

BASMA **a** L-SHARIF

Philistine

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COMMISSIONED WRITER ON:
CANTATA | CADENZA | CRESCENDO, POCO A POCO

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مفردات
Mophradat

a Philistine

MOVEMENTS

PRELUDE.....the opening act, establishing what is to come

ALLEGRO.....a fast moving tempo

Cantata

a piece that involves singing by one or several voices and is accompanied by music

ANDANTE.....a somewhat slow moving tempo

Cadenza

an elaborate solo displaying virtuoso brilliance

SCHERZO.....a fast moving composition

Crescendo, poco a poco

a slow, gradual increase in volume over time

FINALE.....the last concluding movement, ending the piece



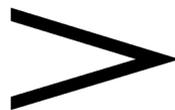
eighth rest



fermata



whole rest



diminuendo



PRELUDE

At the end of 1980, Sabreen began working in a furniture shop on Hoda Shaarawy Street, beside the giant Victoria. The absence of the letter “V” in Arabic rendered the unfortunate pronunciation of the shop as: FAC-TOE-RIA, written in phonetic Arabic above the Latin. The heirs of this shop were always found sitting outside on precariously small wooden chairs, resting the weights of their massive heads and broad shoulders a top full, round bellies. They gave off the same dusty, useless, cumbersome impression of permanence as their furniture pieces.

The Factoeria heirs were paternal brothers who found themselves burdened with the shop after their father deserted his first wife, then his second, and left for England. He had been an absent father who spoiled these wives financially yet starved them emotionally. The brothers grew into habits of lazy ineptitude in their respective homes, and eventually inherited their father's only investment: an overstuffed, rent-controlled furniture shop. For years, the brothers survived on purchases made by the occasional government office or embassy in need of a couch or chandelier, or a wealthy Saudi furnishing his summer flat to look like a room in the Palace of Versailles. When, decades later, gated compounds rife with barren homes emerged in the desert, business boomed.

Even if they had had other passions worth pursuing, the brothers were obliged to keep year-round vigil over Factoeria to secure their livelihoods. They boasted about their 100 percent handmade furniture, crafted in exotic wood and only wood and imported from France. The items themselves were impractical Louis XIV imitations; marble topped tables, bergères chairs with inlaid tortoise shell, ebonized armoires of carved wood and commodes in mother of pearl. On a round table of gold-leaf finish and ivory trim right at the centre of the shop, they kept a macaque in a little cage.

The brothers were never curious to understand why people paid an arm and a leg for this kind of furniture decade after decade; it seemed to them as permanent as the changing of seasons. But for Malak, Sabreen's boss and the owner of the much more modest furniture shop next door, this was cause for relentless frustration.

Malak commissioned artisans from the al-Darb al-Ahmar district in Cairo to reconstruct chests of drawers, beds, and stools in the style they had been made during the Pharaonic era. Sourced from natural rattan fibers, banana palm leaves and bamboo, these pieces were stained gold and black, contained delicately carved lotus flowers, and stood on legs resembling those of a gazelle. They were sturdy, simple and elegant. Malak paid the artisans well, priced her furniture

reasonably, and secured a discount with a shipping company managed by her uncle. But the only people to ever seriously wander into her shop were tourists who bought items they could carry back to France or Germany or the UK, or else it was overseas Egyptians.

Sabreen took the job the summer after finishing her university studies at Cairo University. She had wanted to study veterinary sciences but was dissuaded by a particularly surly professor who suggested she was better suited for architecture, which led her to interior design, which led her to Malak's furniture shop.

Malak and Sabreen got along well; they were both content to occupy spaces for hours without saying much of anything. Malak gave Sabreen small duties that she enjoyed, such as retouching carvings or restraining pieces that had started to fade. Sabreen could play whatever music she wanted on a record player Malak had brought in as decoration, and she could smoke cigarettes as long as no customers were around -- which turned out to be 90 percent of the time. Like others her age, Sabreen was drawn to the kind of western Pop songs that had slowly encroached on traditional Arabic music. Her favourites included Diana Ross and Lionel Richie's Endless Love and Physical by Olivia Newton-John. She sang along to Queen's Another One Bites the Dust flawlessly, even without any knowledge of the English language. Occasionally, they would listen to Samira Said, whom Malak also had a soft spot for. A few times, right before locking up for the night, the pair relished in playing Dalida's Je Suis Malade and singing along melodramatically.

