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THE UNSEEN

PREFACE
TEREZIA FILIP



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THE BEGINNING

Mohamed Youssef Al-Baghdadi
Damietta, 1995

I finished my studies at the Commercial Secondary School in Mansoura, then was conscripted into military service. A few months before the end of my term, my elder brother Mahmoud passed away, leaving me with the burden and responsibility of caring for three orphans, the eldest, just past his tenth year. His death added poverty upon poverty, hardship upon hardship, to a life already narrow and weary.

My service ended around the time of the Liberation of Kuwait in 1991. I did not take part in that war in truth; I never even saw any of the units said to have participated in it.

Emptiness, as our father Sheikh Abu Ismail, the imam of the mosque, used to teach us, can be either a blessing or a curse, especially in youth. For me, it was neither. The emptiness that followed that period was filled with emptiness itself – the same hollow echoing within itself. Nothing at all was happening, especially after all my efforts to find a steady job had failed.

My village, Al-Mayasira, which belongs to the city of Zarqa, lies closer to Mansoura – dense and teeming – than to Damietta. Its size matches its wealth, born from the vigor of its people and their generations, long devotion to craft and trade. That reality – or, more precisely, that predicament – between the two cities forced me to seek a decent living in barren, unyielding soil that rarely produced opportunities except by miracle.

Work in Mansoura was hard and demanding. Young men flocked there from every direction to study or to work for crumbs. The promising opportunities were few and most required a university degree, while the commercial diploma I carried was met with condescension.

As for Damietta, work there demanded special skills in furniture and woodworking – skills I had missed learning in my youth. Even the few prospects that appeared soon buried themselves alive,

undone by the cost of commuting daily between my village and the city, which made any earnings meager at best. Employers there imposed long hours for a meager wage – not enough to cover food, sleep, and travel.

Once, I worked as a salesman in a furniture showroom on Al-Galaa Street, in the heart of Damietta itself – thanks to a recommendation from one of my teachers. But the owner fired me after just two weeks because he saw me smoking inside the shop, as if my lonely cigarette would turn his showroom to ashes.

Another time, a fabric merchant in Al - Sherbasy Street let me go after only a few days when he noticed that the women who frequented the shop preferred to talk to me, perhaps because of my youth. He paid me for the days I had worked, doubled the amount, and said: “May God ease your way, son. This is a place of livelihood – such things won’t do here.” I don’t know what passed through that senile old man’s mind. God is my witness and my defender.

After that, I heard nothing but polite refusals from shopkeepers – as if they had all, at the same moment, received word that one merchant had dismissed me, and another had grown weary of me. It was as though they had struck an unspoken pact among themselves never to hire me again. So, to pass the time – or perhaps for some reason I couldn’t name – I found myself earning my bread off the tales of the Kuwait War! I would gather some of the villagers at night after the evening prayer, whether in the mosque courtyard, in one of their guest rooms, or even beside the village square. There, I would tell them stories – spun entirely from imagination – tales of heroism and valor, by the light of burning firewood that flared and faded with the wind. Behind it all came the sounds of water boiling in large kettles, and the gentle clinking of spoons against glasses of strong tea, half – filled with sugar.

At first, the stories were short. But as time went on, they grew longer, deeper, more intricate. Repetition, after all, brings mastery – that’s what we were taught as children.

In one of those stories, I told them that I had refused to face the Iraqis during the liberation of Kuwait City – that I had even been sent to military trial for it. Yet I neither flinched nor trembled, for I told the military judge in a firm voice that the Prophet’s saying declares: “When two Muslims meet with their swords, both the killer and the killed are in the Fire.” The judge, deeply impressed by my words, ordered the case dismissed at once and assigned me only to guard duties with the battalion, far from any fighting with the Iraqis.

I saw in the listeners’ eyes a gleam of admiration and a proud

smile for the son of their village – and so I went on and told it even better. I told them that I had once seen an American soldier slap an Iraqi prisoner in one of the camps. I waited until evening, when it was time for dinner at the *mess hall*, then approached him quietly and slapped the back of his neck – a thunderous slap that drew the attention of every American and non-American soldier eating and drinking there. My slap knocked him off balance and sent him sprawling to the ground despite his strong, muscular body.

Necks craned, eyes froze in their sockets, waiting to see how the scene would unfold between us. Then his massive comrades – the ones they called *Marines* – rushed toward me to strike me, but some of my Egyptian fellows stood ready to defend me. I shouted at them at the top of my voice: “Hold your ground! Stay where you are!” I didn’t want anyone to get involved – no one could tell how things might end.

I told them that at that very moment, calm and strength descended upon me from the heavens, as though an unseen angel had wrapped me in his wings. I faced the Americans alone and cried out: “Man to man! Let any one of you step forward, strip to the waist, and face me here – before everyone, in front of the mess hall!”

