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BASIC CABLE: A RELUCTANT AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE ARAB SPRING
THROUGH REVOLUTIONARY ART

by

PHILIP AYOUB

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Abstract

BASIC CABLE: A RELUCTANT AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE ARAB SPRING THROUGH REVOLUTIONARY ART

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Philip Ayoub

Thesis Adviser: Dr. David T. Humphries

Supported by a critical component that traces back the Egyptian revolution of 2011 to its roots in the post-Nasser era when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces assumed nearly complete political and economic control over the country, this novella, based in New York City, looks at the crisis through an American lens. As the story progresses the protagonist learns that the conditions which precipitated the events in Egypt can be viewed at once as both a product of American capitalism and Egyptian complicity, as well as act as a mirror, albeit on a magnified scale, of the changing socio-economic changes in the American landscape over the past few decades. What helps the protagonist discover this common link is his exposure to various characters and events that present the competing ways in which these issues are framed in trans-national cultural and economic contexts, and consequently, how they operate on different registers of entertainment and social efficacy.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2013, a time when the United States was slowly crawling its way out of the global financial crisis, if not stagnating economically in a kind of suspended animation, the Arab Spring was still raging across the Middle East and North Africa while the Occupy movement and protests against austerity measures throughout Europe were still fresh in the collective mind. It also happened to be around the time I started my Graduate Studies at the City University of New York. While many argue the social and political upheaval across the Arab world and the recent economic crisis are not wholly unrelated, my own personal journey, both as an interested observer and an aspiring scholar, reaffirmed this interconnectivity of global events.

Beginning with Dr. Selma Botman's course on the Arab Spring and contemporary Egyptian history, I was reminded once more of the roots of this complex web of relationships between the West and the fledgling Middle Eastern states newly freed from under centuries of Ottoman rule. As much as the course readings and discussions seemed to cover every facet of this rich and complicated history as well as the lead up to the Egyptian revolt of 2011, what struck me the most, amidst all the theorizing and detective work trying to piece together a broader narrative of overarching themes, was the lack of emphasis on what living, breathing Middle Easterners were themselves saying. However overstated, the role of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms made it evident for all to see just how much the tide of social movements relies on emotion, perception, fear, rumor, and hope.

The Arab Street has largely been ignored over the years, so too have their accounts of corruption and greed by their rulers and the ruled alike. The ever-worsening conditions of neo-colonialism and the culture of political apathy that set in over the decades were missing from the reams of academic scholarship dedicated to uncovering the truth behind the conditions that

would ultimately set the stage for the Arab Spring. What may have been missing from the scholarly record over the years was certainly present in other sources. For decades the works of Naguib Mahfouz, Mahmoud Darwish, and other notable writers faced these unsettling truths, using them as the engines for award winning novels and poetry that placed as much onus on the conquerors as it did the conquered. Storytelling then became for me a necessary learning tool for introducing what scholarship most times cannot, albeit for obvious reasons of verification and an understandable aversion to hearsay. Still, fiction can simultaneously inform the reader by filling in those intangible columns of very real, if unproven, injustice while warning society in the vein of the prophetic traditions of more ancient times. Fiction thus can be viewed as a continuation of that stream of human consciousness divorced from the parameters and restrictions set by scientific or academic discipline. Like many other art forms it is free to exist outside the confines of the dominant institutions of any era, and speak truth to power on its own terms. From this point on I knew my thesis would take the form of a novel, or for the sake of page limits, a novella-length piece.

Dr. Eric Lott's *Global South* course further drove home this realization of what fiction can accomplish, however, by also taking into account my own ethnicity and nationality when writing the novella. Discussions around Zora Neal Hurston's "Tell My Horse" and other texts by African American writers like Emile Baraka who traveled to the Caribbean to meet people ostensibly with the same ethnic origins as their own but who ultimately came away from their respective experiences with conflicting questions of identity, revealed the challenges inherent in approaching fiction pertaining to the 'other,' as much as the writer might feel a strong sense of kinship to the group in question. In their case what it truly meant to be 'black' as viewed through

the lens of the American experience did not agree with that of the rest of the hemisphere or even amongst other African Americans in many cases.

As an Arab American this struck a chord on a personal level. Like these authors I too have traveled to locations on the map where I certainly shared stronger ties either genetically or ethnically with local populations, yet my numerous encounters with average Middle Easterners revealed just how much baggage I wittingly or unwittingly carry as an American, born and raised, and the wide ideological chasms preventing me from enjoying complete harmony with the broader psyche of the Arab world. Also, like Baraka's Cuba and Hurston's Jamaica, the Middle East has been subject to decades of Western interventionism and colonialism, and more recently a strand of neoliberalism stemming from the Reagan/Thatcher era, where American capitalism and hegemony re-asserted itself through puppet regimes of vassal states at the cost of their own population's economic and social stability.

Dr. David Humphries's *Introduction to Graduate Liberal Studies* added yet another dimension to my attempt at crafting this novella. With gentrification completely altering the spatial and ethnic identity of New York City on a continuous basis, we find that this perhaps may not be the work of natural market forces alone. Neoliberalism, we can argue, has been recycled down to the city level, no longer just a tool of American foreign intervention. Michael Sorkin's *Twenty Minutes In Manhattan* documents this phenomenon by highlighting City Hall's complicity in gentrification, and to a larger extent the emergence over the past few decades of a new culture within the city that caters almost exclusively to multi-national corporations and interests at the expense of the average NYC resident. One major byproduct is the marginalization of those who historically gave a voice to the voiceless; the radical class of artists, intellectuals, activists, and politicians. Consequently that eternal feud between preservation and development,

the kind embodied by the famous tug of war between Jane Jacobs and Robert Moses during the previous century, is increasingly becoming a lopsided contest in favor of the rich and powerful. We see this in the Disneyfication of Times Square, itself symptomatic of New York's trajectory toward becoming an international city subject to the whim of colossal economic forces on a global scale.

In this sense what is happening in Egypt's major cities, with its scarcity of jobs, increasing reliance on informal work, the almost complete liquidation of its manufacturing based economy and the subsequent transformation to a consumer based one that exclusively enriches foreign investors and Egyptian oligarchs, rising living expenses, etcetera, can also be said of New York, and by extension the United States as a whole. In the same way the remittances from Gulf States and USAID keep Egypt's economy above water, so too does the post-Reagan American economy no longer rely on its own self-sufficiency, as evidenced by the Bush and Obama bailouts of the last decade.

Few economies in the "Third World" can save themselves from insolvency solely through what they produce and export, especially in light of challenges posed by free-trade agreements favoring the more developed nations. This usually leaves them little alternative but to borrow on loans they can never pay back, or if conditions are met, to continue to try their luck on the international market by acquiring on credit overpriced manufacturing equipment at exorbitant interest rates, thus creating a vicious cycle of perpetual debt, brain drain, and loss of labor to other economies. This phenomenon is recorded quite famously in Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America* and David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, to name but a few. More importantly it is at the very heart of Egypt's economic woes and current predicament.

With all these factors to consider I set out to write *Basic Cable*. However, before we delve into the novella let us first take a brief look at the historical roots of Egypt's current crisis, and ultimately how this sordid sequence of events put in place a burgeoning culture of resistance and resentment toward ousted President Hosni Mubarak that reached its apex during the month of January 2011. In addition to providing context for my story, this study of the dire economic conditions that precipitated the revolt demonstrates some of the analytical work that I undertook as a graduate student of Liberal Arts at the CUNY Graduate Center. What I hope to achieve with these two complementing works is a deeper understanding of the Egyptian crisis and how it is connected to a broader narrative that transcends international borders.

Egypt's Almost Revolution:

Analyzing the economic conditions that precipitated the revolt of 2011 and what it reveals about the true face of power in the most populous Arab nation.

Anyone who closely followed the events as they transpired in Egypt during the eighteen days of demonstrations that kicked off on January 25, 2011 cannot deny the influence of the Tunisian revolution that ousted Mohammed Ben Ali just weeks prior, in addition to the heartfelt pleas by young Egyptians on social networking sites to gather in Tahrir Square to call for the end of the regime in response to a string of high profile incidents, such as the beating death of Khaled Saeed by Alexandrian police officers; itself an ugly reminder of the decades old Emergency Law. This emotional component was certainly, in my estimation, what spurred the masses into action. However, the question remains: Why did Egyptians choose to take such a monumental stand in 2011 as opposed to ten, fifteen, or even twenty years earlier? What were the conditions that created an environment so openly defiant and antagonistic toward Mubarak in 2011 that did not exist to such a wide extent throughout his nearly three decades of rule? Lastly, why was the Egyptian military overlooked as far as being complicit in this financial crisis given its stranglehold on the economy?

In this paper I will provide an overview of the origins of the military's role in the economy beginning in the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser. I will then demonstrate how former president Mubarak, both as a self-interested autocrat and as a figurehead of the all-powerful military industrial complex, which controls roughly forty percent of the Egyptian economy, violently suppressed labor and social movements, and avoided earlier mass uprisings only by

virtue of the financial assistance from the United States and other sources, and under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund. Lastly, I will attempt to make the case that the conditions that led up to the revolt were accelerated by the worldwide recession of 2008, resulting in widespread unemployment and an increased reliance on informal jobs, rising inflation, sharp spikes in food and energy prices, as well as deficiencies in other sectors of the economy.

If Egypt's current story must be traced back to a precise date, June 23, 1956 would have to suffice, as it was the day Gamal Abdel Nasser, one of the main figures in the Free Officer's Movement of 1952, assumed the presidency amidst great jubilation and a strong emphasis on both political and economic independence reinforced by military might. In *Nasser: Hero of the Arab Nation*, historian Joel Gordon recounts a CBS Radio interview between Nasser and reporter Howard K. Smith in February of 1956. In response to a question Smith asked about his motivations as the new leader: "Nasser outlined the revolution's Six Principles: anti- colonialism, anti-feudalism, anti-corruption, social justice the creation of a strong national army and clean democracy, not, as he put it, the 'game of democracy' that had plagued the old regime" (37-38). Later that year, the Suez Crisis, although a military defeat for Egypt, was a symbolic and political victory for Nasser. In one sense it validated his anti-imperialist and anti- colonial paranoia, but at the same time revealed the glaring weaknesses of the armed forces, which he would later attempt to remedy through an alliance with the Soviet Union. Gordon writes: "After the Suez, the Egyptian regime, seizing the upsurge of good will, looked inward to the consolidation of its national project" (50). What this entailed was the redistribution of wealth and the reconfiguration of the economy, which at the time was mostly in the hands of a very small group of private capitalists. Before this could be achieved the Egyptian regime, which was

mostly made up of military officers who took part in the Free Officers Movement in 1952, took some decisive initial steps toward economic control. Gordon continues:

Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, a Free Officers founding member and Minister of Public Working, undertook to remodel Cairo's fashionable districts...A state-of-the-art Hilton Hotel was built on the site of the former British barracks; nearby stood the new Shepherd's Hotel...South of Cairo, at Helwan, the Soviets financed a massive steelworks. Outside Alexandria, the 1.2 million feddan Liberation Province was an early model for land reclamation and rural cooperatives...The arts blossomed under active state support...(51)

Clearly, even from the early days of the post-revolutionary period, the military had its hand in various key sectors of the economy. All this occurred prior to the construction of the Aswan High Dam. Once the regime had gained more footing, a series of policies that came to be known as the 'July laws' effectively nationalized the remainder of the sectors not yet claimed by the revolution. Gordon writes on this pivotal moment:

Banks, insurance companies, real estate corporations and heavy industry fell under state control. The state expropriated half the capital of eighty-six mid-sized companies and limited personal holdings in over one hundred others. Only light industry and "non-exploiting" professions remained fully in private hands. In agriculture, the regime instituted a revised land reform, limiting family holdings to one hundred feddans...(72)

Later on in 1962, Nasser's National Charter would take it one step further and nationalize the sectors of "finance, heavy and medium industry, mining, foreign trade and at least half of domestic trade..." (74). By 1964 this umbrella of nationalized sectors of the economy would account for sixty percent of the nation's gross domestic product (74). How successful or

unsuccessful these initiatives were is beside the point, at least for the purposes of this paper. What we should take away from this are two important points. The first, that the revolution, which was a bloodless coup led by military officers, together with the post-Suez Crisis wave of popularity Nasser enjoyed, permanently embedded the regime as the unchallenged political and economic steward of the country, especially once the economic policies indicated above were implemented. Secondly, the regime did not, as was feared by many in the West, completely abandon foreign investment by capitalist nations (even if it also cooperated with non-capitalist ones, most notably the USSR). In fact, Nasser explicitly states this in his National Charter speech where, as Gordon writes, he made "distinctions between Arab socialism and Marxism" and held that "the state would play a direct role in economic development, but capitalism would not be abolished" (73). Although this doesn't equate to opening up the country to the free-market, it did leave the door open for future investment. Also, this reluctance to completely sever ties with the capitalist west was due in part to the fact that, as Alain Roussillon writes in The Cambridge History of Egypt, "...between 1954 and 1966, Egypt thus received American wheat shipments valued at \$643 million, largely subsidized by the US Treasury and paid for in Egyptian pounds" (355). The United States was willing to overlook the socialist aspirations of Nasser as well as his alliance with the USSR for reasons that would pay off down the road in the form of closer economic and political relations. Whether Nasser's intentions were noble or misguided, he helped usher in the era of the military industrial complex in Egypt through which all foreign and domestic capital had to pass. This laid the foundation for Anwar Sadat, and later Hosni Mubarak to further build upon, thus resulting in the consolidation of political and economic power in fewer and fewer hands.