Otherwise, Malak mostly kept to herself. She spent hours on the phone with relatives, entangled in family dramas from the comfort of a large green chair in the display window. As if delivering a performance to a careless audience, Malak would raise her voice and wave her arms around, all the while making eye contact with an invisible other.

Youssef was looking for a first piece of furniture to put in his new downtown apartment when he paid his first visit to Malak's shop. As the sun started to set, giving the display a golden glow, Malak looked up from the accounting books she was reorganizing in the storeroom. As though an alarm had just gone off, she detected Youssef's palpable attraction to Sabreen.

Malak had picked up on the involuntary draw that Sabreen caused in both men and women; her proximity exuded a warmth with the quality of an autumn sun. Her eyes had narrow openings and were widely set apart, allowing strangers to linger over the numerous fine jet-black lashes that decorated their outer edges like ornaments. The negative space between her prominent eyebrows introduced the bridge of a long fine nose whose tip was not so much turned up as pointing forward. When she smiled, it looked as though she were sunning her face.

Youssef found himself asking question after question about the only desk he spotted in the shop. ***Does it come with a chair? Is that a lotus engraving? Did the pharaohs use desks? Are you a writer too, miss? Did I get your name?*** Malak swept in to ask how he would like to pay for his item, and if he would like it delivered. Feeling slightly swindled, Youssef handed over a bundle of cash and arranged a pick up date that Sabreen carefully wrote down in the calendar book beside the register. As she wrote down his name, Youssef found his palms sweating. The numbers that confirmed his return to the shop formed a powerful target, already pulling at his body and mind. Sabreen just stood there silent, blinking unhurriedly, as if awaiting Youssef's next move. He stared at her hands, now idly holding the pen. For a few moments, he became convinced he had lost all the words he had collected. He climbed into her silence briefly before dramatically escaping the shop.

When he returned a week later, with his car and an elaborate plan to seduce Sabreen, he found only Malak. Youssef went home with a void in the pit of his stomach and a desk he didn't

want carefully wrapped in a thick brown paper and adorned at the top by a stamp that read: Naranj.

He sat cross-legged for a long time on the red carpet on the floor of his unfurnished flat, wondering what had gone wrong. Before resigning to sleep, Youssef decided to unwrap his new desk, still compulsively re-playing from memory the series of knowing glances he had shared with Sabreen on his first visit, followed by her absence on the date she had elected for his return. His heart pounded as he absentmindedly ripped more and more of the wrapping. He imagined himself returning to the shop and asking Sabreen to go for a drink at his favorite bar, around the corner on Talaat Harb. In the middle of this hallucination, he discovered a small inscription hidden at the base of the table: a delicately carved explicit drawing of a man taking a woman from behind while pulling her hair, signed: Sabreen.

Youssef couldn't sleep that night, and only half of the following one, and finally decided he should wait until he could get at least two full nights of rest before going back to Naranj. It was not his habit to become anxious around someone he was interested in. In fact, he often failed to recognize when someone was attracted to him, and even failed to acknowledge his own attractions. He never suspected why this friend or that kept such close company, performed un-requested favors, or brought him souvenirs from trips abroad. He often chased after misjudged first-impressions that landed him in the beds of those who wanted him to be an extroverted entertainer, a ferocious and confident lover; anything but who he was.

On the day he decided to return for Sabreen, Youssef calmed his excitement by taking a long swim in the athletic club of his childhood neighborhood, followed by an off-the-menu request for warm milk with cinnamon. When he finally arrived in Naranj, Sabreen looked like she was expecting him, although it had already been nearly two weeks since they'd met. She did not make his unexplained return to the shop any easier by asking, for example, if something was wrong with his desk but rather stood, half leaning on a tall stool, smiling