Before the eyes of all present, the Americans hesitated at first, then agreed, one after another. I made sure to strike them hard: first with slaps and kicks, without insults, then to flip each one face-down and – pardon the expression – expose his backside before the crowd of Egyptians, Americans, Britons, and others, until shouts of laughter and admiration filled the air.

I explained to my eager audience, their ears wide and their necks craning forward, that the hand which wields the axe is stronger and sturdier than the one trained to lift weights in air – conditioned gyms. They laughed and applauded with delight, and cries of “*Allahu Akbar!*” and pride rose high for the brave hero, the son of their village.

I also told them how I had helped about nine Iraqi prisoners, maybe more, escape from the American unit opposite our camp. I said I had crept in by night, held the American guards at gunpoint, and helped the Iraqis steal an armored American transport truck to flee in. Not only that – I had even stolen food and drink from the Americans’ supply depot and handed it to the fugitives to help them survive their escape across the desert.

And that an American female soldier had once been so taken with me during a guard shift that she offered herself to me, but I, of course, refused and said: “God forbid.”

Those stories were born in the moment, bursting with their own joy. They delighted the simple souls of my fellow villagers – most of them, like me, had no more than a middle – level commercial education. Few had ever traveled abroad, and fewer still had dared to dream of it, except perhaps to Iraq for work or to Saudi Arabia for *'umrah*.

At that time, the name of Iraq was on every villager's tongue, after millions of Egyptians had gone there in the eighties and returned with the fruits of their labor. The houses were rebuilt with red brick; the televisions turned from black – and white to color; clothes changed, food changed – even the way people spoke changed.

The spontaneous sympathy for Iraq – that country which had eased, for so many, the harshness and austerity of neglected rural Egypt – made me go on, repeating and embellishing my tales. I needed those looks of admiration mingled with gratitude. Even if some of them did not believe me, and doubted all or part of my story, in the end they had no choice but to respond, swept along by the enthusiasm of the crowd eager to listen.

I was a storyteller by nature. And through repetition, I perfected the craft: I learned how to modulate my voice, when to fall silent to invite applause, how to shape the plot with timing, how to pause – just long enough – to let the clapping flow.

The people longed to hear the story of “the hero”. They sat as still as statues, holding their breath, united in the figure of that hero – especially since he was one of their own. Perhaps they missed the old tales of Abu Zayd al-Hilali and Adham al-Sharqawi – those champions who once stood for weakness against power, and poverty against wealth.

The amusing part was not just how passionately they followed the story, but how they began to take part in it. Later, they would retell it themselves, adding their own flourishes – and even scolding me as if to challenge my courage: “But Youssef, you should've slapped that American twice, not once! If I were you, I'd have humiliated him in front of everyone!” And so it went, night after night – laughter, warmth, the intimacy of souls gathered together, shoulder to shoulder, spirit to spirit.

They were all like that – all except one university student who sometimes joined us, smiling as he listened, a smile whose meaning I did not understand at first. Later, I guessed it was the smile of someone who knew that what he was hearing was nonsense – or perhaps simply an appreciation for the art of the story itself, for its form rather than its truth. I avoided meeting his eyes more than once, but one

evening he surprised me – he held my hand a little longer than usual as we parted.

– Youssef, how are you? Still looking for work? Aunt Umm Mohammed told me you finished your military service years ago and have been searching for a job. My father, Sheikh Abu Ismail, mentioned you wanted something in Cairo, not in Zarqa or Damietta, is that right?

– Yes, that’s right, sir, I said. I’d take any job, anything at all – whatever would help me feed my brother’s orphaned children. Life’s hard here, sir. There’s no job left in all of Zarqa that’s worth the effort anymore.

He smiled that knowing smile of someone who can see the secrets and depths of things, then leaned the back of his head against the wall as if pretending to be lost in deep thought. He smiled again – this time a hopeful smile, full of pride and self importance – and nodded, as if to say “I’ve found it.”

– What do you think, Youssef, about acting? Would you like to try?

– Acting? Oh no, please don’t mock me, Mr. Khaled. I’m a peasant. There’s no need to make fun of me. We’re poor folk relying on God’s mercy, not like you university types.

– Poor? Not at all, Youssef. You’re fit for it, you’d be very good.

– Mr. Khaled, forgive me, but I’m looking for bread to feed my brother’s orphaned children. By God, please don’t joke with me about this - joking isn’t proper when it comes to the hardships of the poor.

