An Excerpt from THE YACOUBIAN BULIDING by Alaa Al Aswany

Zaki el Dessouki got to his office a little before noon and from the first instant Abaskharon, the office servant, took in the situation. After twenty years of working for Zaki Bey, Abaskharon had learned to understand his moods at a single glance, knowing full well what it meant when his master arrived at the office excessively elegantly dressed, the scent of the expensive perfume that he kept for special occasions preceding him, and appeared tense and nervous, standing up, sitting down, walking irritably about, never settling to anything, and hiding his impatience in brusqueness and gruffness—it meant that the bey was expecting his first meeting with a new girlfriend. As a result Abaskharon didn't get angry when the bey started berating him for no reason, but shook his head as one who understands how things stand, quickly finished sweeping the reception room, and then grabbed his wooden crutches and pounded vigorously and rapidly off down the long tiled corridor to the large room where the bey was sitting. In a voice that experience had taught him to make completely neutral, he said, "Do you have a meeting, Excellency? Should I get everything ready, Excellency?"

The bey looked in his direction and contemplated him for an instant as though making up his mind as to the proper tone of voice to use in reply. He looked at Abaskharon's striped flannel gallabiya, torn in numerous places, at his crutches and his amputated leg, at his aged face and the grizzled stubble on his chin, at his cunning, narrow eyes and the familiar unctuous, scared smile that never left him, and said, "Get everything ready for a meeting, quickly."

Thus spoke the bey in brusque tones as he went out onto the balcony. In their common dictionary, "a meeting" meant the bey's spending time alone with a woman in the office, and "everything" referred to certain rites that Abaskharon performed for his master just before the love-making, starting with an injection of imported Tri-B vitamin supplement that he administered to him in the buttock and that hurt him so much each time that he would moan out loud and pour curses on "that ass" Abaskharon for his heavy, brutish touch. This would be followed by a cup of sugarless coffee made of beans spiced with nutmeg that the bey would imbibe slowly while dissolving beneath his tongue a small piece of opium. The rites concluded with the placing of a large plate of salad in the middle of the table next to a bottle of Black Label whisky, two empty glasses, and a metal champagne bucket filled to the brim with ice cubes.

Abaskharon quickly set about getting everything ready while Zaki Bey took a seat on the balcony overlooking Suleiman Basha, lit a cigar, and settled down to watch the passersby. His feelings swung between bounding impatience for the beautiful meeting and promptings of anxiety that his sweetheart Rabab would fail to turn up for the appointment, in which case he would have wasted the entire month of effort that he had expended in pursuit of her. He had been obsessed with her since he first saw her at the Cairo Bar in Tawfikiya Square where she worked as a hostess. She had bewitched him completely and day after day he had gone back to the bar to see her. Describing her to an aged friend, he had said, "She represents the beauty of the common people in all its vulgarity and provocativeness. She looks as though she had just stepped out of one of those paintings by Mahmoud Said." Zaki Bey then expatiated on this to make his meaning clearer to his friend, saying, "Do you remember that maid at home who used to beguile your dreams when you were an adolescent? And of whom it was your dearest

wish that you might stick yourself to her soft behind, then grab her tender-skinned breasts with your hands as she washed the dishes at the kitchen sink? And that she would bend over in a way that made you stick to her even more closely and whisper in provocative refusal, before giving herself to you, 'Sir.... It's wrong, sir. . . .'? In Rabab I have stumbled onto just such a treasure."

However, stumbling onto a treasure does not necessarily mean possessing it and, for the sake of his beloved Rabab, Zaki Bey had been compelled to put up with numerous annoyances, like having to spend whole nights in a dirty, cramped, badly lit and poorly ventilated place like the Cairo Bar. He had been almost suffocated by the crowds and the thick cigarette smoke and had come close to being deafened by the racket of the sound system that never even for an instant stopped emitting disgusting, vulgar songs. And that was to say nothing of the foul-mouthed arguments and fistfights among the patrons of the establishment, who were a mixture of skilled laborers, bad types, and foreigners, or of the glasses of foul, stomach-burning brandy that he was forced to toss down every night and the exorbitant mistakes in the checks to which he turned a blind eye, even leaving a big tip for the house plus another even bigger one that he would thrust into the cleavage of Rabab's dress, feeling, as soon as his fingers touched her full, swaying breasts, the hot blood surging in his veins and a violence of desire that almost hurt him it was so powerful and insistent.

