmother would not live to witness Aida's suicide. But she

was witness to Aida's sufferings and unhappiness in her marriage, and the electric-shock treatment she underwent.

There is an irony to all this. In the circumstances in which Aida found herself, Islamic law would in fact have granted her the right to a divorce or an annulment. Had she been free to take her case to an Islamic court and had she not been constricted by the conventions of her people, she would have been granted, even by that male-created law, the release that she sought. Not by Grandfather and his customs or by Grandmother and her daughters and their conventions, steeped as they, too, were in the ways of their society, but by Islamic law, in another of those unexpected, startlingly just provisions of this otherwise male-biased construction.

Nor was this the only situation in the various family circumstances I've described when women would have been more justly treated at the hands of Islamic law than they were by the traditions of the society, traditions by which the women of the family, too, were evidently bound. Islamic law, for example, frowned on the practice, entirely accepted by cultural tradition, whereby a man repudiated a woman, as my dying uncle had done, because he doubted her virginity. Asked about such a case, a medieval Islamic judge responded that the man had no right to repudiate a woman by claiming she was not a virgin, since virginity could be lost in many ways—just by jumping about or any such thing. He could divorce her nevertheless, since men had the absolute right of divorce even if in the absence of a good reason, but the woman was entitled to full compensation and could not be regarded or treated as guilty of anything.

And so we cannot simply conclude that what I have called women's Islam is invariably good and to be endorsed. And conversely, everything about what I've called men's Islam is not to be automatically rejected, either.

To refuse to veil one's voice and to start "shouting," that was really indecent, real dissidence. For the silence of all the others suddenly lost its charm and revealed itself for what it was: a prison without reprieve. . . .

While I thought I was undertaking a "journey through myself," I find I am simply choosing another veil. While I intended every step forward to make me more clearly identifiable, I find myself progressively sucked down into the anonymity of those women of old—my ancestors!

Assia Djebar (Algerian novelist), *Fantasia*

If the women of my family were guilty of silence and acquiescence out of their inability to see past their own conditioning, I, too, have fallen in with notions instilled in me by my conditioning—and in ways that I did not even recognize until now, when, thinking about my foremothers, I suddenly saw in what I had myself just written my own unthinking collusion with the attitudes of the society in which I was raised. Writing of Aunt Farida and of how aggrieved and miserable she was when her husband took a second wife, I reproduced here without thinking the stories I'd heard as a youngster about how foolish Aunt Farida was, resorting to magic to bring back her husband. But I see now how those stories in effect rationalized and excused his conduct, implying that even though taking a second wife wasn't a nice way for a man to behave, perhaps he had had some excuse, Aunt Farida being so foolish.

"The mind is so near itself," Emily Dickinson wrote, "it cannot see distinctly." Sometimes even the stories we ourselves tell dissolve before us as if a mist were momentarily lifting, and we glimpse in that instant our own participation in the myths and constructions of our societies.

SCHOOL DAYS

OUR SCHOOL stood on the extreme edge of Heliopolis, a suburb of Cairo about three miles to the west of us. It was a handsome, beige L-shaped building with green shutters occupying a corner on one of the boulevards of Heliopolis, and it was the last building before the desert. About five or six stories high, its walls were embossed at regular intervals with the school's emblem, a laurel wreath enclosing a rose over which were the words *Ducit amor patriae*—Love of our country guide us—an emblem emblazoned also on the upper front pockets of our school blazers, in shades of blue or rose, the different colors signifying athletic achievement or prefecthood or something else, I cannot recall what. Our blazers, worn in winter, were navy blue, like our uniform, a navy tunic over a white shirt and the school tie of gray and navy blue, with a thin line in a different color (purple, green, red, or blue) edging the navy stripe to indicate which house we belonged to—Gloucester, York, Kent, or Windsor for girls, Raleigh, Frobisher, Drake, or Grenville for boys. In summer the uniform was royal blue. And white socks and black shoes, both seasons.

Behind the school were the school grounds and playing fields. The playing fields, of red pressed sand marked with white lines for the running tracks and the football, hockey, and net ball fields, extended a considerable distance. Beyond them, toward the end of the