Four years after the resignation and death of Gamal Abdel Nasser, his successor, Anwar Sadat, a member of the Free Officers movement, would make a decision that would arguably overshadow all of his accomplishments in office. Marvin G. Weinbaum's article "Egypt's 'Infitah' and the Politics of US Economic Assistance" published in *Middle Eastern Studies*, recounts the now infamous decision by Sadat in October 1974 to "restructure and reorient Egypt's economic relations" (206). He states:

In place of the government-managed economy inherited from Gamal Abdul Nasser, Sadat proposed a system that would rely more on private initiatives and investment, domestic and foreign...This Infitah or, loosely defined, 'Open Door' policy...was conceived in order to enable Sadat's Egypt to realize political objectives, unattainable through military means, and to attract the external assistance needed to cope with an immediate economic crisis...(206)

Thus, the Infitah was born, the consequences of which would be felt for generations to come. It should be noted here that the 1952 revolution and the subsequent tenure of Nasser transformed the Egyptian economy from a mainly agricultural based economy to one that largely incorporated heavy and light industry, all while staving off foreign domination and reducing the economic power of land-owning private capitalists. Weinbaum argues that what this new economic doctrine introduced by Sadat effectively did was reverse this policy against private interests and in turn "paved the way for a more consumption-oriented society, exploitable by private domestic and foreign interests, and subject to the hazards of international trade and the influence of foreign creditors and aid donors"(206). Although Egypt did not achieve a truly self-sustaining economy under Nasser, the economy was relatively stable even with very little annual growth. Also, what Nasser achieved through his quasi-socialist experiment was to reduce Egypt's reliance on the

west, which in light of the Suez Crisis was of paramount significance at the time. But perpetual antagonism toward the west and its biggest ally in the region, Israel, came at a price. After the 1967 War, which resulted in an Egyptian defeat by Israel "defense expenditures assumed a large share of the country's resources and attention," resulting in a less than one percent average of real per capita GNP growth between 1966 and 1973. Echoing Weinbaum, Alain Roussillon writes in *The Cambridge History of Egypt: Republican Egypt Interpreted: Revolution and Beyond*:

Sadat inherited a particularly bad financial situation, increasing budget deficits, a chronic currency shortage, and the "classic" consequences of this sort of situation: factories operating at a third of their capacity owing to a shortage of raw materials, assembly lines grinding to a halt because of lack of spare parts, neglect of equipment, and other problems. (360)

Sadat had two major problems to contend with: fixing the stagnant economy and getting back the Sinai from under Israeli control. Although what motivated Sadat to launch the 1973 War remains a highly contentious subject, what can be said with certainty is that Egyptian-American relations greatly improved directly after the conflict, while Egyptian-Soviet ties waned.

Roussillon points out that "Barely a month after the Egyptian offensive had been launched, diplomatic relations were restored between Cairo and Washington" (363). After Sadat had made his announcement in 1974, effectively instituting the Infitah, by the following year Egypt was already receiving U.S. aid. Weinbaum writes: "The Nixon administration on 1 March asked the Congress for a total of \$250 million for FY(Fiscal Year) 1975 and programmed an additional \$50 million to Egypt as it prepared the 1976 budget" (210).

Obviously, this all predated the Camp David Peace Accord of 1979, which saw even greater amounts of American financial assistance going to Egypt. Aside from the political

implications of the Open Door and later the Camp David Accord, Sadat set the precedent for economic dependence on the United States. One of the long lasting legacies of the economic policies of Sadat is the mass exodus of Egyptian labor, which persists even today. Roussillon observes that "The Egyptian labor force, whose education, low wages, and docility were intended to facilitate the 'marriage' of Arab capital and western technology — to the great benefit of employment rates in Egypt — migrated to the Gulf in increasing numbers to seek work and social promotion" (365). This was most likely due to the unwillingness of prospective foreign investors to open businesses in Egypt in light of its poor infrastructure, bureaucratic hurdles, and perceived corruption. Corruption was in fact a very real problem in Egypt during the Open Door years; enough that it came to be defined by it. Weinbaum writes, "Criticism increased as evidence mounted of corruption and fortunes being accumulated by many of Sadat's close relatives and associates" (219). Also, not to pin all the blame on Egypt, the 1970's fiscal crisis in the United States certainly restricted American investment of all kinds around the world. Ironically, the recession of the 70s in the U.S. seems to have had a direct impact on the Egyptian economy just as it was opening up to American capitalism, which was a decision made by Sadat based on his faith in its economic stability in comparison with the Soviet bloc. This begs the question of whether this umbilical relationship with the American economy would have similar, or perhaps even greater, implications during the 2008 recession?

Once Hosni Mubarak, the Vice President and career military officer, assumed the presidency following the gruesome assassination of Anwar Sadat, he immediately took a defensive stance on the issue of maintaining the Infitah policies. Instead of focusing on the flaws of the economic doctrine itself, he instead laid the blame on corruption and incompetence. One of his first executive orders was the removal of the economic czar, Abdel- Razzak Abdel-Meguid,

who oversaw the Open Door under the previous administration. (Weinbaum 219). Mubarak even went as far as bringing Anwar Sadat's brother, Ismat, before an "ethics tribunal for illicit gains"(Roussillon 374). He was reluctant to completely abandon the Infitah since a fundamental restructuring of the economy might have resulted in even more instability in light of the "state's redistributive role" of providing subsidies on consumer goods and government employees, which was the only known preventative measure against the "too- brutal degradation in the standard of living of those who had benefited least from the infitah — notably salaried employees, who had been struck by an inflation rate of about 20 percent throughout the 1980's" (Roussillon 374). If we take a closer look at which commodities were being dumped on Egypt by the United States over the years, Roussillon finds that, "In the early 1980s, American wheat shipments to Egypt made up 27 percent of the country's annual consumption, and this percentage increased thereafter...if western or Japanese technology was brought into Egypt, it was not in the form of equipment that would develop the country's productive capacities, but as electronic gadgets to satisfy long-repressed consumer desires" (365).

Therefore, this suggests that what was keeping the Egyptian economy afloat in the latter years of the Sadat regime and into the 1980s under Mubarak was the dumping of mostly borrowed capital into the very same economic system initially set up to flood Egypt with consumer goods it never needed in the first place. Clearly, this suggests an invented dependence on foreign aid to keep the country from deteriorating, and as far as Mubarak was concerned, to stave off an uprising by those Egyptians who had "benefited least from the infitah." Although the relationship the United States enjoys with Egypt cannot be defined as strictly economic, in this instance we have to ask what the motivation there is for the U.S. to keep up its end of a seemingly uneven trade alliance with such an unstable economy. Is the aid simply to keep Egypt,

militarily speaking, out of Israel's way as many analysts have surmised? Or is this most populous Arab nation by far, and arguably the most developed country in Africa, the ideal market for surplus goods in the region? While examining the path China has taken in regard to the United States, David Harvey reveals one of capitalism's more problematic eventualities that I believe is relevant to our discussion. In *A Brief history of Neoliberalism*, Harvey writes: "As invariably happens with the dynamics of successful capital accumulation, there comes a point at which internally accumulated surpluses require external outlets. One path has been to fund the US debt and thereby keep the market for Chinese products buoyant..." (140). Does this example provide us with a general template for what occurred in Egypt? Was American aid, which is mostly tax dollars, essentially being thrown into the bottomless pit that is the Egyptian debt in order to keep that market "buoyant" for consumer goods made by American corporations? What did Egypt have to gain from all this?

While the Sadat years were hard on most Egyptians, Mubarak saw no other alternative but to maintain the status quo. Perhaps knowing he couldn't realistically meet the demands of the masses, he quickly set out to guarantee the "loyalty of those sectors of the political and economic establishment for which channels of communication with the west are the main source of accumulation of wealth and influence" (373). The most substantial sector, of which he was a member as well as its figurehead, the military, saw an increase in funding and supplies from the United States via "generous credit lines opened up by the Reagan administration" (373). Within a few years, the national debt rose to \$4.5 billion, which was more than double the amount under two decades of a Soviet partnership and after having fought three wars and taking part in other military exercises throughout the Middle East. Interestingly, increased military spending at the

expense of social programs in favor of unregulated private interests was also at the core of Reaganomics.

It seems Reagan's economic doctrine, which David Harvey sees as influencing the Chinese economy under Deng Xiaoping when it too was opening up to foreign capital around the same time, was also infused into the Egyptian system with almost equally disastrous results for the public sector. In other words, it was Neoliberalism with Egyptian characteristics. In fact, Harvey's description of the state of the American economy during the 1980's under Reagan sounds eerily familiar to the situation in Egypt at the time:

To be sure, inflation was brought down and interest rates fell, but this was all purchased at the expense of high rates of unemployment...Cutbacks in state welfare and infrastructural expenditures diminished the quality of life for many. The overall result was an awkward mix of low growth and increasing income inequality (88).

Along with increased military spending, the focus on keeping inflation down, a reduction in trade barriers, and maintaining a healthy GDP in spite of the toll it would take on workers, social programs, and food prices would come to define Egypt under Mubarak until his very last day in office, and as have recently seen, even beyond.

Let us take a closer look at the issue of national debt. According to Roussillon, the Egyptian national debt in 1976, two years after the Infitah was implemented, stood at ten billion dollars. The year Mubarak became president, 1981, the debt had risen to seventeen billion. By the end of the 80s, it had reached a staggering fifty-three billion dollars. Meanwhile, Egypt was ducking the IMF's recommendations, which included the "elimination of subsidies, liberalization of agricultural prices, increases in the prices of electricity and petroleum-derived products, (and) a rise in interest rates" (Roussillon, 375). The Gulf War of 1991 put an end to this stalemate

between Egypt and the IMF. In return for Egypt's support of the United Nations push toward mobilizing a coalition of nations opposing the Iraqi regime, it was awarded a "cancelation of a substantial tranche" of the debt it owed after signing a new letter of intent with the IMF in May 1991 (Roussillon, 375). More agreements with the IMF resulted in a third accord that reduced its debt to roughly twenty billion in exchange for "fiscal reform and privatization of public firms" (376). The consequences of this deregulation left Egypt mostly "poor and indebted" by the mid-90s while seeing the emergence of a super-wealthy class, some of whom amassed fortunes rumored at "\$40 billion to \$50 billion." Also, twenty-five percent unemployment, price increases, and the reduction of subsidies, which as mentioned before, helped stave off the "too-brutal degradation in the standard of living" (and that were signed away in the agreement with the IMF), created a bleak outlook for Egyptians as they approached the new millennium.

