

Excerpt from NO ONE SLEEPS IN ALEXANDRIA by Ibrahim Abdel Meguid

During the past few weeks, the city of Alexandria had built a number of open shelters in the poorer neighborhoods, but the inhabitants use them to relieve themselves. That forced the municipality to assign policemen to guard the shelters, and stopped the building process. The military court in Alexandria, under the emergency law, held a session to try a poor girl who was practicing prostitution without a license. She was fined three Egyptian pounds. A house in Karmuz was raided for being an unlicensed brothel. When the police surrounded the house, the owner shouted, "Where's Goebbels? Where's the Gestapo? I am Hitler!" But the valiant policemen were not fooled. They arrested him and gave him a sound beating on the back of his neck. The newspapers received a great number of letters asking about the beautiful Hollywood actress Norma Shearer and whether she would remarry after the death of her husband. The answer was in the affirmative, that the prospective husband was the actor George Raft, with whom she had a close relationship while her husband was still alive. People were also wary and cautious, as the Italians were a stone's throw away from Alexandria. That was why, when the air-raid sirens were heard several times in the daytime, they realized immediately that these were no longer drills, and when they saw anti-aircraft guns blasting away, they were certain that the time of drills was gone.

Strict orders were given to drivers to paint their headlights dark blue, after it was noticed that they had become lax about it in the past few months. People were instructed to paint their windows and to apply adhesive gauze strips vertically and horizontally to the glass from inside so that it would not fly around if shattered. People were also warned not to assemble on the streets during raids, and that all vehicles must come to a stop and passengers get out of the cars. Landlords were instructed to vacate the ground floors of their buildings and to convert them to shelters for people without access to the public shelters. People whose property was damaged as a result of the air raids were told to apply as soon as possible to the city of Alexandria to get new building materials—wood, steel, and cement—to repair the damage or to reinforce old buildings.

That night when Magd al-Din awoke, people heard the intermittent sound of the sirens and felt it was different from earlier ones. It was accompanied by unusual scurrying about and panic; there was more worry in their hearts. The daytime air raids the previous week had been shorter and had not caused any obvious casualties or damage. Tonight it seemed that real war would come to the sky over Alexandria.

It was midnight and very hot. A few people walking on Ban Street quickly went into the nearby houses and stood in the entrances. Two taxis stopped; one of the drivers did not leave his cab. One of those standing in the entrance of a nearby house looked at him and invited him to come in to be safe, but he said, "If the house falls on top of me, will I live?" It seemed to make sense. Those standing in the entrance looked at each other, but they could not violate the civil defense regulations. Standing in the entrance of a house was safer than being out on the street in the open.

Even though the moon was not full that night, it was bigger than a crescent, and it lit up the streets and betrayed everyone.

Khawaga Dimitri, his wife, and his two daughters had gone downstairs to Bahi's empty room and turned off the light. Lula had also joined them. In the confusion, she did not think to wear something to cover her shoulders and arms. Her husband did not join

her there. He was the solitary type. Besides, he lived on the first floor, so what good would it do him to move to another room? The truth was slightly different. As soon as the air-raid sirens sounded and the guns began blasting away, Lula shook with fear and moved closer to her husband, who hugged her tight and reached to take off her panties. She heard the footsteps and voices of Dimitri and his family and tried to break away from her husband, who held on and wanted to have sex right then and there. He thought that was the best way to overcome fear. She resisted him and also resisted her own desire, which lit up as soon as he touched her. She was thinking of what would happen if the sounds of their lovemaking were to reach the ears of Dimitri and his daughters. That was why as soon as she was able to break away from her husband, she dashed out and joined them in her long, white nightgown, her shoulders and arms lighting up the eyes of those standing in the dark.

Magd al-Din was guided in the dark by Dimitri's voice and did not let go of the hand of Zahra, who screamed as soon as she got in the room, "My God! Shawqiya is upstairs!" Magd al-Din had to go up to bring the little girl while Zahra stood with the others in Bahi's room.

The guns fell silent but the all-clear was not sounded. The silence lasted for a long time, and so did the people's patience. They all pricked up their ears to hear a slow, calm droning sound like rains coming from far away. The buzz grew in volume, as if swarms of killer bees were coming to the city, like a storm gathering on the horizon to overrun the desert, or armies of locusts homing in on green plants: ZZZZZZZ. That was sound of the German and Italian planes coming in for their targets in large formations, coming in close to the city and close to the ground. The sounds of bombs and explosions and the flashes of lightning passed quickly in front of the closed windows, penetrating the shutters and the glass.

