

Excerpt from CITY OF LOVE AND ASHES by Yusuf Idris

He rang the bell, and Bedeir opened the door wearing his bathrobe over a brushed-cotton gallabiya. A white woolen skullcap was fastened to his head, a scarf turbaned around it.

"Brother," said Bedeir, as he returned to his seat, "my knees are like jelly! I was sure you must have been arrested. Where have you been?"

"I was looking for work."

"Find anything?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I'm going to give private lessons."

"Where?"

"Here."

Bedeir roared with laughter. The armchair shook accordingly, as did the newspaper he was reading, and his robe was in turmoil.

"Here where, may I ask?"

"Here in the apartment."

"Oh, that's a good one! You do have a sense of humor! So why do they talk all this nonsense about you? . . . Anyway, have you had your supper?"

"I've no appetite."

"I don't believe it! You've never in your life had no appetite. It must be a miracle. What are you talking about, no appetite? You have to have supper! Have some supper—I want to talk to you."

Hamza could offer no more resistance; he had no choice but to sit down and swallow the food.

Bedeir's expression became serious as he spoke. "Listen, Hamza. You know I have your interests at heart, and you're just like a brother to me. And we've been colleagues and friends for what, fifteen years? I want to tell you something."

"What?"

"Hamza, brother, settle down. Put an end to all this. It's enough that you've wasted years of your life, and there's less left of it than you've used up already. You'll spend your whole life on the run, cast out, nowhere to go. No offense, you understand. Perhaps what I'm saying is a little harsh, but it's the truth."

"Exactly what my mother says," said Hamza with a smile. "Settle down how?"

"Settle down—work, do the right thing, get married, make yourself a home and a family, snap out of it! It's not right for an educated man like you to live like this."

"But I'm very happy with my life as it is."

"Happy? How?"

"I'm happy because the important thing is not how or where you live, but why. The important thing is, what are you doing for other people?"

"I don't understand. Humor me, brother. What are you talking about?"

"Well, of course you wouldn't understand. You're a man with your own life, your own home, your own work. I don't have a life of my own. I've put myself and my life at the service of the people. If necessity dictates I run, I run . . . go to jail, I go to jail . . . die, I die."

“This is unbelievable. So that’s it, you’ve become a prophet, a saint? You don’t want anything in this world? You don’t have any ambitions of your own?”

“My private aspirations are exactly the general aspirations of the people.”

“What fine words! Am I supposed to understand then that you’re never going to marry, never going to have your own home?”

“Certainly I’ll marry, and have children. But my marriage must serve our cause, not be at its expense. And certainly I’ll have a home, but a home that will allow me more opportunity to serve the people.”

“So you’re going to remain rootless like this forever.”

“Not at all. What made me rootless is what made millions of Egyptians rootless, and millions can’t remain rootless forever.”

Bedeir was silent for a long time, then said, “Hmm. Fine. Looks like it’s no use. Hmm. Good night.” He pulled up the cover, and I was not long before his snores rose up and he was asleep.

Hamza could not sleep. The conversation had reminded him of the alienation he had felt since coming to this luxurious apartment. Even the word “people” sounded strange on his lips. It hardly had a place among the chandeliers, carpets, and ornate furniture. The visions that had begun to well up in his mind’s eye multiplied. His mother. His father. His father the rail worker, with his ample, thick mustache that turned up suddenly at each end. The rail camps that were the pasture of his childhood and boyhood, the camps that the rail authority set up between stations for the workers repairing the tracks. The closed, sealed community of workers. People faced life together. Secrets were the property of all; poverty was fairly distributed among all. The wives bathed together on Friday mornings, boasting about the events of the night before, and the husbands dived together in the irrigation channel to purify themselves. The camp was in the hands of the women in the mornings, and the endless arguments would begin over lost geese or ducks. Eggs were the currency among the women, hand-rolled cigarettes among the men, but real money had to change hands between the men and the women, or else. In every camp there was a wolf who showed his beard then hid behind his wife; the men did not know, but the children and the women watched out for him. In every camp there was an outcast miser who piled millieme upon millieme in the hope of buying a small patch of land in his home village. In every camp there was a religious visionary whom the men mocked and from whom the women took blessings. In every camp there was a beautiful wife, there was jealousy, and there were feuds; children were born by the dozen; there were mosquitoes and millions of insects; dogs and their howlings guarded the poverty, the water jugs, the subsistence.