In an article titled "The Political Economy of the Egyptian Uprising," Stephen Maher of the Monthly Review echoes this conclusion when he writes that the "IMF conditions forced the government to cut spending on social services, relax price controls, cut subsidies, deregulate and privatize industries, target inflation, and liberalize capital flows." The national debt, which was largely brought upon by the economic dependence on the U.S. along with increased militarization, created the opportunity for the IMF to do away with what little social safety nets existed in Egypt. For example, the healthcare system was gutted and privatized, while "food subsidies were reduced by more than 50 percent." Maher then points out the impact this privatization of the public sector had and continues to have on Egyptian labor, who he claims have the tremendous disadvantage of living in one of the worst labor rights violating countries in the world. He writes, "The establishment of both a debt cycle through which Western financiers extracted vast wealth from Egypt and growing Foreign Direct Investment meant that vast new

surpluses extracted from Egypt's laborers were divided between the new Egyptian ruling class and their Western backers." Here we see the debt accrued, mainly by the military industrial complex, not only as the result of economic dependence on the United States, but in hindsight, acting as the catalyst for a fundamental shift in Egyptian society that would accelerate the widening gap between the rich and poor, and ultimately set the stage for the 2011 revolt.

Although the process of privatization of public industry was not so black and white, it revealed how the existing power structure in Egypt effectively gained more of a stake in the economy than ever before. Maher notes that the "...political allies of the regime benefitted tremendously from such privatization schemes. State assets were handed over to a domestic oligarchy that included many members of the Army's officer class, forming a new capitalist class closely linked to the state apparatus." This handover Maher refers to didn't exactly happen overnight. According to Roussillon what occurred during this time was "a public-private symbiosis" intended to recapitalize "public property for the benefit of private interests: land, equipment, raw materials, public finances, the state having partially or totally given up the dividends of these resources in order to 'encourage' the private sector to exploit them and increase their value on a basis dubbed more 'rational' than state management" (378). Usually this required experience on the part of a "state bourgeoisie" made up of retired governors, ministers, and military officers using bureaucratic barriers to keep in or out whomever they choose (377). These tactics allowed the military elite to control more tightly the access to the wealth of the nation. Through these means private interests asserted control over such public sectors as foodstuffs manufacturers and tourism, which provides average citizens and small business owners their main access to hard foreign currency (378).

Another consequence of privatization of the public sector is the growth of an informal workforce and the emergence and re-emergence of religious, social, and labor movements. In a comparative study of employment in Egypt between 1998-2006, Ragui Assaad, author of *Egypt's Labor Market Revisited*, finds that, although employment had improved overall since 1998, "Employment growth in the civil service has slowed dramatically and much of the burden of employment creation has shifted to the private sector" (2). Surprisingly, the demographic group most affected by this shift was "young educated women, who had come to rely heavily on the government for employment," causing many of them to opt out of the labor force altogether (2). As a result of this increased reliance on the private sector, "By 2006, 61 percent of all employment was informal"(2). Informal work, by its very nature is sporadic and unstable. Compound this with the privatization of the public sector and a marked shift in wages and job security and you have a recipe for social unrest. Joel Beinin and Hossam El-Hamalawy write in their Middle East Research and Information Project article titled "Strikes in Egypt Spread from Center of Gravity," that the result of opening up the Egyptian economy to the international market "will eventually drive down wages and worsen working conditions. Since there are few trade unions in the private sector, workers lack even the weak institutional mechanism of the state-sponsored union federation to contest the unilateral actions of private capital." It is no surprise then that by 2007 Egypt saw its "longest and strongest wave of worker protests since the end of World War II," in addition to the "222 sit-in strikes, work stoppages, hunger strikes and demonstrations that occurred during 2006." Beinin and El-Hamalawy then point out how these particular protests differ from those of the past and how it reflects the fundamental change that has occurred within the Egyptian economy:

From their center of gravity in the textile sector, the strikes have spread to mobilize makers of building materials, Cairo subway workers, garbage collectors, bakers, food processing workers and many others...But unlike upsurges of working-class collective action in the 1980s and 1990s, which were confined to state-owned industries, the wave that began in late 2004 has also pushed along employees in the private sector. (par.2)

Social and religious groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and the leftist Kifaya (Enough!) Movement, also made strides in voicing their opposition to the regime, albeit for different reasons. Beinin and El-Hamalawy see essentially three camps focusing on three main issues: the "national question," the "social question," and labor (26). In spite of their different grievances and demands, the response by the Mubarak regime showed "signs of desperation, internal division and weakness, lashing out at the Muslim Brothers, bloggers, striking workers and NGO activists alike." It was difficult to clamp down on the dissenting voices given how varied and widespread they had become. The pressure had been building up well before the 2008 recession. Already by May 9, 2007 (the date this article was written) the authors found evidence of a "growing struggle between labor and capital" that was "likely to intensify as the neoliberal project in Egypt advances."

The global economic crisis of 2008 impacted just about every nation tied to the world's largest economy in ways unique to each respective relationship or arrangement with the United States. While trade was directly affected as soon as the crisis hit, the decrease in USAID under the Bush administration, which the Egyptian political and economic elite relied upon to maintain the status quo, as well as a sharp rise in commodity prices (such as wheat for bread making), precipitated the downward spiral of the economy, or at least revealed what had always been a

thin facade of stability. In closing, I will argue that the economic policies implemented by Anwar Sadat, in coordination with the United States in return for economic, military, and technological aid, and that would expand exponentially under Hosni Mubarak, would be stressed beyond their breaking point in the midst of the global recession. I will examine the findings from a February 2010 study of the Egyptian economy conducted by the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt titled "Impact of the Economic Crisis on Trade, Foreign Investment and Employment in Egypt" and written by Arne Klau. I'll briefly review the most striking pieces of data from the report and discuss how they may have potentially inspired the revolt of the following year.

Quite surprisingly, the first determination made by the study is that Egypt is an "example of an emerging open economy responding to the global crisis with considerable success" (4). What constitutes success is vaguely defined, but the study's forward emphasizes the "interdependence between trade, employment and foreign investment...with sound prudential regulations and strong banking sector supervision" (4) Let us then briefly examine the findings reached by this study on the sectors listed above.

From 2004-2008, trade in Egypt contributed to its pre-global crisis stability. During this time "Egypt's merchandise exports more than tripled" (5). By the first half of 2009 exports fell by over 25%. The most drastic decline being petroleum exports at 50%, followed by Non-petroleum exports at 18.9% (11). This is quite alarming considering that the previous 2004-2008 period saw petroleum product exports tripling and non-petroleum exports more than quadrupling (17). The industries responsible for non-oil exports were one of the main contributors to economic growth and employment. Meanwhile, cotton, "once among Egypt's best-known export products and the traditional basis for the local textile industry, has lost in absolute and relative importance" (17). As I have demonstrated above, this is reflected in the massive protests over the

past several years by textile workers in response to the privatization of their industry, and the reduction of wages and worsening working conditions.

Tourism, yet another public industry that has been largely privatized over the years, has, according to the study, yielded a decrease in exports in the post 2008 recession period after a steady rise in the lead up to the global crisis. Although it went down only 3.1%, "The decline peaked in the third quarter of 2008/09 when the yearly growth rate amounted to -17.2%"(26). The Study also notes that "The decline in tourist arrivals has also affected the construction sector and the local sales of the food industries." In reaction to this downturn, some employers in the tourism industry responded with layoffs, while most others issued a hiring freeze, and a reduction in wages, bonuses as well as compulsory vacations (26). Although not mentioned in the study, any drop in tourism most often results in the reduced circulation of foreign currency, especially for small business in Egypt not tied to the power structure and the economic elite. The Textile and clothing industry, which listed 6,480 companies operating in Egypt in 2006 and a total employment figure of 400,000 workers, who, as the study points are paid an average labor cost of one US dollar per hour (comparable to China), saw a massive decline in exports, and the dismissal of 70,000 workers. "The decrease in employment was most pronounced for women and low skilled workers, and among informal companies"(26). Construction was not hit as hard as other sectors but it's rate of growth slowed to 11.4 percent in contrast to the previous year's 15.8% (27). Unlike other industries, the state fuels investment in large infrastructure projects. In fact, half of the \$15 billion stimulus package issued in March 2009, went toward infrastructure. In spite of the capital being pumped into construction, the study determined that it does not translate into "increased or sustained levels of employment" (27). From March to September 2009, "2,667 workers from 29 companies" were laid off (27). The information and communication technology

(ICT) sector, which accounts for 4% of the GDP, with 2,262 companies and 50,000 employees as of 2007 (28). The biggest impact on this sector after the fiscal crisis was essentially a hiring freeze for "non-revenue generating employment" (28). ICT is one of the fastest growing industries in Egypt, which is quite interesting considering the enormous role social media and related technologies played in the 2011 revolt.

While inflation remained more or less steady, food and energy prices skyrocketed. The rise in cost actually occurred before the recession. "Between January 2006 and January 2008, the price of imported food items increased 60%, while the price of domestic food products grew by about 25%" (11). Of course this mostly affected the "middle and lower income groups" who spend a larger share of their earnings on food. The images of protestors holding baguettes in protest attest to these figures, especially since "oil, wheat, and sugar account for some 20% of their total expenditure"(11). In the wake of these sobering statistics, the policy measures taken in response to the global price increases "were heavily biased in favour of Egypt's 5.8 million government officials" while those not employed in the public sector were given "energy subsidies and additional food through "rationed cards"(11). As was noted previously in the paper, the non-government, non-public sector represents a 61 percent majority.

To make matters worse, during this period "large numbers of expatriate workers returned from abroad, in particular from the Gulf countries, leading to a strong fall in remittances"(7). Even with the aid Egypt received in 2008/2009: \$2.269 billion dollars from the United States, \$1.594 billion from Kuwait, \$1.38 billion from the United Arab Emirates, and \$976 million from Saudi Arabia, its economy still experienced a five billion dollar drop. It should be noted that American Economic Aid to Egypt (ESF) had been on the decline for years, but dropped by almost half in 2009, while military aid remained relatively unchanged.

Finally, the author of the study, Arne Klau, makes a stunning prediction, though probably intended as just a cautionary piece of advice for the Egyptian government:

Thus, Egypt's labour market, which even before the outbreak of the crisis was already in a difficult state, has been facing the prospect to accommodate these mostly low-skilled workers, in addition to increasing local pressure caused by the crisis. As a result, the current slowdown particularly affects the poor and bears the risk to exacerbate social discontent. (7)

The immediate economic consequences of the recession between 2008 and the end of 2009 reveal which sectors of Egypt are the most vulnerable. The study has shown that the public sectors that have been privatized, such as textiles, tourism, and retail, felt the full brunt of the global crisis. The informal working class that existed outside of the public sector remained in a state of perpetual financial instability and uncertainty without the benefit of any social protections. In spite of USAID and other remittances, the economic policies championed by Mubarak would precipitate his fall.

Afterword

Irrespective of Mubarak's ultimate fate, the true gatekeepers of these policies, the Egyptian Military, remain fully in power. The infusion of Qatari resources into the elections that saw Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood become the first democratically elected leader of Egypt after the revolution along with a substantial Saudi backed Salafist representation

in parliament, proved only to have been a temporary disruption in the status quo. Although the efforts by the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) were widely viewed as being part of region wide counter-revolution, most dramatically in the Saudi-led suppression of the Bahraini revolt of March 2011, Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces managed to successfully repel all efforts to transform the nation's power structure by forces both foreign and domestic. Morsi's removal in the military coup of July 3, 2013 and the subsequent rise of General Sisi as Egypt's next and current president is a testament to the near complete failure of the Egyptian revolution. Its economic configuration remains largely unchanged and susceptible to the same problems that plagued it over the decades.

This outcome has not gone unnoticed by the Egyptian youth who rose up in 2011, only to see the fruits of their courageous efforts spoiled by the reestablishment of the old power structure. Consequently, the dissenting voices that remain have had to find more creative means of keeping the revolutionary spirit alive. Contemporary Egyptian art, specifically street art, has become one of the most visible torch bearers for the cause. Although it has a flavor all its own, much of the street art has been heavily influenced by Western guerrilla artists, most notably Banksy, and has provided Egyptians with one of the few outlets left to vent their frustrations in an increasingly rigid and oppressive police state.