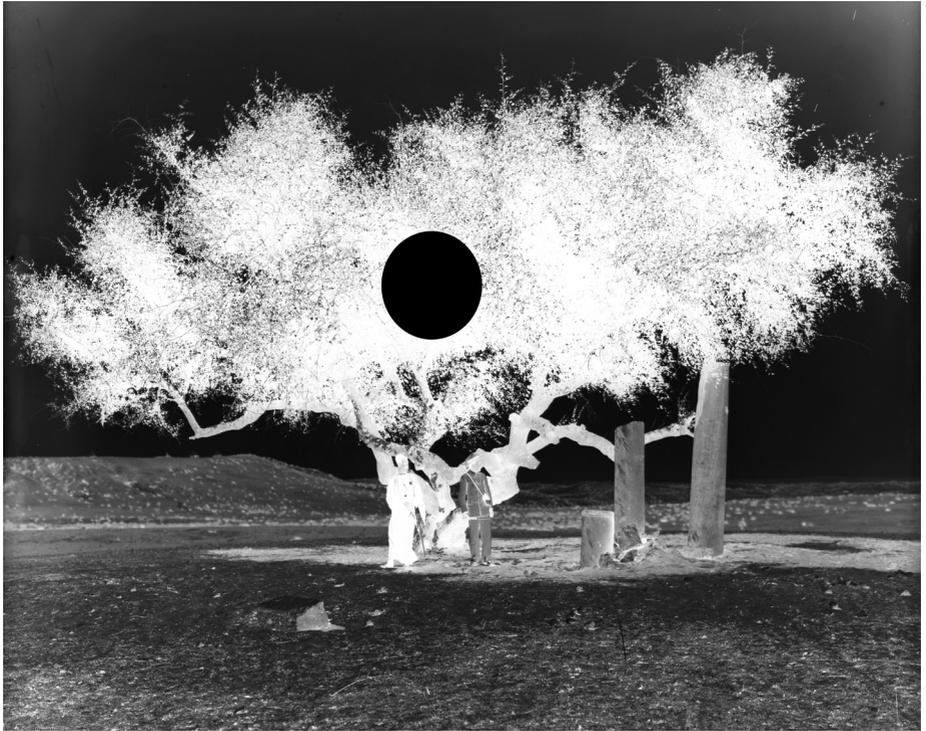
while holding his gaze. Just as dusk was falling, Youssef realized that Malak was nowhere in sight. As though it had been pre-arranged, Sabreen and Youssef slipped into the storeroom, closed the door, and quickly began undressing themselves.

This is how it came to be that when Malak was absent and Youssef visited Sabreen, they would find themselves entangled in ways they had only ever imagined. Though they were not doing anything particularly new or different, there was something that happened in the dark, without words, that neither had experienced before. The physical world around them dissipated, giving way to arms and tongues and breathing and unimaginable pleasure. It was as if they could only see one another in the dark.

Outside the storeroom, Sabreen was reserved, almost cold, which made Youssef feel that even the most banal or mundane of personal questions were impossible to ask. These questions, which he practiced all morning on the days they met, sounded crass and foreign when he spoke them in her presence. Despite treading around their interactions as carefully as possible, he occasionally asked a simple question that received a disingenuous answer -- leaving him to wonder why he was making small talk at all.

If Malak happened to be there, Youssef had no choice but to keep purchasing superfluous items for his flat. Sabreen continued to inscribe everything with drawings they would replicate in the storeroom. This went on for what was left of the summer, into the autumn, and then the winter. Over time, they delved deeper into each other's bodies and histories.

Youssef was a writer who had lost both of his parents in a fatal car crash, and Sabreen an only child raised in Alexandria. They did not share the same taste in music -- Youssef preferred Sheikh Imam and Sayed Darwish. He liked to listen to his music with a cup of tea and many cigarettes in the early morning or late at night, but had quit smoking the year before. He found it caused him to linger too long in cafes,



fruitlessly eavesdropping on the conversations around him -- to the point that he had altogether stopped working on the book he was writing.

Youssef had found his calling not too long before his encounter with Sabreen. Having been raised by middle class intellectuals who believed in public education and taught Arabic literature at Cairo University, Youssef himself believed in academia. As a teenager, he saw his world through a different lens and felt betrayed. Why hadn't his parents told him that not everyone could read? Or that the world he lived in was full of people who had stopped reflecting on the changing conditions of their country?

Youssef witnessed the Bread Riots when he was on holiday in Aswan, and became infected by a fury he had never experienced in the sheltered world of ideas his parents and their academic friends lived in. With the conviction of someone who imagines themselves to be the first to discover disparity, Youssef resolved he would use language itself to mend the gap between the world that existed inside of books and the life people lived on the streets. He promptly returned to Cairo and laid the skeleton for what he imagined would be the most controversial novel ever written. It would disrupt those who were most comfortable from their slumber. And then he met Sabreen.

When he wasn't visiting Sabreen in the shop, he reflected upon their interactions and distinguished a strange quality about them. He had trouble remembering what happened, what they said to each other -- even at times, what she looked like. He would find large voids where neither sight nor sound existed. Time seemed to pass slowly before he would see her, and then suddenly disappear when they were together. It didn't matter if it was for half an hour or a couple of hours; it always seemed the same amount of time to him. When he would walk back towards Bab al-Louq after their encounters, languidly and in a daze, all the encircling sounds were muffled beneath his every footstep.

