

The Top

Light filtered through the thin slats of the closed window blind, creating a pattern of long, narrow stairs on the opposite wall. Shoukry stared at it as he sat at the round linoleum-topped kitchen table waiting for his wife to bring him a cup of coffee and some toast. The pattern shifted with the direction of the light until it started to fade, and his eyes lost its movement.

Walking quickly towards him, his wife set down the demitasse of Arabic coffee and a plate with two pieces of toast sliding back and forth precariously. "Here," she said, barely parting her lips. Before he could ask about butter, she had bustled away. He sipped the coffee and ate the toast as it was, occasionally glancing up at the wall to see if the pattern might return in a different form.

"I have to go in early today," she said, grabbing her pocketbook and sweater. "If you come home before me, there is hamburger in the refrigerator. You can put it in the oven."

"Amira, what about Amira?" he asked.

"She has a meeting after school."

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The desk in his office in Egypt had been very large. Even if he bent forward and stretched his arms to either side as far as he could, feeling the tendons on the inside of his elbows pull and strain, his fingertips would barely grip the edges. The desk chair was cushioned, and it twirled around. The men who came to see him sat on a straight-backed hard wooden chair. They would lean forward, their hands vigorously explaining their request. He would relax, fit his

body into the chair's contoured shape and let it rock a little with his movements. Never would he move his body closer to the man in front of him. Even when shaking hands, he would stand upright behind his desk, so the other man had to bend forward to reach his hand. It was this precision of his movements, he believed, that had earned him the respect of his colleagues and the men who came to see him. That was why he was called Ustaz and Pasha.

He was in charge of issuing permits for building new apartment buildings or adding more floors to old ones. With the population growing so fast and so many enterprising young men eager to gain some of the profit, his office had a long list of appointments that stretched six months ahead. About once every month, he would refuse to give a permit because the new government building codes had not been implemented. The rest of the time, he might overlook certain discrepancies if he were offered some compensation in return. He would debate with the man across from him that the codes were really too strict given the rising cost of building materials. In his mind, he justified his actions by convincing himself that he was adhering to a set of revised codes based on his own better judgment. He thoroughly enjoyed discussing the building projects with the builders and felt himself to be an expert, often giving advice on the drawings laid out for him.

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"And why not? Are we less than anyone?"

"I said no. Our lives here are good and we will stay here."

"Why don't you look around you? Everyone wants to leave this country and its misery."

"What misery? I've reached a high position in my work. And here we are living in an apartment that is beautiful and large. What more do you want?"

"I want what all people want. I want a house for myself with a garden and a fancy car. I want to go out to enjoy myself and to see the world. I want my freedom, not this society that suffocates our desires."

"The world is in your home in front of you, your husband and your daughter. We are your world."

"You're just afraid. A coward."

"That's enough. You've given me a headache."

"Look at my sister's husband. He doesn't even have a college degree like you. And they've only been in America for six months, and now they have a house and a car. Think. You, with your college degree and your experience, how far you can go in America! This is a country that gives opportunities that one can't imagine."

"Enough. Enough. Just what do you want from me?"

"At least think about it, Shoukry. Lots of people are immigrating now, especially after the '67 war. And all of them, in a short while, achieve a high position, and they have things we can never reach here even if we work till we die. This country is closed. Abd el Nasser doesn't want to let anything in. And he's fighting everyone's battles. Everything that is of worth in the country he lets go. There's no future here."

"Let's thank God for what we have and not look too far. My work is good. There is no need."

"If we were going to America, think how people would see you. They would look at you as if you were a king. This America is heaven."

"All right. All right."

"Will you think about it?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Why don't you get the application tomorrow from the embassy? We can just look at it.
We won't lose anything."

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Fifth floor, please.

Ninth floor, please.

Tenth floor.

Top floor, please.

Good Morning, Sir.

Good Afternoon, Miss.

How are you today, Shoukry, the fifteenth floor.

Like a continuous circle but flat, never curving out, no interior space inside the lines.
Confined in this elevator, pushing buttons, taking people up, down. The high metal stool to lean
against, occasionally rest the weight of the body, back stiff, supported by a thin slip of air.
Surrounded by tongues inside lips dancing out sounds that merged into a flat rhythm, repetition
of *th*. Alone, pressing tongue between teeth into a windblown whistle.

And his wife, *his* wife. She didn't even have a college degree. Now working in an office
with her own desk. Thinking she's somebody. Lying, lying to everyone. Making it all up.

Filling out the application with her sister at her shoulder instructing. Say you graduated from Cairo University. Tell them you worked at the National Egyptian Insurance Company. They won't know. They can't check. Put an x next to filing. It's easy, just putting things in order by letter. You'll get the job.

Interviews. Straining to determine when the word ends and another begins. The sentence stopping. His turn to speak. Lips in jigsaw pieces to form the shape for the word to pull it out.

Then she says, "I got you a job. You'll be in charge. Practically your own boss."

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"Where's Amira?"

"A friend picked her up early this morning. She's going on a weekend ski trip with her school."

"And why wasn't I told? Don't you need my permission? I'm her father."

"I signed the permission slip for her. You were asleep and she had to take it in that day."

"And did you find out anything about this trip? Are there boys going too? Don't you think about your daughter's reputation? You want her to ruin herself?"

"Oh Shoukry, calm down. It's a school trip. Don't make a fuss over nothing."

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In the elevator, sometimes, the smell of flour, bread, the baking of crust, would whisper through his nose. He'd twirl his tongue around the crevices of his mouth searching for the taste

of that holy bread, the *orban* he ate as a child. Going to church with his parents in Coptic Cairo, walking through the cobblestone alleyways to the Hanging Church where his father was a chanter. At the end of the liturgy, the smell of incense swung from the priest's gold chalice as he walked down the aisles between the rows of pews. The smoke would flood Shoukry's nostrils and mix with the floury smell of the *orban* just being brought out.