What this paper highlights most prominently is how deep Egypt's problems are rooted and how they should not be isolated to a certain individual. Mubarak, many forget, was given the presidency after Sadat's assassination. He did not assume power by force, but was chosen to fill this position by SCAF leadership. The military asserted its dominance by controlling the inflow of money, money provided to it initially in order to establish a special relationship with the United States and later to other first world economies as part of an attempt to incorporate it into a

global economic system that values Egypt's potential as a market for commodities. This is not to diminish the role of geo-politics in the region as it applies to ensuring peace with Israel; however, the arrangement the U.S. made with Egypt pre-dates Camp David and must be viewed in the context of a Cold War setting in which the spread of Communism, no matter how exaggerated, was a major selling point for this relationship. Thus Egypt's story can be viewed as one in a long line of victories for Capitalism over Communism, which usually enriched the ruling class at the expense of their people and the long term health of their economies. Eventually these symptoms would appear in America itself, causing even the casual observer in the States to notice a disquieting connection between their misfortune and that of the rest of the world.

Basic Cable

I got a call one Wednesday afternoon in November telling me Omar had died from a heroin overdose. On the other end was his girlfriend of four years, Mona, a struggling filmmaker I knew from the days I fancied myself one. Just in from JFK I was far too jetlagged to recognize the raw number at first with the new phone. Reluctantly I answered and was relieved to hear the subtle Caribbean accent and the soft, but imploring way she often pronounced my name. In fact, not so serendipitously, I was expecting it to be Mona. Although it came a few months too soon I was by now accustomed to hearing from her once or twice about every six months with the expectation of honest feedback on whatever project she had going at the time. Usually with a palpable lump of anxiety and excitement in her throat, she'd mine me for solutions to everything from conceptual snags in the screenplay to lighting and sound techniques, an ongoing back and forth we've shared since our days at film school, before I became a sellout. This time around there was a numb, almost nasal drone to her voice devoid of any desire to talk shop.

Skipping over the usual pleasantries; my dog, my show, her cats, the weather, she revealed to me in short fits of coughing and crying how Omar was found face down in bed by his irate landlord who'd master-keyed his way in after he failed to respond to a frenzy of knocks and phone calls. He barged in to investigate the source of an overnight water leak responsible for the gaping hole in the ceiling of the loft directly below. Apparently, sometime before he succumbed to his addiction Omar left the kitchen faucet running over an elaborate pile of just about every eating utensil and piece of dinnerware he ever owned, effectively redirecting the water everywhere but down the drain.

Omar's addiction, I learned, consumed the better part of their relationship despite Mona's attempts at downplaying it at first when, by all appearances, it seemed only to take up a dark corner of their lives every few days or so. The more frequent it got, no matter how functional an addict he appeared on the surface, the more their relationship began to lose in bliss what it gained in dysfunction and flirtations with disaster. Mona threatened to leave him after a few "close calls" as she put it, highs that seemed from her angle more punishing than euphoric, his friends sitting idly by assuring her he was going to be alright. Even they couldn't deny he wasn't building up the type of tolerance they themselves developed by then, lagging behind in his stamina for debauchery. Mona questioned if he was even a true addict in the strictest sense of the word, as in chemically dependent, or just addicted to what the high offered him, an escape. Yet the more serious she became about packing it up for California without him the more the small baggies kept appearing, sometimes with a side of painkillers and never without whiskey. While relaying this all to me, Mona's exhausting flourishes of well thought out, albeit transparent, excuses and long winded prefaces forced me to step in with the occasional

“Hmm, I see” or “Wow, I had no idea.” Not so much robotic responses of feigned interest as much as recognizing my role of allowing her to catch her breath, and perhaps more so as verbal greenlights to continue on with this narrative of hers she’d clearly been working on well before Omar kicked the bucket. As tempted as I was to crumple up a piece of paper against the phone to create the faulty illusion of static, I dug my nails into the armrest of the sofa and “uh huh-ed” her into the next part of her story.

He started losing weight, she went on, with sudden mood swings and bouts of the nod interweaved throughout. Despite her threats she stayed put though, as it goes, praying in earnest for that expedient consciousness in the cosmos to send down lightning bolts of sobriety and clear thinking, or at the very least, the more earthly powers of a rehab clinic to pull him out of it in time. Afterward nothing but profoundly sunny days and pleasant nights in contrast to the ones wasted. Grief is never assuaged by reason, and it was no less evident in Mona's deflated murmurs of incredulity over the phone. He was 33 years old.

I grabbed a piece of paper and a pen to jot down the funeral information. But it turned out he'd been dead for over a month. I put the pen top back on and stared at the blank paper in silence. She apologized profusely, pleading with me to consider the unprecedented nature of the loss and her initial shock, which seemed permanent. Also there was the issue of time. Although not a practicing Muslim, Omar's only living relatives, his elderly Egyptian mother and an older brother, arranged it so that he'd receive a proper burial within the customary twenty-four hour period, all his hipster art pals be damned.

I had never met his mother but knew his brother Fawwaz, or Frank as he preferred

to be called, somewhat well. He owned a bunch of hookah bars in Manhattan and Brooklyn, quite successful ones actually, and I frequented at least three of these regularly over the years. Mona first introduced me to Omar at The Queen of the Nile in Alphabet City. I recall one night when business was slow Frank took off his owner's hat and nudged his little brother to slide over and make room for him at the table with the rest of us. He loved to talk smack to Omar's friends, all of whom he openly accused of being the kind of trust fund brats who tornado through cities rich in character and history, leaving nothing behind but flatlands of uniformity cloaked as 'culture.' They're then pushed out of the way for even more uninteresting and spotless temples of blandness to be erected by the multinationals and corporate real estate firms facing little to no opposition from city councils and the barely audible voices of those they represent.

"Just look what happened here just in the last ten years. It didn't take long for Manhattan to become one continuous twenty mile loop of the same fucking banks, Starbucks, and mega pharmacies. Yeah it's clean and safe, no complaints here, but in every other way it's dead, no character anymore. The yuppies have won. And these hipsters, you know, you guys...don't think you're any different. Hipsters are just yuppies in silly clothing. Okay I'll give you this, you're just a little more adventurous when it comes to picking a place to live, but that's it. There's nothing special about you," he said, fingering the ice cubes of his third double vodka.

Before downing the rest of it in one huge gulp he went on about having been old enough to have witnessed the aftermath of the first major wave of gentrification on the older order of hipsters who were ultimately forced out, and, certain the fate of the current lot would be a repeat, he seemed to find their instant dismissal of such predictions

strangely satisfying.

"Laugh all you want, but they'll spit you out the same. I hope you like Jersey," he said laughing with hookah smoke shooting out his nostrils. A few of them looked over at Omar as if to curb their reactions to his own threshold for brotherly ball busting. He just shrugged and smiled in a way that suggested they could have at him.

"Look at Karl Marx over here, how many businesses you own again Frank? Ten? Twelve? You probably have more money than everybody at this table put together," shot back Aaron, a graphic arts designer and good friend of Omar's, from the other end of the table.

"Listen jerk-off. I'm not ashamed of my success even if things are the way they are. Plus my businesses add culture to this city. People grab a pipe, a bottle of beer and talk ideas, meet people, compare experiences. Pubs and bars go hand in hand with free-thinking and the freedom to shit on whatever it is you want to shit on without somebody firing you or ruining you in some creative way. Every city needs 'em. So I help keep that going while making a good living for myself and for my family. I sleep good at night. I even help my little brother here pursue his dreams as a painter. I never pretended to be some kinda champion of the working stiff or whatever. Now drink your free beer that's on the house and fuck off," rallied back Frank. Aaron chugged down his beer to the sound of everyone's laughter.

As the night wore on the discussion descended into personal jabs at each other's looks; their overall ridiculousness versus Frank's receding hairline and the living slideshow of fad tattoos he wore proudly on both arms from eras gone by, from New York City's gone by. I was never really the butt of any of the hipster jokes, being

somewhat of a neutral party in these scenes, and when I think about, for most of my life. I'd never taken the trendy counter-culture of the month route, as a lifestyle or even vaguely in my style of dress. This was around the time I began slowly distancing myself from all the cookie cutter personalities in my everyday life. Anybody voluntarily limiting themselves by squeezing into the latest unofficial uniform of a niche subculture or dominant institution and adopting blindly its prepackaged perspective on society, I tried my best to avoid. The vapid, greedy, and pernicious fundamentalist cultures of Wall Street, Main Street, and the side streets included. Unsurprisingly it left me with very few friends.

It was also around the time I started landing better paying jobs in television, a medium for "sell-outs" and "corporate whores," or whatever pseudo-intellectual classification my current gang filed me under. They never came right out with it, just hinted at it in passive aggressive remarks between the occasional pull of a cigarette or swig of beer. All except Omar, when I look back on it.

Although he was a bit younger than I was, he was one of those people who can seem as old or as young as they wanted or needed to be. There was an intelligence in him that recognized who people really were underneath the costumes, and unlike me, an enviable ability to stomach all the posturing. He was certainly more willing than I ever was to dress the part and hang around these people, but with an air of being completely aware of the absurdity of it all. He must have, on some level, generally enjoyed their company, but knowing what I know now, the easy access to drugs had to factor into it enormously.

Even Frank thought his brother seemed out of place amongst them. He extended

that observation to me as well. One night he said to me quite drunkenly, but seriously, "You seem like a reasonable dude. Why do you even hang out with these douche bags?" I shrugged and nodded in Samantha's direction, a more than casual friend of mine at the time who was, unfortunately, tethered to the group in all manners of thought and leisure. "No need for further explanation my friend," he said, grinning knowingly.

In hindsight what stuck out the most that night, when the discussion turned to religion, was Frank's silence. Omar spoke for him instead. "My brother isn't a fan," he said rather underwhelmingly compared to every other subject covered during those early morning hours. As he said it, he looked over at Frank with a loaded smile hinting at a closely guarded 'because' that neither wished to voice. An awkward silence followed until someone in the group suggested plans for food. I was used to Omar not saying much, that was Omar, but Frank's behavior was odd considering how outspoken he always was about everything and especially considering no one else in the group of seven, or eleven (I was on drink six by then) even believed in a god let alone everything else that came with such a decision. I was probably the only admitted agnostic in the bunch.

Still, Frank saw to it that his brother's body was cleaned, wrapped in white shrouds and buried in a plot almost as fresh as his death. All of Mona's talk of oils and white sheets brought me back to those Sunday school stories of catacombs and sleeping Centurions. At the same time the image she painted of the body's close proximity to the soil, as opposed to the insulation of a stained wooden coffin with satin inlay, seemed timeless in its sentiment, even postmodern and new age-y. In place of Golgotha a small cemetery in the newly gentrified Astoria, Queens.

It was the day before Thanksgiving and a passing nor'easter was really sticking it

to the streets of Manhattan. While we talked addiction and loss my usual Upper West Side view of the river and the modest urban sprawl of Jersey was rapidly losing ground. In minutes the advancing storm formed impenetrably white siege walls around my building on 72nd and Amsterdam. Meanwhile Mona took me on all kinds of tangents regarding her life with Omar, personal stuff I simply didn't want to know. I got the growing sense that the main reason she called, aside from informing me of Omar's untimely demise, hadn't yet been broached. I didn't probe. Interviewing people for a living, I've since mastered the art of effectively listening without hearing every single word, a kind of speed listening that makes these situations tolerable. As she continued to pilot this aimless tour to nowhere, I could only sit back on the sofa with the TV remote, watching muted images of rioting in Greece followed by pictures of the latest celebrity offspring. I changed the channel only to catch my own mug in the middle of a promo, something I haven't gotten used to, not to mention the sound of my own voice. I couldn't click it away fast enough. Two quarters of a *Seinfeld* episode later, she was still going strong. Gambling on the fact that even she'd run out of gas from all this circling around and come down eventually, I was perhaps a little too generous with the landing space I allotted her. A part of me wanted to think it was loneliness, a primordial void she desired only for me to fill.