Zaki Bey had put up with all of this for the sake of Rabab, inviting her again and again to meet him outside the bar. She would refuse coquettishly and he would repeat his invitation, never losing hope, and then just yesterday she had agreed to visit him at the office. So overjoyed had he been that he had thrust a fifty-pound note into her dress without the slightest feeling of regret and she had come up to him so close that he had felt her hot breath on his face and biting her lower lip with her teeth she had whispered in a provocative voice that demolished what equanimity he had left, "Tomorrow, I'll pay you back, sir . . . for everything you've done for me. . . ."

Zaki Bey bore the painful Tri-B injection, dissolved the opium, and started slowly drinking the first glass of whisky, followed by a second and a third, which soon released him from his tension. Good humor enveloped him and pleasant musings started gently caressing his head like soft tunes. Rabab's appointment was for one o'clock. By the time the wall clock struck two, Zaki Bey had almost lost hope, when suddenly he heard the sound of Abaskharon's crutches striking the hallway tiles, followed immediately by his face appearing around the door as he said, his voice panting with excitement as though the news genuinely made him happy, "Madame Rabab has arrived, Excellency."

In 1934, Hagop Yacoubian, the millionaire and then doyen of the Armenian community in Egypt, decided to construct an apartment block that would bear his name. He chose for it the best site on Suleiman Basha and engaged a well-known Italian engineering firm to build it, and the firm came up with a beautiful design—ten lofty stories in the high classical European style, the balconies decorated with Greek faces carved in stone, the columns, steps, and corridors all of natural marble, and the latest model of elevator by Schindler. Construction continued for two whole years, at the end of which there emerged an architectural gem that so exceeded expectations that its owner requested of the Italian architect that he inscribe his name, Yacoubian, on the inside of the doorway in large Latin characters that were lit up at night in neon, as though to immortalize his name and emphasize his ownership of the gorgeous building.

The cream of the society of those days took up residence in the Yacoubian Building—ministers, big land-owning bashas, foreign manufacturers, and two Jewish millionaires (one of them belonging to the famous Mosseri family). The ground floor of the building was divided equally between a spacious garage with numerous doors at the back where the residents' cars (most of them luxury makes such as Rolls-Royce, Buick, and Chevrolet) were kept overnight and at the front a large store with three frontages that Yacoubian kept as a showroom for the silver products made in his factories. This showroom remained in business successfully for four decades, then little by little declined, until recently it was bought by Hagg Muhammad Azzam, who re-opened it as a clothing store. On the broad roof two rooms with utilities were set aside for the doorkeeper and his family to live in, while on the other side of the roof fifty small rooms were constructed, one for each apartment in the building. Each of these rooms was no more than two meters by two meters in area and the walls and doors were all of solid iron and locked with padlocks whose keys were handed over to the owners of the apartments. These iron rooms had a variety of uses at that time, such as storing foodstuffs, overnight kenneling for dogs (if they were large or fierce), and laundering clothes, which in those days (before the spread of the electric washing machine) was undertaken by professional washerwomen who would do the wash in the room and hang it out on long lines that extended across the roof. The rooms were never used as places for the servants to sleep, perhaps because the residents of the building at that time were aristocrats and foreigners who could not conceive of the possibility of any human being sleeping in such a cramped place. Instead, they would set aside a room in their ample, luxurious apartments (which sometimes contained eight or ten rooms on two levels joined by an internal stairway) for the servants.

In 1952 the Revolution came and everything changed. The exodus of Jews and foreigners from Egypt started and every apartment that was vacated by reason of the departure of its owners was taken over by an officer of the armed forces, who were the influential people of the time. By the 1960s, half the apartments were lived in by officers of various ranks, from first lieutenants and recently married captains all the way up to generals, who would move into the building with their large families. General El Dakrouri (at one point director of President Muhammad Naguib's office) was even able to acquire two large apartments next door to one another on the tenth floor, one of which he used as a residence for himself and his family, the other as a private office where he would meet petitioners in the afternoon.