Every day a problem, quarrels, yelling, scrapping, attempts by the foreman to assert his authority, attempts by the workers to wrest it from him. Talk of pay scales, talk of wages docked. Women in search of conception, men in search of a loan. Patched yellow trousers. Tall woolen caps and heavy Egyptian army-surplus boots. The whistle of trains coming and going: a virgin opens her window, contemplates the trains, sighs, and dreams of the local town, its educated men, and three gold-plated bracelets.

Every day a problem, quarrels, yelling, scrapping. As soon as the day is finished and the sun disappears and the smoke from the stoves dies down and the smoke from the trains stops, the men return to their houses, in winter, or in summer to the spaces in front of them. The low, round table is put down, mouths all around it. Supper is over almost

before it starts and is followed by languor and occasional brief exchanges between husband and wife, in which there is more sleep than wakefulness, more optimism than pessimism. The wife is restless, the husband steady. The woman is afraid, the man reassuring. The wife yawns, the husband mumbles tiredly, "It'll all be all right in the morning."

As for Hamza and the other children, the day was theirs. Theirs for running, jumping, and swimming in the irrigation channel; for counting sleepers; for trying to walk unaided along a single rail; for using pebbles as flints to make sparks, in imitation of their fathers; for hunting sparrows with catapults and small stones; for the best game of all, of putting a nail on the track and waiting for a passing train to squash it flat, thin, and sharp as a knife; for the plentiful prickly pears that covered both sides of the track; for the prickly pear season and the endless chases with the trader who bought the fruit from the rail authority and guarded it.

Like him, all the children became ill with bilharzia, hookworm, measles, malaria, and conjunctivitis. Some of them came down with jaundice, never to regain their natural color, or with splenitis. Sheikh Zidan's Quranic school was followed by compulsory state schooling and its beatings. Primary school brought his first uniform and the somber, vile tarboosh. He passed the primary certificate with 85 percent, entitling him to free secondary education. His father was delighted; his mother wanted him to learn a trade, nothing more. His father wanted him to be an engineer and work in the rail company like his boss's boss's boss's boss. His mother used incantations to protect him against envy. His father showed him his sieve-like trousers and said, "Top of your class, or it's these for you." And he was top.

After the secondary certificate came the calamity, the pain, the terrible struggle to find a pound or fifty piasters for Hamza in his exile far away in Alexandria. A year passed: only three years to go— O Lord, make things easy! But he acquired bad habits: poker, rummy, sour rum, curly-haired women with brilliant red lipstick like the abattoir stamps on slaughtered meat. He lied to his father and swindled his friends. He failed a year and hid his failure. His father believed the star student had passed. He deceived and dissembled.

His father was desperate: Hamza's needs were strangling him. His mother learned to make decorated headscarves. The whole settlement helped out—even the foreman paid fifty piasters each month. His father took Hamza's younger brother out of school so that Hamza could go on, because he was older and closer to earning a salary. The sixth of March: demonstrations, committees, conferences. Meanwhile, his brother was working in the shunting yards, where one morning a train took off his foot; he spent six months in the municipal hospital, then returned to work, onefooted, as a crossing attendant.

Hamza graduated and worked in a factory. With his first salary he printed the union broadsheet. His life was politics, meetings, discussions, the cause, appointments. He was trailed by the political police. His first conviction was on trumped-up charges: he became internee number forty-eight and spent twenty months in al-Tur, Hikestep, and the Alexandria Foreign Prison. Then he was released, but every time a British government official or high-ranking officer came to Egypt, he was arrested, and on every occasion of national or international importance he was detained in the police station for days that stretched into weeks, until at the beginning of the year he was able to make a list of the days on which he would visit the station, as another might mark the public holidays on a

calendar. He owned one suit, which he had had made on his graduation; his eyeglasses he had bought from the university medical center for one pound; he was the second owner of his shoes. He sometimes sent money to his father, but he was unable to send the pair of black slippers his mother asked for. His mother still embroidered scarves; his father's mustache had become white as he had grown older, and he had still not made foreman. His brother still limped and closed the gates for the trains and opened them when they passed, his sister, Nabawiya, was still unmarried, and they had moved to yet another rail camp. His mother prayed for his guidance; his father spoke to the men of his exploits and cursed the government and the rail authority. The whole settlement wove tales of heroism around him, and when a train passed the small children would say,

“That train's going to Hamza.”

“Aren't you going to sleep, Hamza?”