Maybe it was just wishful thinking on my part, listening fixedly to Mona's gentle exhalations and soft lip smacks between thoughts; cutting reminders of those nights together, vivid flashes of climaxes and early morning pillow talk, latent feelings of longing reemerging even stronger after years of effectively keeping them at rest with sixty hour work weeks, booze, and other women incapable of positively filling in the

negative spaces of her absence.

Over the years Mona and I occupied the circles of friendship and romance but never quite found long lasting harmony in the darker shaded cross section of the relationship Venn. After film school in San Francisco, I tried my luck in L.A. She went up to Seattle to check out the Grunge scene during its decline. I figured she planned on documenting it all in film, the fading plaid and the suicides, but instead she fell in love with some lead guitarist in a fledgling indie rock band that decided the Lower East Side of Manhattan was the new music mecca at the time.

By the time I gave up on Hollywood, which didn't take very long, and Uhailed my life back to New York, she had already made the move out to Brooklyn, the latest epicenter of all things cool, apparently. We met up from time to time, grabbing pizza, drinks, walking the Brooklyn Bridge, melodramatically lamenting the death of independent film in the comic book era on our way back from viewings of pretentious cinema in claustrophobic theaters. All of this tag team idling gave way to the next inevitable stage. Three full weeks of transcendent sex, the kind I feared I could hold onto for a lifetime, but was too ill prepared for and not willing just yet at that age to invest in completely. It was right around the time I received an email that would change my life forever. The brief note initiated the hiring process for what would become my first hosting gig for a travel show on basic cable, *One Way Ticket*, which is in its fifth season. When I told her I intended to take the job and to embrace this sudden career change she became noticeably more estranged. I suspected she envisioned the two of us struggling together through the nine circles of the film industry, backed by a suicide pact if it went bust.

I had never planned on acting or in any way being in front of the camera, let alone the face of one of the flagship shows of the network. At the time I was desperate for a job and as luck would have it some executive or an assistant saw a short travel documentary I created for a now defunct internet startup magazine who then tracked me down somehow. Before I knew it I was boarding planes on a weekly basis to cover local music and art scenes all over the world on the company's dime. It was a hit, at least in terms of basic cable numbers. As a result I saw less and less of Mona. Dinners turned into quick lunches, lunches into the occasional cup of coffee, until she was completely out of the picture.

Several months would pass before we'd hear from each other again. Days after having wrapped the first season of the show I get this cheery little message from Mona expressing how much she missed my friendship, inviting me out to some hookah bar in Alphabet City to hang out with her and a few friends. When I arrived, she waved me down from across the dim, smoke filled room seated at a table with two of her girlfriends, Natasha and Emily, and some guy I'd never seen before. When I got closer and saw her hand in his back pocket I felt duped.

Brimming with revenge and what she hoped would be my imminent obliteration, she introduced Omar to me as her "love." I soldiered on though, pretending not to be slighted in the least, even winning over the table with funny anecdotes of my new adventures abroad. As the night went on I locked in on Emily, her friend of three years whom I'd never seriously given much attention to in any sense. A few drinks and empty compliments later she was on my side of the booth eager to help scratch an itch across my inner thigh I didn't know I had. By the time Emily worked her way up to my ear,

nibbling my lobe and whispering into it vodka-inspired suggestions for later, I caught Mona, initially brimming with nostril-flaring triumph now staring in despondency at the sudden reversal of her airtight battle plan. Although the usually corrosive atmosphere birthed by more cocktails and the progression of time could've ignited at any moment, the night ended on a good note, an extra tight hug goodbye in place of what would've been the impetus for make-up sex on any other occasion had we been alone.

With the lines of communication back open, I met with Mona and Omar quite frequently, eventually introducing some of my friends into the mix. Omar must have picked up on the not so subtle intimations of persistent feelings between her and me; the measured flattering, the reciprocal laughter at each other's corny jokes, the shared suggestions and concerns, and the looks, always the looks. He never confronted me about it either way. When the show was picked up for four more seasons my workload multiplied exponentially, bleeding out any semblance of a social life. Before I knew it I was only seeing Mona a handful of times a year and always around friends. Had it not been for her occasional phone call every now and then I would've thought her out of my life for good, taking a chunk of me with her.

The tone of this call was different, not wholly detached from our history, but at the same time with a businesslike quality that was undeniable. She was either working me or just really bad at closing. The more Mona spoke the more she seemed reluctant to bring it up, whatever *it* was. I saved her the trouble.

“Mona I want to be blunt with you,” I said.

“Okay, be blunt with me then,” she said, almost sounding relieved.

“You know I feel really bad about the whole thing and I'm very touched you

called because I wouldn't have found out about Omar otherwise, or at least not for a long time. But where are we going with this?"

"No, you're right. I haven't been completely honest with you."

"Why not?"

"I want to see you. I need to talk to you. There's something I've been sitting on that Omar wanted you to have."

"Omar wanted me to *have*?"

"Before he died your name came up a lot. He thought you would be able to help him with something. He was mulling it over for a long time. He knew he could trust you. But see the thing is, there's more to it than trust."

"What did he need from me?"

"There was this idea he was obsessed with, kept bringing it up. It consumed him. He worked on it day and night during the last few months of his life. I'd never seen him work like that, so hard for so long. He must've foreseen his own death. Don't ask me how, he must have. Whatever happened he made sure it wouldn't die with him," she said, before abruptly falling silent.

"What wouldn't die with him?"

She didn't speak.

"Mona?"

"I can't. You have to see it for yourself. It won't do it any justice over the phone."

"Try me."

"No, you have to see it for yourself. Trust me Jamie."

"I can come over in a little bit if you want?" I asked, my heart beating in Conga

rhythms awaiting her answer.

I honestly could care less what her boyfriend wanted to pass on to me from the after-life. I hadn't seen her in so long that the idea of being there now, in her apartment, thrilled me into a kind of panic. I wanted her more than ever.

"That might be tricky. I'm in a rehab facility in Pennsylvania right now."

"You're kidding me. For what?"

"A few things. I checked myself in the week after he died."

I wasn't entirely surprised. After all, the love of her life was a heroin addict surrounded by a diversity panel of other fiends I knew well. I doubt she went along for the ride without having sampled any of the reality-coping chemicals that kept that particular world in sync.

"I don't know what to say. How're you now?" I asked.

"I'm great actually. I'll be out pretty soon, in about two weeks."

"I want to see you when you do."

"Oh, you'll see me. You can bet on that."

Although tremendously disappointed, I was just relieved to finally be off the phone. The nine hour flight back from Italy was surprisingly demanding on my body, and Mona's hour and a half long one way conversation practically depleted the reserves of adrenaline keeping me going. I needed a stiff drink to make the transition less jarring. As I rounded the corner into the kitchen to grab a bottle of scotch I found my beagle, Samson, working on the ten pound artisanal salami I smuggled back from a quaint little village in Tuscany. After I wrestled it from his jaw I plopped down on the chair with my drink, constantly aware of his dejected gaze over his spotted shoulder. "It's for your own

good Samps. Chase any tail while I was away? Huh boy? Besides your own?" I said, relaxed now as the alcohol began mending the superficial wounds of mind and body. Once he saw me reaching for his favorite bag of treats we were friends again.

I got to work on the sauce-smothered pork ribs I picked up on the way home. Tearing open the white paper bag drenched in the grease from the soggy fries, I couldn't wrap my head around what it could possibly be that Omar wanted me to have. I tried in vain to recall all the conversations we've had, retrospectively digging for clues in what was said as much as what wasn't. Most perplexing of all, why during those few clear moments between black tar binges did he think of me for any reason? The more I gave it some thought, the less I wanted anything to do with it.

No matter how many fanciful delusions I've successfully shed from my adult brain, superstitions continue to cling stubbornly, and being on the receiving end of a gift from a guy who may or may not have accidentally killed himself had bad luck written all over it. Then again, I'd break a hall of mirrors and walk under a baker's dozen of ladders just to see Mona again. Gray snow was forming small mounds on the windowsills. Inspired by Samson now sound asleep on his Droopy Dog cushion, I finally went to bed, my own bed at last.

Thanksgiving dinner with my parents was delightfully predictable. The food along with the accompanying nagging was exactly what I needed. Being on the road so long you take for granted just how much good old fashioned family dysfunction

completes a meal.

That Friday morning I woke up not exactly sure where I was at first. The past three mornings I came to in a Sheraton just outside of Rome, my own bed on 72nd, and now my parent's lumpy couch in Westchester, respectively, each time feeling groggier than before. I needed to get a grip, maybe some fresh air.

While most Americans were out looking for deals on shiny new objects to bring home, I decided to do the opposite and get rid of the assortment of faded relics from previous Black Fridays laying around my parent's backyard. It was becoming an eyesore, all the junk that'd been accumulating back there since they first bought the place, the same year Nixon flashed the double peace signs. I loaded the back of Dad's ancient navy blue Dodge Ram Van, empty now as it no longer housed his electrician's tools, spare parts, bundled wires, and milk crates. The engine and transmission were both a good decade younger than the van itself, but just one look at it and the only reasonable explanation for what kept it running must've been his generous church donations. I offered to buy him a new car several times, nearly signing on the dotted line at the dealership once or twice, but he declined on the grounds that T.V. money was unpredictable and that I should save every penny. I borrowed a pair of his old heavy duty gloves and got to work.

"Be careful with that Jamie," yelled my father as I nearly popped a blood vessel in my right eye lifting the rusty lawnmower up against the bumper.

"There's like six thousand scratches on this bumper, what's another one," I yelled back.

"I wasn't talking about the bumper. I'm talking about the lawnmower, be more

careful," he said, instantly looking down, realizing that I instantly understood.

"Oh. So you're planning on getting something for this piece of shit? It's been sitting in the back unused for what ten, twelve years? You can stick your finger through here. Look at this rust," I said slapping the side of it.

"Stop that. I know a guy who can save it."

"Jesus?"

I loaded the rest of the discarded garden gnomes and gizmos that littered the landscape of my youth and off we went. Although cold, the day couldn't be more ideal with puffs of immaculately white clouds hanging contentedly in an eternity of blue. The warm glow of the amber-rich sunlight coated over the salvage and junkyard section of town a nostalgic quality of forgotten innocence, of a simpler time that never quite existed and always reeked, without complaint, of gasoline and grease. It was the smell left after all the marketing, advertising, and sex wore off, where commodities, stuff, came to lay sideways and mangled in pits of refuse.

After pulling into a fenced in lot of lawnmowers, snow blowers, and about a thousand other kinds of machines of burden, my father got out and popped open the back doors of the van to show it to his guy, whose name I soon learned was Pedro, an old Portuguese man with Popeye-like tattooed forearms and a surprisingly full head of hair. After giving it a careful look they both went into his office. As I waited I pulled out a cigarette and lit it. Two of Pedro's workers, a scrawny young guy in a Black Sabbath t-shirt, and an older man in painters' pants, came over to the van to retrieve the lawnmower.

My father had disappeared inside the office for a solid half hour. Knowing all too

well of his penchant for haggling, the kind of which even Pedro hadn't seen in his seventy plus years on two continents during times of war and impoverished peace. Not expecting to see his face anytime soon, I got out to stretch my legs and check out the John Deere's in the lot. As a kid I always fantasized about owning a huge mansion surrounded by vast swaths of land just so I could justify having one of these to ride around on my own property. It wasn't until I got a little older that I realized people with that kind of money don't cut their own grass.

"Cocksucker." I heard someone shout behind me. I turned around to find an elderly man hunched over a crate of spare parts throwing around all kinds of four letter words the more he dug through it.

"Hey mister, you're workin' here?" he asked me in a foreign accent.

"Me? No, I'm just waiting for someone."

"I pay almost one thousand dollar for the snow blower and now it no workin." he said, talking more to himself than to me.

"No warranty?" I asked.

"It finish six month ago."

"Have you spoken to Pedro?"

"Ah this guy...He don't know nothin' "

"Did you try the store you bought it from? They can order it for you."

"No too much. They ask four hundred fifty dollars," he said, before turning around to face the street and yelling out at an idling Toyota Corolla with a young boy behind the wheel pretending he was steering it around some imaginary race track. "Hey walak. Itfey'l sayarah."