The officers' wives began using the iron rooms in a different way: for the first time they were turned into places for the stewards, cooks, and young maids that they brought from their villages to serve their families to stay in. Some of the officers' wives were of plebeian origin and could see nothing wrong in raising small animals (rabbits, ducks, and chickens) in the iron rooms and the West Cairo District's registers saw numerous complaints filed by the old residents to pre- vent the raising of such animals on the roof. Owing to the officers' pull, however, these always got shelved, until the residents complained to General El Dakrouri, who, thanks to his influence with the former, was able to put a stop to this insanitary phenomenon.

In the seventies came the 'Open Door Policy' and the well-to-do started to leave the downtown area for El Mohandiseen and Medinet Nasr, some of them selling their apartments in the Yacoubian Building, others using them as offices and clinics for their

recently graduated sons or renting them furnished to Arab tourists. The result was that the connection between the iron rooms and the building's apartments was gradually severed and the former stewards and servants ceded their iron rooms for money to new, poor residents coming from the countryside or working somewhere downtown who needed a place to live that was close by and cheap.

This transfer of control was made easier by the death of the Armenian agent in charge of the building, Monsieur Grigor, who used to administer the property of the millionaire Hagop Yacoubian with the utmost honesty and accuracy, sending the proceeds in December of each year to Switzerland, where Yacoubian's heirs had migrated after the Revolution. Grigor was succeeded as agent by Maître Fikri Abd el Shaheed, the lawyer, who would do anything provided he was paid, taking, for example, one large percentage from the former occupant of the iron room and another from the new tenant for writing him a contract for the room.

The final outcome was the growth of a new community on the roof that was entirely independent of the rest of the building. Some of the newcomers rented two rooms next to one another and made a small residence out of them with all utilities (latrine and washroom), while others, the poorest, collaborated to create a shared latrine for every three or four rooms, the roof community thus coming to resemble any other popular community in Egypt. The children run around all over the roof barefoot and half naked and the women spend the day cooking, holding gossip sessions in the sun, and, frequently, quarreling, at which moments they will exchange the grossest insults as well as accusations touching on one another's honor, only to make up soon after and behave with complete good will toward one another as though nothing has happened. Indeed, they will plant hot, lip-smacking kisses on each other's cheeks and even weep from excess of sentiment and affection.

The men pay little attention to the women's quarrels, viewing them as just one more indication of that defectiveness of mind of which the Prophet—God bless him and grant him peace—spoke. These men of the roof pass their days in a bitter and wearisome struggle to earn a living and return at the end of the day exhausted and in a hurry to partake of their small pleasures—tasty hot food and a few pipes of tobacco (or of hashish if they have the money), which they either smoke in a waterpipe on their own or stay up to smoke while talking with the others on the roof on summer nights. The third pleasure is sex, in which the people of the roof revel and which they see nothing wrong with discussing frankly so long as it is of a sort sanctioned by religion. Here there is a contradiction. Any of the men of the roof would be ashamed, like most lower-class people, to mention his wife by name in front of the others, referring to her as "Mother of So-and-so," or "the kids," as in "the kids cooked mulukhiya today," the company understanding that he means his wife. This same man, however, will feel no embarrassment at mentioning, in a gathering of other men, the most precise details of his private relations with his wife, so that the men of the roof come to know almost everything of one another's sexual activities. As for the women, and without regard for their degree of religiosity or morality, they all love sex enormously and will whisper the secrets of the bed to one another, followed, if they are on their own, by bursts of laughter that are carefree or even obscene. They do not love it simply as a way of quenching lust but because sex, and their husbands' greed for it, makes them feel that despite all the misery they suffer, they are still women, beautiful and desired by their menfolk. At that

certain moment when the children are asleep, having had their dinner and given praise to their Lord, and there is enough food in the house to last for a week or more, and there is a little money set aside for emergencies, and the room they all live in is clean and tidy, and the husband has come home on Thursday night in a good mood because of the effect of the hashish and asked for his wife, is it not then her duty to obey his call, after first bathing, prettying herself up, and putting on perfume? Do these brief hours of pleasure not furnish her with proof that her wretched life is somehow, despite everything, blessed with success? It would take a skilled painter to convey to us the expressions on the face of a woman on the roof of a Friday morning, when, after her husband has gone down to perform the prayer and she has washed off the traces of love-making, she emerges to hang out the washed bedding—at that moment, with her wet hair, her flushed complexion, and the serene expression in her eyes, she looks like a rose that, watered with the dew of the morning, has arrived at the peak of its perfection.