"Open the windows so we'll know what's happening," Dimitri exclaimed. Magd al-Din was close to the window so he opened it. In front of them the night looked like daylight, white and red, and engulfed in a river of blue smoke. The sky was burning to the north and people on the opposite side of the street screamed as they saw the smoke. Magd al-Din, Dimitri, and the women watched the light come in from the north and burn bright into the south, like a sword brandished by a celestial warrior. Magd al-Din began to recite the beginning of Sura 36.

"Yasin, By the Wise Quran, verily you are among those sent on a straight path, a revelation of the Mighty, the Merciful, to warn a people whose forefathers had not been warned, so they are heedless. Already the word has proved true of most of them, for they are not believers. Verily

We have placed yokes around their necks to their chins so that their heads are forced up. And we have put a bar before them and a bar behind them and so We have covered them up so that they cannot see. God Almighty has spoken the truth." Then he repeated, *"And We have put a bar before them and a bar behind them and so We have covered them up so that they cannot see."* He repeated the verse, his voice growing louder, and as he swayed the moonlight revealed him to everyone, though he was completely oblivious.

"And We have put a bar before them and a bar behind them and so We have covered them up so that they cannot see." Zahra began to repeat after him, and his voice kept getting louder. Sitt Maryam kept repeating, "We ask you God, the Father, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil," while Dimitri repeated with her, "We ask

you God, Our Lord, lead us not into temptation, which we cannot endure because of our weakness. Give us help to avoid temptation, so that we might extinguish Satan's fiery arrows." His voice and Sitt Maryam's voice grew louder, "And deliver us from evil Satan by Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen." Magd al-Din raised his voice even louder, "O God I ask you to lift every veil, to remove every barrier, to bring down every obstacle, to make easy every difficulty, and to open every door. O God, to whom I appeal and resort in hard times and in easy times, have mercy on me in my exile. Amen, Lord of All Creation." Magd al-Din, still swaying, began reciting the Quran again after his prayer. Dimitri continued his own prayers. The words intermingled in such a way that one could only make out that they were the prayers of sincere souls devoting every bit of their being to God, the Savior:

"By the wise Quran, . . ."

"O God, our Lord, . . ."

". . . on a straight path . . ."

". . . lead us not into temptation . . ."

". . . a revelation of the Mighty . . ."

". . . deliver us from evil . . ."

". . . whose forefathers had not been warned . . ."

". . . because of our weakness . . ."

". . . true of most of them, for they are not believers . . ."

". . . us from evil . . ."

". . . and we have put a bar before them . . ."

". . . that are Satan's . . ."

". . . that they cannot see."

Amen. Amen.

Voices come from the street, men, youths, frightened women, and crying children.

"Where's it coming from?"

"The searchlights or the bombs?"

"The bombs."

"From Mina al-Basal, Bab Sidra, and Karmuz."

"All the bombing is in Karmuz—the houses are shaking."

"The searchlights are not stopping. The guns in Kom al-Nadura, Kom al-Dikka, Maks, Qabbari, and Sidi Bishr are all going at the same time. More than a hundred planes!"

"The sky is full of the blue flies of Death!"

"Where has all of this been hiding, so that it appears all at once?"

"Khawaga Dimitri, get out, the houses are going to collapse," a voice came from outside.

"Who's that?"

"Ghaffara."

The voice was nearby and muffled. Ghaffara looked in on them from the window. The women had gathered in a corner close to each other. As soon as Camilla and Yvonne saw him, they screamed, "Mama!" They heard a muffled voice coming from behind the fezmask that he had tied on his face.

"Have no fear, ladies. This is Ghaffara's anti-air-raid mask. Khawaga Dimitri, Sheikh Magd al-Din, please forgive me. I know you, and I was friends with the late Bahi.

The houses in Karmuz are falling down and they are shaking here. You'd be better off coming out and standing in the street."

He was looking from behind his glass eye-pieces at Lula's arms and shoulders gleaming in the dark as if they had black covering in the daytime. Dimitri and Magd al-Din came out but the women did not.