"My son he playing too much," he said, shaking his head then turning once again to make sure the car was turned off.

"What language was that if you don't mind me asking?"

"Araby," he said.

"Oh you speak Arabic. Can you teach me some? I'm going to Egypt in a few weeks."

"Oh yeah. For what you go to Egypt?"

"I host a show on T.V. *One Way Ticket*, ever hear of it?"

I'd never seen anyone so emphatically say no before.

"I don't blame you. Basically we show music and art from around the world. We're going to interview a few people there in Egypt like umm, Jalilah, Jalilah Faras. You know her?"

"No."

"What country are you from?"

"I'm comin from Tunisia."

"You know we almost decided on Tunisia or Algeria."

"Why no Tunisia?"

"I dunno. Maybe it's a little too exotic. You understand exotic? Anyway, most people, including me and everyone I work with, we know close to nothing about the place. Plus it's on the border with Libya right? We're afraid that clusterfuck would find us somehow."

"I live there for forty-seven year before I come here. It is safe even now with all the problem still."

“What problems?”

“Politics and you know...no good now.”

"Wait...isn't that the country that started it all? The whole Arab Spring?"

"Yes, we start but it not like Libya or Syria.”

“The fruit seller set himself on fire right? Mohammed something?”

“Bouazizi. Yes he set fire for himself.”

"Is that what really happened? Shit, why'd he do that?"

"He did that because our government, crooks, deny him to make a living. He sell the fruit and the vegetables on the push...the cart, and they take this away. When he went to make complain for the government they treat him like dog. You know, he no have enough money for *baksheesh*."

"*Baksheesh*?"

"You know, ahh...bribe to pay police or officials. He is stuck."

"So he just burned himself alive?"

"Yes. But I think for other, different things," he said, gesturing at something invisible to his left.

"Like what, freedom?"

"No, no freedom. The problem is if you know some guy or are in a family for the government or the rich man, they give you job or they give you business loan, but if you don't know then there is no work. You feel you're not a man. There is many with no job like this."

"I get it, connections and all that. But that's how it is everywhere right?"

“Sure of course. But here in America you can get something good without family

name or something like this. In Tunisia is very, very corrupt and some have billions of dinars in the bank and big mansion and African servant and driver because they have big friend in government or army and everyone else, you know, sell fig on the highway or work small carpenter or like me have to come to America or go to Saudi to find hard work like me and my brother family."

"So your people just had enough huh?"

"What people will not?"

"Is everything better now in your country?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Nothing has come good, everything worse. They find way to save the old way and make it brand new."

Just then my father emerged from the office all smiles. He gave me one of his famous "what're you doing? let's go" looks. I wished my new friend luck finding what he was looking for.

"Farid al-Atrash," he said, to my back.

"What was that?" I said, turning around.

"Farid al-Atrash is very good Egyptian singer."

"Oh yeah? Where can I find him? Is he based out of Cairo?"

"No, no he died forty year ago."

"Oh...Well thanks for the tip," I said, getting into the van.

"What the hell was that about?" asked my Dad, with the smell of cold air fresh on his coat.

"You took forever."

"Well it's a good thing I didn't listen to you. Thirty five bucks. Howdya like that."

he said, strapping on the seat belt.

"You're shittin' me. For that piece of crap?"

"Yeah, yeah Mr. big time Hollywood. Go on drive, drive."

Having stayed the weekend I left that Sunday afternoon dragging Samson behind, who looked visibly depressed knowing he wouldn't have my mother around anymore to shower him with undivided attention twelve hours a day. Once home I got to work on the voice over script for the Italy post-production grind. I filled the coffee carafe to the brim and sat down to an empty template hoping words would eventually pour out, no matter how clumsily. I'd organize them into coherent strings of thought once the caffeine kicked in.

As it was, I was having a hard enough time without Mona's voice popping up in Whack-A-Mole fashion between each attempt at a complete sentence. The more brutality I put behind each reflexive blow with the foam mallet to clear my mind, the more futile my efforts seemed to be. In fact, ever since we last spoke, it dawned on me that this was the first time in days I was truly alone, not a soul around, save the dog, to distract me from the destructive potential of silence. It left me to contend with voices, past and present, interweaved with regrets, triumphs, and cringe worthy episodes exaggerated by the passage of time. Had it not been for the Lions game and the ubiquitous white noise of arguing parents, I would have been forced to co-exist, like I was at this moment, with Mona's haunting vignettes of Omar's perpetual winter of dissolution, of gray skies and bare trees for every season.

Sampson's sudden barking freed me from this morose trance and into the state of icy detachment I so desperately needed to finish the first draft. Having worked in writer's rooms fueled almost exclusively by a certain superhuman focus attributed to short trips to the bathroom, reemerging with flaring nostrils and new angles, I had to sustain this wave for the next few days with only double brewed coffee and psychological cold turkey. Already behind on the pre-production phase of the Cairo show, the pressure was on to bang this one out in record time.

The thought of visiting Egypt alone accounted for an extra pack or two of *Camel's* that week, no pun intended. Just going by the daily chaotic scenes on the news of screaming fanatics, sabotaged pipelines, sectarian clashes, and reports of highly trained police being gunned down in droves, I was pretty nervous about this upcoming trip to say the least. If the law was getting it, what were the odds against a pasty John C. Reilly looking rube like me to fare in such a place? My producers assured me I had only the UV index to worry about. Their feigned optimism was painfully transparent, only serving to validate my own neurotic constructions of worst case scenarios. That with the knowledge that most of them would be roughing it out with thirty-six dollar martinis on the Upper East Side while I descended head first down the devilish whirlpool of the post-revolutionary maelstrom six thousand miles away. As much as I put up a fight against their plans for a string of Middle Eastern episodes in the midst of a regional conflagration, my clout, what little of it I enjoyed, couldn't alter reality to my liking.

The decision, I later found out, came all the way from the top, at the behest of the network's new part-owners from the previous year's merger, a Qatari-based media syndicate *Al Haya*. They bought out Daniel Gill's stake in the company for some absurd,

suspiciously inflated amount. The former governor of Tennessee and self-proclaimed internet pioneer couldn't resist the offer. When the news broke he was verbally lambasted, called a traitor to his country by right and left wing media pundits alike. Their collective cries left him little choice but to release a statement to the press, a short letter essentially pointing out how money has no borders and no allegiance to any particular flag. It transcends patriotism and the space-time continuum and so forth, but not exactly in those words.

What didn't help matters either, in the event of a worst case scenario, was the certain unlikelihood of any anti-western blood thirsty mob sparing my life on account of having enjoyed my work in *Boogie Nights*. I was screwed no doubt. I took a deep breath hoping to activate the more rational part of my brain, the one very familiar with the media's responsibility to sensationalize everything, especially as it pertains to all things foreign and brown. Ironically, that coupled with my ignorance on Egypt in just about every conceivable way gave me some hope. The universe has a way of protecting all of us bumbling idiots. It's the ones in the know who usually find themselves at the other end of a pair of rusty pliers in a windowless room.

But I guess I wasn't completely in the dark. For a while there no one near a television screen or news site could avoid the recurring image of their fallen dictator, Mubarak, holed up in some reinforced glass jail cell ala Hannibal Lector, perpetually behind a pair of Ray Ban's for some odd reason. As he awaited his fate in Arab purgatory, in his place came a new, but not much younger bearded man with fresh eyes, not to say ideas, and an exaggerated gait or stride backed by the democratic process. I didn't exactly follow his presidency the way I would something important, like say the NBA playoffs,

however, when I did it almost never seemed to be working out. He tried his luck for some time before securing his own pair of bracelets. The black berets kindly escorted him the fuck out of office and into a jail cell of his own. His political party, the Muslim Brotherhood, cried bloody coup, puffed up their chests and got shot up pretty good. It was ugly all the way through. Tensions were perpetually high. I was just praying *Walk Hard* was a massive hit in Egypt.

Whatever I didn't learn on my own or from the half-assed research forwarded to me by the production assistants, the producers saw to it I'd glean from an expert on the Middle East, some cultural anthropologist at NYU we paid, not so generously, to personally provide me with a crash course in Egyptian politics and culture.

Following a marathon of writing, which after a few dozen do-overs resulted in one lackluster introductory sentence that I wound up scrapping anyway, not to mention the self-loathing which ensued, I had to pull on the emergency break, call it a day. I decided to take up a friend's offer for drinks that evening.

Matt was already on round number two by the time I arrived. He invited me out after hearing I was back in town. We were old college buddies who managed to stay in touch despite our radically different career paths, not to mention taste in women and tolerance levels for alcohol. In Matt's case, the latter clouding the former, and resulting in two failed marriages in three years. For almost a decade he worked as a theoretical physicist, which is to say as an adjunct professor in applied math at a small technical college in Indiana. He returned to New York disillusioned by the ghostly glow of dead stars, walking instead toward another kind of fleeting light, of ticker boards on the floor of the stock exchange. Matt never looked back, making sure to flush out his cherished

pipe-dream of tacking on to Einstein and Hawking a new paradigm of spatial brilliance with double whiskeys and spiced rum. After I informed him I'd be visiting Egypt, he mulled it over for a second, projecting whatever was in his head onto the surface of *Jack Daniels* in his glass.

"I went to Egypt once. Never told you did I?" he said, still looking down.

"Don't think so. What were you doing there?" I asked.

"This was before the whole revolution business. When I was over at Schwartz the Egyptians were looking for a loan."

"What for?"

"Hard to say. If we agreed it would've just been one of many loans from various sources. They were going all in for something huge. We're talking, all told, sixty billion minimum just to get it off the ground. Absurd amount for such a broke ass shithole. We basically laughed them away."

"Why did you go then?"

"Well it was before we realized they were crazy. Schwartz sent a team to see it for ourselves."

"See what exactly?"

"They had this idea in mind for an entirely new city. To build one from scratch. And not just any city, but one that would replace Cairo."

"A new capitol?"

"Yeah. I guess they saw the writing on the wall. The revolution was only two or three years away by that point. Basically the plan was to ditch Cairo, move all the government and financial buildings, offices, anything that matters really, and set up shop

in this new city of the future type of deal.”

“Where in Egypt will they put it?”

“They showed us some strip of desert on a map. They’re nuts. Actually pretty shrewd but nuts.”

“Why shrewd?”

“Think about it you make a city less important, if you neuter it, like what they were planning or still might be planning to do with Cairo, and you stave off revolutions, social unrest, give government and financial guardians a buffer zone when shit pops off again. Plus all the foreign dignitaries, corporations, anybody who wants to do any kind of substantial business in Egypt must stay in this new shiny underpopulated place with friendly, familiar coffee houses and banks. Make it less local feeling. Internationalize it. What was that I read the other day in this article....Disneyfication? This way guests won’t have to deal with the beggars and the filth. Poor people are bad for business.”

“What made your people say no in the end?”

“American firms used to have a lot in store for Egypt. We had faith in it becoming one of the few major emerging economies for a while, like Brazil or India. It fit a lot of the criteria, large population of cheap labor, very little political resistance, these guys are bought and paid for, plus it’s smack dab in the middle of the world, at the door of Africa and the Middle East. Problem is they never got their act together. They turned out being that straight A student in elementary school who grew up to be one of the guys on the C-train with *A&P* bags for shoes.”

Even with his head start I couldn’t keep up, let alone catch up. I threw in the towel by the fourth stiff drink, rewarding myself with an enormous order from one of the

ten-odd burger joints in a one block radius, and calculating, while enjoying every last bite, the ratio of deforested Amazonian acreage to pounds of flame broiled patties. One day I'll listen to that voice inside my head, the one shouting about ethical consumption and postponed enlightenment, and to finally opt for the consumer equivalent of hemlock, of choosing to no longer participate in the freak show, the vicious cycle. When I looked up from my plate, Matt was already gone. A teenage employee in a blue polo shirt and khakis was flipping chairs up on the tables as the light over the griddles went out.