He laughed a loud, condescending laugh – the kind bullies use to show their superiority – then, in a low voice as if revealing a grave secret, told me he was the head of the drama troupe at the Faculty of Commerce, Cairo University. He spoke of that position as if it were important, for the Faculty of Commerce contained thousands of students, which had given him connections with several directors and people in the arts. He said he would do me a favor: introduce me to a director friend so I could take an extra role in his new film. The job, he promised, paid well enough and would at least guarantee a meal on every workday. All I would have to do was go to Al-Ahram Studio at the end of Al-Haram Street and obey the director’s instructions, nothing more.

The unexpected offer arrived in a lean season like an icicle of water falling on the tongue of a thirsty wanderer in a barren desert with no crops, no water, no shade. I was doing nothing but sitting with my mother, caring for my deceased brother’s children, and farming

two karats of land my mother tended as if it were an immense fortune – the hidden treasure, the Holy of Holies, untouchable by man or jinn. My tireless attempts to persuade her to sell them and use the money to open a small shop in the village had failed. That was outright impossible, and I could never wrong her or betray the orphans' rights, while I, in the prime of my youth, had nothing – no craft, no skills, not even female acquaintances. Who would befriend a poor unemployed young man in a village where everyone knows everyone and spies on one another by night and by day?

The truth is, I never liked this Mr. Khaled. He always seemed arrogant; he didn't mix with us and took pride in his education, his clothes, and his haircut for no good reason, though he, like us, had almost nothing and his father was a peasant. It was a hateful vanity and conceit. Had I gone to university, I would surely have been better than him and dozens like him. Still, I decided to play along with his offer, perhaps, just perhaps, the barren shrubs might finally bear fruit.

Things went according to the agreed plan. On the appointed day and at the appointed hour I sat by the outer gate of Al-Ahram Studio beside an elderly man who must have been past sixty. Dreams had assailed me in recent days – as if Aladdin's lamp had released a genie who told me my wishes were granted: "At your service... your servant stands before you." Perhaps not long from now I would be a match for Nour El - Sherif, Hussein Fahmy, or Ahmed Zaki. Perhaps I would act alongside Naglaa Fathy, Mervat Amin, Yousra and the rest. To me they would be colleagues – friends I would respect and admire. Life, as Suad Husni once said, would turn pink. Dreams that would make even the fiercest men drool.

I snapped back from those rosy daydreams to find a poor, badly rolled cigarette offered to me by the old man at my side. I looked closely at him and saw that time had carved hard furrows across his face – deep grooves split by a hammer and chisel like those used by carpenters in the carving of *awima* on Damietta furniture – each one telling many hidden memories in the coils of his mind, revealed in his sunken eyes.

– What's your name, son?

– My name is Youssef, father.

– And what brings you here?

– To make a living. My relative Mr. Khaled recommended me to the director for an extra role. Don't you know, father, what exactly I'll be doing?

– Of course I know, son. Everything in that job, I know well.

Long ago I had a special place. I was a senior extra; I used to appear in films and kiss.

Thus began Umm Khairat's uncle's speech, then he went on to explain that there are ranks among extras, like steps on a ladder. At the bottom rung are those who take the slaps and kicks in place of the hero, especially if they resemble him in features and build. Above them is a higher tier and with it a higher wage, the one who might get to say a line or do something small, like hand over documents or open a car door. Then there is the tier above that and what can be said of that tier? It is the highest of all: those lucky enough to belong to it might, by chance, be allowed to kiss the leading lady or perform scenes of sexual violence – with all the closeness, contact, and tearing of a heroine's clothes that dramatic necessity may demand – until the valiant hero arrives to rescue her from the villain's clutches.

My dreams shrank inside me when I heard his discouraging words. I reassured myself that this was normal – even expected. All the great stars had begun this way; even Adel Imam himself started out as an extra. The beginning is always hard, and I had to endure it. I had talent – Mr. Khaled himself had said so – and that, I told myself, was enough.

I stood in a long, uneven line. A man approached us – the director, or so I thought – but it turned out he was just one of his assistants, and not an important one either. He looked over at us quickly, indifferently, as if to give everyone the impression of his supposed importance.

I expected his eyes to focus on me personally – I was, after all, the most fit and the most handsome among them. There was an old man well past seventy, a bald man in his forties with a sagging belly, a woman in her fifties without a trace of beauty, and a frail young woman of twenty whose pale face and skin spoke of severe anemia. He glanced again with arrogance, then said loudly, "*Majami!* – *Extras!*" and walked away without the slightest backward glance.

I felt a light sweat form on my skin from the heat of the studio – the equipment, the workers, the lights filling the place with scorching warmth – and from the director's shouting, with or without reason.

A long – haired young man stepped forward, holding a large envelope. He took out some banknotes and began handing them to those standing in line. When he reached me, he gave me a quick side glance – the kind police officers give during a checkpoint, scanning you from head to toe, just to remind you of your lowly place.

– First time?