Youssef and Sabreen were oblivious to Malak's suspicions. She had started to notice that the storeroom was in a state of disarray and had a strange humid quality to it on the morning of an eve in which Sabreen was tasked with closing the shop. Malak also calculated a duplication in Youssef's purchases: another mirror, two more coffee tables, a third and fourth lamp. As she packed the items that Youssef begrudgingly bought the week Sabreen abruptly gone to Alexandria, Malak stumbled across the latest inscription. It was a kind of acrobatic pose between two people around a member of mythical proportions that made it unclear whose body parts belonged where or to whom. Outraged, she ran out of her shop and into Factoeria, exploding with details of her discovery, her brightly flushed cheeks betraying a mix of rage and embarrassment. The Factoeria brothers convulsed in simultaneous laughter, sending clouds of dust up into the air as their watermelon-sized bellies jiggled up and down. Slapping their knees and shaking their heads, they proclaimed in false sympathy:

ya nhar eswed
ya lahwi
eh da eh da eh da

When the brothers asked her to tell them the story one more time, the codes and euphemisms Malak used made them burst with laughter to the point of actual tears. Seeing Malak grow more and more exasperated, the men made an effort to convince her that the situation was a blessing for the shop: to have such fertile passion in the backroom where she kept her accounting books was sure to bring her great wealth!

In her frustration, Malak hadn't noticed that a couple, standing in a corner of the shop and dressed in fine silks, had turned to witness the entire scene. They took the scene in with seriousness and concern. The perfumed man had striking salt and pepper hair, held in place by a sleek sheen of gel. The woman wore a long string of pearls against her slightly bronzed skin. Her thick-heeled shoes made her a good 10 cm taller than her husband. The woman stood a few steps ahead of the man,

intentionally blocking his view. A palpable distaste between them made it impossible to imagine that they had ever been bound by anything more than shared bank accounts and generations of family names.

In very broken English, the woman interjected:

iks-cuze moi, iz evrising okay?

Annoyed, one of the brothers started to half-heartedly relay the story, but the woman impatiently cut him short as well, turning to Malak.

Madame. My name iz Laetitia de la Roche, could aye possibly see zees enscripshion

After entering Malak's shop to see the erotic inscriptions for herself, Laetitia paid, in cash, triple the price for the latest of Youssef's furniture: a small night table, a coat hanger, and a serving tray. She told Malak that she would be purchasing the rest of Youssef's furniture, and that she would like it shipped directly from his flat to Paris. She took Sabreen's number, and called her as soon as she returned to her hotel room overlooking the Nile. Sabreen divulged, with neither hesitation nor shame, the intimate details of how she and Youssef passed their time in the storage closet, as Laetitia gathering the details into a forensic file:

you say he lick-ed your neck n'est ce pas ? while eez -and waz ware ?

It was in Paris that these details would get twisted and turned upside down to render Sabreen into a peasant girl with insatiable lust escaping the moralistic grasp of cultural circumstance, and Youssef an undiscovered genius about to publish a book that would radicalize Egypt's working class. Laetitia would eventually open a shop on Rue des Saints-Pères. With Malak as a newfound business partner, they would commission Sabreen to reproduce, on demand, her secret inscriptions onto furniture that was sold to the extensive de la Roche

circle of friends and family.

Malak's furniture infested salons across Paris and the South of France, eventually making their way into second and third homes owned by wealthy families with property in Réunion, Martinique, and Tahiti. Malak turned the storeroom into an artist's studio and fixed it with bright light bulbs, while encouraging Sabreen's drawings with the dryness of a school teacher. She made sure to communicate that she would be the sole owner of the key to that room from that day forward. Amused, Sabreen began to exaggerate the delicately carved scenarios to include animals and inanimate objects.

It was around this time that Sabreen began to sneak into Youssef's apartment: a three-bedroom with a large central salon that was just as bare as when he moved in. They would make love, very slowly, on a red rug that was precisely large enough for the two of them, staring at each other the entire time without saying a word. Here, outside the airless storeroom, a thrilling intimacy was building between them. Both knew it was happening, felt it to be happening, but neither put words to it. Sometimes they smiled at each other for no reason, resting their eyes against one another for several minutes, warmth growing in the contact of their skin. With open eyes, they would take turns secretly breathing each other in. They told stories about their pasts, spoke of failed loves, and sometimes ruptured the soft air they were nestled in with an insult or a mean joke. It would take till dawn to mend the injury, with thrusts and bites and lips pressed so firmly against the other's that they would emerge sore and a bit wobbly in the joints, their heart rates beating irregularly into the following day. Meanwhile Laetitia, infatuated with the image of Sabreen she had constructed back in Paris, began to arrange for a tourist visa to import Sabreen to Paris the way she had Malak's furniture.