The next morning I awoke feeling a little too well rested, certain I'd overslept. The odd numbers on the alarm clock confirmed it. My phone was blinking, indicating a voicemail from my producer, Carla, kindly demanding that I show up for a lunch meeting at noon to discuss a list of business I glazed over during a powerful yawn. It was already close to eleven fifteen. By the time I showered, shaved, and dressed it was eleven thirty. Not exactly my best time, but in my defense five minutes of it were spent wrestling with Samson on the floor before changing his water and topping off his bowl.

I took a cab down to network headquarters in midtown, the whole time trying to get a handle on the driver's name. It sounded Middle Eastern enough for me to initiate a friendly conversation. An impromptu opportunity to brush up on my research with someone who knew the region well enough to leave it.

"Bukrah, bukrah. Ya'la ma'a salameh." he said.

"Huh?" I asked.

“Oh no I was talking on the phone. Sorry mister.”

“No problem Mr. Ibn Gazowee?” I said, trying to pronounce the name on the ID behind the plastic next to a picture of him presumably taken during sunnier times.

“Gha-zaw-wi,” he corrected me with an exaggerated annunciation that bordered on condescension.

“Mind if I ask you where you're from?” I said, as least threateningly as possible. He studied my face in the rear view before gripping the wheel with both hands and looking back at the road.

“I'm from Egypt,” he said, almost in a mumble.

“Must be my lucky day. I'll be there in a few weeks, on business. Know of any good places to eat I should check out?”

“Well, it's been a long time since I've been there. I don't know what's still open.”

“When was the last time you were home?”

“Like ten, eleven years ago.”

“That's a long time. How long have you been in the States?”

“Ten, eleven years. It was a direct flight.”

“You never wanted to go back? Not even for a visit?”

“I like it here. I have wife and two sons. I don't want to go back really.”

“Cause of the problems? The violence?”

“What problems? There is no violence in the way you think, it's very safe. My father and uncles and their children are still there and they have no problem.”

“I guess the news tells a different story then.”

“The news is bullshit. It's either biased towards American interests, Gulf interests,

or Egyptian state propaganda. Better off not paying attention to any of it.”

“So why haven't you been back?”

“Because I don't miss it. I wasted too many good years there for nothing. At least here I'm working steadily, even if it's doing this.”

“What were you doing there? No jobs?”

“It's more than just no jobs. It's...see my parents made sure me and my brothers got everything we needed to become something, English language prep schools, tutors, the works. When I did, became a chemical engineer, it was like all of a sudden the world stop spinning. After that I sat at home for years. I could only find work doing bullshit IT jobs, running virus scans for law students. So it's not just no work it's that there was nothing there and nothing to come either, so I came here.”

“Did you try engineering in the States?”

“No they wouldn't accept my college credits, forget my engineering degree. Look at this asshole,” he honked, and tailgated a green sedan with New Jersey plates for two city blocks.

“Then you must've threw a party when they kicked out Mubarak?”

“I didn't feel anything to be honest.”

“Really? Didn't you at least think he was responsible for a lot of that?”

“Of course, sure. It's just I look at it like if a thief comes in the middle of the night and steals all your things then sells it all on the black market, would it make you feel that much better if the police catch him even though all your stuff, the most important things in the world to you and the memories tied to those things are gone forever? You can't get it back.”

“But at least there was some kind of justice served right?”

“Kangaroo courts. He'll get off.”

“I don't know if that's simple this time. Not even the U.S stood by him when he fell. Who'd stick their neck out?”

“But they stood by him for thirty years until the very week they realized he couldn't be saved. Then they washed their hands and spoke of democracy and the 'people.' All those judges, the whole legal system there, they all wink at each other when the cameras are off. It's a show, a game.”

“I see.”

“So what's your business in Egypt in a few weeks?”

“I work in television.”

“The media...well listen I don't care two ways about politics. We're just having a conversation right? I don't care really, you know,” he said with an uneasy grin on his face.

I instantly got the sense I shouldn't have mentioned that. From then on he never as much as glanced up at me. He either pretended to take a phone call or forced someone on the other end into one. “What was so bad about what I said?” I thought. Was it too vague? Something inherently clandestine-sounding to the right ear? Did he have something to hide or did he just feel generally exposed in front of someone with the means to give his words life beyond the confines of his yellow cab? I had a strong feeling he was quietly pinning me as some kind of Homeland Security plant hired to get him jammed up in some textbook entrapment case and on the next windowless red-eye to Guantanamo. I thought I seemed transparent enough. The road to hell is paved...

Aside from the noisy suspension, the remainder of the ride was uncomfortably quiet. I made sure to tip him better than I normally would once we arrived, a cheap price for such a valuable lesson in what it looks like from his end.

Running late by this point, I squeezed by security, hitched a quick elevator ride up to the thirteenth floor and paced toward Carla's office, the very last door at the end of the hall, greeting the familiar faces along the way trapped behind desks or drowsily tending to papers shooting out of copy machines. Slightly out of breath I was met by her assistant Lara, a twenty something red-haired beauty with a nearly indiscernible Irish accent.

"Ah Mr. Webber. Ms. Damon had to step out for just a second. Please have a seat inside. Coffee, tea?"

"No Thanks. Wow it's beige in here. What happened?" I said turning into Carla's office.

"She's been putting her lipstick on crooked. She does weird things lately. I never ask."

As ten minutes turned to twenty, turned to thirty I grew restless, getting up from the beige couch to walk across the beige rug over to one of the four beige walls lined with framed pictures of Carla on vacation with her family, at galas, premiers, holiday parties. An object on her desk caught my eye. Sticking out from under a stack of scripts was the bottom half of a forest green velvet necklace case with genuine gold accents. I lifted the pile of paper enough to reveal the long rectangular shape of the box with a crown at the top under which was more gold writing, some kind of Arabic calligraphy I learned much later on. Then suddenly I heard the familiar trollop of those thick-soled sandals Carla loved to wear no matter the season. I hustled back to the couch just in time before she

strutted in clutching a diet soda with a lipstick smeared straw bouncing around with every step, instantly filling the room with a much needed burst of life and liberally applied perfume.

“Jamie sorry to keep you waiting. I just came from Yuri's room. The Italy footage looks great,” she said.

“I got a look on the plane. You were right about that guy, Ray.”

“Best DP for the money. You look well rested Jamie. How was your Thanksgiving?”

“It was...You didn't really call me down here to talk about what kinda pie I had? So what's the emergency Carla? Don't get me wrong, any excuse to see your lovely face but what's the problem?”

“It's about the Egypt show. Waleed wants a list of the subjects we're interviewing beforehand. He needs them by Friday.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Jamie don't be difficult. He just wants to see a preliminar--”

“I don't give a shit what he wants to see. In the five years we've been at this no one has ever asked to see anything. And now all of a sudden we have to satisfy the demands of this clown? What did you tell him?”

“I told him you'd have the list ready for him by Friday?”

“Well call him back and tell him it's not gonna happen.”

“I don't see what the big fuss is about. Plus it's the third time you deny his requests. It won't bode well for you later.”

“What the hell does that mean? Later?”

“It doesn't mean anything. Look he just needs this list for...look Egypt is in a fragile state he says. He wants to make sure we don't cause some international crisis with our little show, especially with his family's name on the product now.”

“Don't believe him Carla, you're smarter than that. He just wants to micromanage every goddamn detail so he can feel like a big shot. We say yes to this and we'll be putty in his hands. Trust me. What is he claiming to be afraid of anyway? That these people might be terrorists or something?”

“Not exactly. He thinks...I'll level with you. He wants to make sure they don't mention certain things, things that could be viewed as too sensitive for the region. He would rather the focus remain on Egypt. This is what he told me.”

“Sensitive? He's an Arab right, what does he care if Israel is mentioned once or twice. It comes with the territory over there. Anyway, I don't know of one artist or musician we're thinking of whose work touches on the Israeli conflict. But say they did? Wouldn't he be for that kinda thing anyway?”

“He wasn't talking about Israel honey.”

“Then what?”

“He was being quite vague but I got the sense that he wants the focus of the show to remain on Egypt, keep it very local, and not turn into a marathon of bashing Qatar, which according to him is a fashionable thing to do nowadays in Egypt.”

“Do you even hear yourself? You just gave this guy the greenlight to censor the show.”

“Not at all Jamie. It's no different than when Kyle was in charge. He's a very nice man and he really loves the show. He was a fan before the buyout. He likes you a lot. He

wants to us succeed.”

“You're the most jaded, cynical person I've ever met. Now all of a sudden you think this walking cliché, this fucking oil prince with a Bugatti in seven different colors for each day of the week really has our best interests at heart? He wipes his ass with what this show grosses in a year.”

“You're being unfair to him. Like it or not we have to answer to him now. And what he wants isn't so crazy.”

“He can fire me if he wants. I don't care anymore. He's not having my list. Not gonna happen.”

“You're putting me in a tight spot here. What should I tell him?”

“Tell him in America monarchies are obsolete, a relic of a dumber time. And I'm not one of his subjects.”

“It's worse than that, he's your boss and you're under contract. I'll say you don't have a list yet. I'll buy you some time, that's all I can do.”

After stopping by my own sad little office, which functioned more than anything else as a glorified storage unit, I grabbed a quick bite to eat at a favorite Italian deli down the street and headed home with a nap on the agenda.

Before I could step foot into the lobby, Art, the sixty-something year old daytime doorman who moonlighted as the host of a ham radio show about conspiracy theories and reptilian investment bankers and who took a liking to me since I never looked at him funny for it, beat me to the punch, intercepting me outside for a brief word. The expression he wore wasn't the kind I was used to by then, the one that usually

accompanied news of shadowy dealings at the annual Bilderberg conference or what the Federal Reserve had in store for the oblivious ninety-nine percent. This seemed colored by the more tangible, mundane realities of this realm.

"Mr. Webber, before you step in there's someone here to see you. Normally I don't let people wait inside unless I know them but this young woman came in very flustered, a little distraught even, and she looks innocent enough. She's sitting in the lobby. Says she's an old friend of yours, Mona?" he said, leveling out his gray tinted frames across the bridge of his button nose.

"Mona?" I whispered to myself, wondering what she was doing back so soon from rehab.

She rose to her feet as I walked in, flashing a look of genuine delight upon meeting my eyes with hers, though circled by the dark lines of mourning, or was it martyrdom? She bent down to pick up a black leather portfolio bag from off the floor, catching her big wavy-brimmed hat in time before it fell off. I hadn't seen her in over a year. Her wardrobe matured since then, though now more hipster chic than full blown. Most people usually get it out of their system in stages I noticed. The silky orange blouse and gray leggings worked wonders on her flawless body and looking up after readjusting her hat, she caught me staring at the familiar contours from two points in time. I hugged her and scooped up the bag, all while noticing Art out of the corner of my eye giving one of those expressions that can only be described as a telepathic high five between two men not possessing all the information but optimistic nonetheless. Her heels cut the six inch height difference in half, bringing us almost at eye level with one another as we entered the elevator.

"You said two weeks?"

"Yeah, I cut it short. I feel great," she said, maintaining a smile.

"Well you look it too," I said, causing her to turn serious and proceed to nervously caress the teal coat draped over her forearm.

"What did I say?"

"It's nothing."

The elevator doors parted and we walked silently down the hall to my door, 17C. I hung up Mona's peacoat and set her portfolio bag on the coffee table while she was busy rubbing Samson's cheeks.

"You don't leave him alone all day do you?"

"I have a dog walker come by. You want a drink? Oh. Sorry about that."

"No it's okay. But it's a little early for a drink ain't it?"

"Is it your turn to call me an alcoholic?"

"I watch your show. I know you are. Don't you have any say in how you're portrayed, like final cut?"

"I tell them not to edit anything out. Plus it's cut to look worse than it really is, you know, for effect."

"How does making you look like that help the show?"

"Squares live vicariously through me, the rough and tumble culture critic who never turns down a drink on camera, drugs off camera. I'm worldly, sophisticated, but wild and crazy when I have to be, dangerous if you test me, a Twenty First century adventurer without the condescension of Anglo-superiority, in fact a low brow conduit of big ideas and complicated genius...or at least that's what my producers say."

"What do you say?"