On the way home from church, women placed themselves throughout the alleyway with baskets of holy bread for sale. Dressed in sheer layers of black that became opaque, each one enticed him with her song. He would beg his mother for a *piaster* to buy his very own *orban*, round and whole with the pattern of crosses engraved in its center, instead of just that small bite the priest handed out. Only on holidays would she give him the *piaster*, and he would eat the bread slowly and possessively, trying to re-design the crosses with each bit that he tore off to put in his mouth.

But in the elevator this craving came over him like a shadow until he was sure that if he could only trail the smell he would find the *orban*. Sometimes when the elevator door opened, he would stick out his face and sniff, trying to catch the direction of it. But people would rush in too quickly and he would lose its trace. Once, he was concentrating so hard, the door almost closed on his nose, and he heard the echo of laughter around him. Still, he would creep his tongue over his lips in hopes of catching a hint of its taste.

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"Shoukry, you look a little tired. Why don't you go home early today?"

The house was quiet. For a while, he sat on the sofa and waited for his wife to return. When he got hungry, he went to the refrigerator. Leaning against the door, he looked inside. A little milk on the top shelf, an almost empty jar of mayonnaise in the door and, on the middle shelf, an eggplant. It had a long neck then it curved out, smooth and round. All of it was a deep layered shade of purple. "Too big to make stuffed eggplant," he thought. Just then he heard the key in the lock and quickly closed the refrigerator door and returned to the sofa.

His wife and daughter entered with bags of groceries. He could see that his wife had a beaming smile on her face.

"When will you start?" he overheard his daughter asking.

"In two weeks. I'll be the supervisor of my own department, and I'm going to have my own office. They're giving me a very good raise."

His wife turned to him as she put the last of the groceries away. "Well, Shoukry, aren't you glad? I got promoted today."

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In the dream, he was a young boy just coming out of the church. The sun was hazy that day, relieving the usual heavy heat of the summer months. It must have been after his father died since his mother was wearing black. She was talking to one of his aunts, and they walked together ahead of him. While kicking a small stone and following its path, he spotted the round worn *piaster*. Just as he picked it up, he saw a woman selling the bread and went towards her, stretching out his hand with the coin. Smiling, the woman handed him the bread and spoke some words of blessing. He heard his mother calling and began to run. While running, he looked

down to see the *orban*, but there was only air between where his fingers were clutching. He woke with a small scream stuck in his throat. Still expecting to see the bread, he looked but found nothing except his fingers in the same position as in the dream.

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It was after having the dream that it became difficult for him to press the elevator buttons with his right hand. He would reach for them, but his fingers refused to separate, and his arm wanted to remain secured to his side. Now he had to turn his body slightly sideways so he could press with his left hand.

"How are you feeling, Shoukry? Maybe you should see a doctor. You don't look too well."

People's stares began to bother him, and sometimes he would begin to explain about the craving, about how the *orban* had disappeared. But before he could seek out all the words, the person would get off the elevator, leaving his words half-formed.

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One day, another craving came over him. Strong and overpowering like the smell of vinegar, the taste of *koshari* settled on his lips. His mother would make it during Lent when they could only eat what didn't come from an animal. Rice, lentils, and pasta with a few chickpeas and the spiced, almost tart tomato sauce, but most of all the thin, crisp-fried onions he always

demanded more of. The taste kept scratching at his mouth until he almost went frantic stretching his tongue for it.

It had to be here, somewhere close. If only he could get out of the elevator, he would find it.

The beeps calling the elevator down stung at his ears, but he kept going up, up to the very top where the tourists went, in one movement that felt like could be flying, until finally the elevator stopped flat with a drop. He put the key in to keep the door open and stepped out.

The sun's brightness flooded his eyes and he squinted sharply to be able to see. A gust of wind came around him, and he smelled dust and heat, but no *koshari*. He sniffed harder, but the smell was gone. He walked to the railing and looked over the Boston skyline, buildings sprouting out of the ground as if they were ancient trees. He wondered at the elevators in these buildings, if all of them had someone like him who pressed their buttons and ran them through the length of the day. His eyes focused again on the breadth of the landscape, and he began to walk around, keeping his head turned to see the city revolving.

When he returned to his original spot, he could hear the buzzing and hard pounding coming up from the elevator. The banging increased in his ears as he walked back inside. There was the elevator standing with its door open. He stared at it then looked around and saw the neon EXIT sign. He opened the door and began to descend the stairs. His feet were sluggish, but as the spiral continued, he gained speed and a rhythm guided his feet down till it became a repetitive tapping. He held the railing with his left hand and felt the smoothness of it slide against his palm. Soon there was only a swirl of white from the walls and the tapping as he wound around unhinged from the ground all the way down.

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A large crowd of people had gathered including at least two groups of tourists. His head was still going around, and it was difficult to keep his feet still once he was standing in one spot. He saw a man hurrying towards him, his face red and his arms gesticulating wildly. He must calm him down, he thought.

"It's all right, Mahmoud. Don't worry. I'll put the paperwork through, and you'll be able to build those apartments in no time. Just be a little patient. There's no need..."

But the man was now shaking him and screaming, "You bastard, you foreign idiot! What do you think you're doing? Going up there for a breath of fresh air! Where the hell is the elevator? What do you think this is, an amusement park?"

Shoukry tried to understand, to answer him, until a woman came up and began to pull the man back.

"Stop shaking him," she said. "Can't you see he's crazy? He's not even speaking English."