Youssef, who was in the midst of his own awakening, having lost all of his furniture for a price that meant he could finally focus on completing his book, suddenly found himself saying a bewildered goodbye to Sabreen. She promised him she

would return to Cairo when her tourist visa expired, three months later. Everything changed when she realized, two months after settling into her temporary home, that she was carrying Youssef's child.

She received letters from Youssef detailing the development of his book and his obsession with finding a publisher who would not censor the ideas he was committing to paper. He believed wholeheartedly that his fiction novel would expose government corruption.

As the child grew inside of her, Sabreen decided that she would never be able to leave Paris. She was embarrassed that she had not thought more carefully about this unexpected fetus that she had kept mostly to evade the loneliness of adjusting to her new surroundings. As she began to feel it move inside her, she suddenly understood the responsibility laying ahead of her. In Paris, she could raise her child without a father; if she returned to Egypt, they would all suffer. She decided she would give birth to her daughter and go back to school to become a veterinarian, as she had always wanted, and would secure a life for herself and her child that would not burden Youssef -- who seemed to be living on a different planet than the one they had shared. And so she began constructing a lie, detailed in two versions of the same letter, of why she had decided to stay in France. One was to Youssef, and the second was to the only remaining living family members she had in Alexandria. These were distant relatives of her father's whom she had very little contact with when her parents were still alive, and even less after they passed away -- along with an elderly foreign woman who had by then become senile. Sabreen's relatives were horrified to learn that she was carrying the child of a man she was not married to, nonetheless one she refused to identify to them, and in keeping of their habit to provide her very little in terms of love and a lot by way of moral judgment, they earnestly threatened to erase her name from history if she ever dared to step foot on the continent ever again.

The letter that Youssef received sounded foreign, as though

it had been transcribed from one language into another by a stranger on Sabreen's behalf. A letter in which crucial details had been lost in translation.

I'm writing you from a little red house, near the coast of Brittany. I've been here most of the summer.

I spent the beginning of my time in Paris, with Laetitia, making drawings like I use to make for you. She said I didn't have to stay in Paris. I could work from here, where it's calmer. We've arranged for Malak to ship my belongings from Cairo, as it seems I should stay here for a little while longer. Maybe a lot longer. I think I've come to accept that this is the way life has to be, and that I was clinging onto a useless fantasy of returning to Cairo. I'm writing you all of this because something completely unexpected happened. I fell in love. I think our distance from each other created the space for this to happen, and now, for the first time I see that I have to devote myself only to him. I understand for the first time how important it is to submit so fully to another human being. I never quite knew what it felt like to be needed and depended on by someone else so deeply, so fundamentally....

I don't know what to do about our interactions Youssef. I know that I will never forget you.

Youssef plunged himself head first into the completion of his novel, at times confusing the fervor of his political ideas with the passionate sting of disappointment Sabreen's departure had caused him. After completing his book, Youssef wrote one final letter to Sabreen. And then there was silence between them for 32 years, until a letter arrived from a publisher in Beirut announcing Youssef's accidental death.

In the span of time since Sabreen's departure to France, Youssef had struggled immensely to find a publisher for his book in Cairo. He eventually gave up looking, and then writing altogether, and instead used his small inheritance to start a writing program for adolescent youth in Cairo. There were

classes on the craft of composition and the skill of making books by hand. It was popular with youth of various backgrounds, and produced a healthy stash of books bound by their authors to fill the corridors of the crumbling villa in Garden City that housed the school.

While satisfied by the legacy that this school would go on to leave, Youssef carried around a strong sense of failure that seeped into all aspects of his life. He kept any flat he moved into meagerly furnished, and would occasionally stop by to see Malak, who had retired on the royalties her furniture produced in France. She had turned the shop into her apartment, fitting the vitrines with glass block windows for privacy. The storefront was a bright veranda where Youssef would on rare occasion share a tea or cinnamon milk with Malak, reminiscing about the same old stories until their drinks were cold.

Youssef would collect snippets about Sabreen's life from afar. He heard about the daughter he did not know was his, along with various anecdotes involving the animals Sabreen's clinic treated: the foal that had difficulty suckling its mother teat, the cats conjoined at birth, and so on. Feeding on short-lived pleasures, he fell into one affair after another, usually with married women. These encounters left him empty and allowed the taste of his story with Sabreen to linger for years. On some days, he felt as though he could return to the shop and slip into the back room of tongues, breath, and unimaginable pleasure.

