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The Map of Love: chapter 8

The English is followed by chapter 8 from the Arabic translation

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

I looked down at the trees in the garden below. I wondered, if they were washed, if someone just washed them down with a hose, how long would it take for the dust to settle again? I wondered how old the trees were: we

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How far gone are you?" I ask.

"I'm not sure."

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

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

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

"Praise God," she sighs.

"What does 'Am Madani say?"

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

"God provides," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tahiyya's eyes wide

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

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

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

"But?"

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's really useful."

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell me what you come up with."

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

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

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

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

"How's Anna doing?" Isabel asks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Will she? Find it?"

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

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

"Yes, complete