Though she suffered quietly, a crippling anxiety slowly infected Sabreen's life. To survive, she busied herself with treating animals, who never questioned any of the life decisions she had made, such as raising her daughter in cohabitation with a much older man. He was a writer of children's stories, who used a typewriter long into the advent of computers. He provided a good home for Sabreen and her child, without judgment, in a small coastal town in Brittany and asked only for loyalty in return.

Sabreen had settled her life. Whereas Youssef, the publisher's letter revealed, was not only an only child, but also the child of only children, and therefore had no one else to bury him but his former lover. He remained in a kind of limbo even after his death.

Sabreen waited until she was at home alone to call the publisher: a Mr. Ayman AbdelNoor. In a soothing voice that caught her off guard, he explained that an Arabic literature student from the American University in Beirut had discovered Youssef's book on a visit to the writing school he had established in Cairo. She read the book in one continuous two-hour-long sitting and was so enthralled by it that she stole the book and brought it back to him in Beirut. More than 30 years after its completion, he would be the first publisher prepared to unabashedly offer Youssef's book a home.

Sabreen listened attentively as the story unfolded.

The book was just as relevant today as it had been when it was first written, if not more. Mr. Ayman AbdelNoor worked with partners in Cairo to organize a private book launch, to which they would invite the most distinguished of intellectuals. As plans for the reading and book signing developed, special attention was paid to keeping the event from becoming too public; the last chapter contained material that was sure to catch the attention of the censorship authorities. A few hundred copies of the book were printed in Beirut and brought over to Cairo in separate trips by a group of writers and students that worked at the publishing house.

What no one knew about the time and date secured for the launch was that authorities, though not the kind involved in censorship, were on high alert for another man. This man, who was the same age and height as Youssef, was linked to the 2008 riots in Mahalla.

The long awaited launch proved underwhelming. The event, made by invitation only, was held in the private apartment of a friend of Mr. Ayman AbdelNoor's near the Diplomatic Club

on Bustan street, in Downtown Cairo, and drew only a small fraction of those who had declared enthusiastic confirmation of their attendance. Mr. Ayman AbdelNoor's friend had designated his salon for the affair: a space large enough to fit at least 200 people. The organizers imagined a standing room only event with a wide swath of Cairo's intellectuals, activists and young poets. They had daydreamed the event as a revival, a renaissance even, but on the actual night, only 35 people showed up. These were retired academics and international Master's students visiting for a semester at the American University, with a smattering of the occasional son or daughter of a wealthy Egyptian. There was no trace of a middle class. Of those in attendance, about a third fell asleep during the reading and several scrolled through their phones mechanically.

Youssef slipped out, unnoticed, and decided to walk home in the pleasantly crisp air that had lingered from winter into spring. He wondered if his audience had fallen asleep because he was reading too much or too long from his book. For him, the words held the same fire as they did when he first wrote them some three decades prior. Political turmoil had grown more dire, societal disintegrations more pronounced, yet the audience was completely passive, as if his story had struck no cords. He was beginning to wonder what the point of that night, of anything, was when he suddenly felt himself being pulled into a narrow alleyway and shot point blank through the brain.

His body was discovered by a street sweeper early the next morning and quickly identified by Mr. Ayman AbdelNoor. The press rushed to proclaim Youssef a martyr and his book a wild success. Backorders were put in as soon as new shipments arrived. It was the foreign press that first revealed that Youssef's assassin had murdered him in a case of mistaken identity. A series of false tips were rather meant to lead to the character who had helped spread news of the Mahalla riots. As the government tried to cover up its mistake, the ensuing frenzy created a false hysteria around the book that made it wildly popular across the region.

Mr. Ayman AbdelNoor spent weeks desperately trying to track down anyone linked to Youssef. His only lead was the inscription on the dedication page: "Sabreen Naranj." No one connected to the writing school had ever heard of a Sabreen. It was the name of the now-closed furniture shop was the key that led Mr. Ayman AbdelNoor to Malak, who connected him to Laetitia, who gave him the address of Sabreen's little home on the coast of Brittany.

Our story begins here, on a morning without sun at the end of March 2018, when Sabreen recounted what you have just read -- in selective detail -- to her daughter, as they shared soft boiled eggs at a small, round kitchen table facing a modest garden, and charged her with making arrangements for her father's burial.