"I call bullshit on myself and I've read the fan feedback, seems no one else is buying it either. They just want to see the different bands and artists I meet. They could care less about me. You should see what they call me online. I feel like I gotta put a brown paper bag over my head just to read the blogs. 'Douche' seems to be the consensus. And apparently, if you look up 'pretentious cunt rag' in a dictionary you'd find a picture of me smiling. I seem to invoke vaginal cleaning products for some reason."

"No they love you or else they wouldn't be watching. You have that x-factor quality about you, and you don't even know it."

"Mona you don't have to—"

"No I'm not blowing smoke up your ass. You have this ability to polarize audiences just by being yourself. Artists would kill for that. Most of them are too conscious of themselves and what they're doing, way too invested in current movements and trends. You say things that are so loaded it gets half the audience in a tizzy over political correctness, the other half buzzing that maybe honesty isn't dead."

"But those aren't intentional, the things I say. I'm not consciously polemical, I'm just breathtakingly ignorant of a lot of things."

"If we all knew everything art would be nothing, it would be worthless. You really should have stuck with film Jamie. It woulda been interesting to see where you took it."

"After a certain age, especially for a guy, pardon my sexism for a second, having less than twenty bucks in your bank account isn't cute anymore. I took a gamble and lost. Just lucky the show came around when it did."

"It's still not too late, you're only in your mid-thirties. Most directors didn't get their big break until they were your age actually, give or take."

"I think it's over. Forget that for now. I'm really happy to see you."

"Me too."

"Can I ask how rehab was or do you not want to talk about it?"

"I'd rather we didn't."

"Fair enough. You know you can always talk to me about anything."

"Yeah, I know."

I reached out for her hand. It developed into an embrace not unlike that night outside the Queen of the Nile. Except this time around we were free to explore it further, which I initiated with a kiss. Our past no longer loomed over me as a faraway horizon of rosy contentment never to be revisited again. Except it had changed, evolved slightly from that state of suspended animation I expected to find it in once it came.

"You know I think I might take you up on that drink. Have any wine?" she said, afterward.

I hustled into the kitchen and poured two glasses, one white, one red. I got back to the living room to find her standing at the window dressed only in her silk blouse and with her hair down past her shoulders in a style suggestive to any keen onlookers in the highrises nearby of what sort of activity must have preceded it. She seemed to care less, standing half naked and raw after the fact, concerned at the moment only with the enormous red barge cutting through the Hudson, slowly but indefatigably on its way up north, beyond the confines of memory, of the great grid itself. I watched her from the couch as I enjoyed a cigarette, ironically a bad habit I picked up full time ever since I

thought I lost her forever. After a few more goes at the wine she turned to me, was about to say something, decided against it, put down her goblet and walked over to the black portfolio on the coffee table. She then began unzipping the bag and pulled out, with great care, a frame-less two by three foot painting with the back facing me so that I was unable to make it out at first.

"I mentioned Omar wanted you to have something, remember?"

"Yeah..." I said, hesitantly.

She walked over to me reading my eyes, my trepidation. Emerald green and hypnotizing, her gaze spoke of a mission, a duty, of what I hadn't the slightest idea. Without looking down she handed me the canvas. I held out the painting, finally breaking eye contact with her to give it a look. I recognized it instantly.

"I can't take this Mona."

"Hear me out."

"If this is what I think it is. If it's real...you should...I can't."

"Jamie stop for a second—"

"Is it real?"

"Yes but—"

"It's too much, no."

Mona grabbed my hand hoping to get a word in between my inaudible expressions of refusal. I tried passing it back to her but she wasn't having it, by the third attempt even becoming visibly offended. What it depicted was an American soldier against a plain white background firing his assault rifle at a group of what appear to be Afghani women and children huddled together against a wall, but instead of a spray of

lethal bullets, out of his barrel came rose petals, and in place of the shell casings bare stems ejecting from the chamber and forming a pile by his boots. It was undeniably a work by Gordo, the world famous graffiti artist whose art can be found on walls and sidewalks in major cities around the world, mainly in New York and L.A. His identity is a secret. No one has ever caught him setting up the installations, or at least not on camera. He apparently employs a stencil technique he basically co-opted from earlier artists, allowing him to go in and out in minutes, maybe even seconds, leaving behind fully realized flash murals replete with political and social commentary, not to mention a dark sense of humor. Although I always thought of his work as being slightly overrated given how easy it looks to make, I appreciated his attempt to bring back to art what it was missing for so long. His stuff is more than just the typical abstract, esoteric filler lining the walls of galleries across the country. He doesn't shy away from those artistically suicidal subjects absent from most American art after a certain era. A constant theme of his is the ever growing complacency with the status quo, the kind of subject matter most art critics would have an easy time pissing all over for its populist overtones. Yet even they love him. It was a perfect marriage of substance and style appreciated by the masses and covered endlessly by academics and bloggers alike. Also, perhaps by some self-deprecating put-on or an actual sadomasochistic fetish, even the rich value his work if we go by what his pieces normally fetch at auction. If only anyone explained to them they were usually the butt of his dark humored slams at capitalism.

I was lucky enough to see several of his works in person here and abroad while on shoots in London, Rome, Paris, Berlin, and Barcelona. His canvas work was much harder to come by though. On a few rare occasions he'd get some unassuming guy to sell his

work at a starving artists sale for literally tens of dollars. Once these buyers learned the truth, usually the following day after an official announcement by his camp online, small fortunes were made overnight. There were dozens of these in existence, but I'd never seen this one. I remember not too long ago reading about one of his prints, at about half the size of the one Mona just handed me, fetched something astronomical like a hundred and fifty thousand dollars at Sotheby's, or was it Christie's?

"How did you get this? Did Omar buy it?"

"No, not exactly."

"Mona you know as much as I do this is way too much. This should go to his mom or to a charity or something."

"No he specifically wanted you to have it."

"Why? And who the hell just gives away Gordo's like that?"

"People who don't have to buy them."

"What does that mean?"

"It means Omar didn't buy this...he made it," she said, almost in a whisper and nibbling at her bottom lip.

She waited on me silently, on the brink of a smile or a sneer, I couldn't tell which, as if expecting a certain reaction from me previously witnessed in a premonition where all this played out before.

"He forged it?" I said, in a whisper on the same decibel level as hers.

I knew I crossed a line as soon as the words left my mouth.

"Show a little respect asshole."

"What are you telling me then? That Omar is...was Gordo?"

"Yes."

"Oh Mona." I said, a lot more condescendingly than I meant to.

"I gather you don't believe me then."

"Did Omar tell you he was Gordo? Or did you just find these in his apartment?"

"I'm really biting my tongue here not to tear you a new one, but I can understand where you're coming from. From where you stand I'm just a grieving mess, a distraught girlfriend wanting something to hold onto or inflate as a coping mechanism. I'm not making any of this up Jamie."

"You've been through a lot, to put it mildly. Maybe it would be a good idea if you planned a little vacation, bring a girlfriend or two along, kick back and—"

"I'm leaving," she said, looking for her hat.

"Mona, Mona just....Okay I believe you. Have a seat let's talk about this."

Reluctantly she put down her hat and joined me on the sofa. I handed her the glass of a wine and made sure she took a sip or two to calm her nerves. I had to figure out a way to break her out of these delusions.

"Forgive me for this Mona, but I have to ask. If Omar was Gordo then how do you explain Gordo's close to fifteen year career or whatever you want to call what he does? He was too young to have--"

"Simple, Omar's been at it since he was 17. Actually 15 if you count his earlier graffiti along the Bronx Expressway."

"But Gordo is worldwide. How did he manage it?"

"He doesn't work alone. He has a benefactor."

"Frank?"

"Right."

"I've seen Omar's work though. Those two exhibits you invited me to over the years. There's no resemblance, even vaguely in style."

"Omar's work as Omar was for a different aim. He wanted to be a success in both worlds so he never mixed the two."

"Both worlds?"

"Mainstream and underground. He wanted the recognition of both, but he never imagined the latter would completely overshadow the former. It devastated him really."

"Disappointed?"

"Gordo was supposed to be a once in a blue moon thing. An outlet to vent his frustrations, a personal mission stemming back from his childhood. His dream though was to be an accomplished artist, apolitical and timeless like the masters. When his more politically charged work started getting attention, he equated it to being a political cartoonist or a satirist, but not a true artist."

"Is that what drove him to drugs?"

"He didn't want to admit it but I think it was partly that. But I know for sure, because he told me, it was his family history...look, he was doing that stuff before he met me. He was off of it for years and then one night at a bar on Delancey close to the bridge, I don't know if you remember that place, Houdini slips him a bag and whispers something to him. I read his lips. He said something like "don't worry your money is no good here."

"I've always hated Houdini's guts. I had a feeling that guy was trouble-" I said, remembering vividly the scrawny little rat faced weasel. His real name was Derek. He got

the nickname after eluding the police on multiple drug related offenses. Some wondered if he was an informant. It was the only way to explain the great escapes and dropped charges. Feeling I'd done Mona a disservice by leading her further down the rabbit hole, I needed to get her back on track.

"If it was a matter of life and death, hypothetically speaking, do you have any proof Omar was Gordo?"

Mona gently put down the wine glass and walked over to her purse. A second later she held in her hand a bulb of some kind attached to a small lanyard. She then picked up the painting and placed it on the carpet, resting it against the coffee table so that it was facing me.

"Can you shut the blinds please."

"Um...sure," I said, getting up.

When I got back to the sofa, the room was dark enough for Mona to flick on what turned out to be a handheld black light.

"Just pay attention. I'm gonna go over the whole thing starting here at the top left corner and go up and down, up and down until we reach the end. Let me know if you see something that wasn't there before."

"Mona look I don't—"

"Just. Please you'll see very soon."

She proceeded, as she said she would, top to bottom, covering every inch. As I expected there was nothing there.

"Mona I want to help—"

"Shh. Look."

I went in for a closer look. There was something in the bottom right corner, a symbol, under the black light.

"What is it?"

"It's Gordo's signature."

"Looks like a flower to me."

"Fleur-de-lis actually."

"I've watched enough Saints games to know what a Fleur-de-lis looks like and that aint it."

"What you know is the French one. The symbol predates France itself. It's ancient, they just appropriated it. There's a story behind this version, but forget that for now. Look even closer."

"I can't read that."

"You're not close enough. Look closer and tell me what you see underneath each drooping petal."

"I see an O and a...is that a Y? Omar Yassine."

"So can you now stop looking at me like a crazy bag lady?"

She went over to the window and opened the shades, letting in the gray light of the cloudy afternoon.

"But that doesn't mean—"

"Put your shoes on. I want to show you something."

"What? But we're relaxed here. Where do you want to go?"

"It won't take long?"

"But—"

"Don't worry it's only a few blocks from here. Bring the black light and follow me."

I slipped on my slacks and shoes and followed her reluctantly out the door. With the winter solstice not too far off, the days were markedly shorter and by the time we got out to the street darkness had set in accompanied by a light fog hanging just above the trees, obfuscating the faint glimmer of the skyline. She wrapped her arms around my waist for warmth as we walked down Amsterdam watching the stampede of yellow cabs rumble by at consistent intervals, each herd becoming smaller clumps of red dots the farther away they traveled. Mona led me to a low-income redbrick housing complex just behind Lincoln Center on 64th street, one of the more dramatic neighborhood comparisons the city had to offer. She scanned the building's facade, "There," she said, grabbing my hand and walking me over. A Gordo painted in white against the ground floor level of the section of the projects closest to the street. It depicted a small boy in rags winding back an archaic sling with a golden egg in its pouch. Tucked in his waistline were four more golden eggs.

"This time I want you to do it."

"Do what?"

"Look for it."

I pulled out the black light, cautiously looking around me on the sidewalk and across the cement courtyards within.

"We must look crazy to those people over there," I said, directing her attention to an elderly couple sitting on a bench twenty yards away from us.

"Look at it this way. People expect crazy in this city. How else do you think Omar

got around unnoticed for so long? They probably thought he was just some homeless lunatic wanting to show the world what the voices in his head were telling him."

I proceeded over to the wall and gave it a scan with the light.

"There," I said finding the now familiar signature.

"Always to the bottom right."

"Why would he do this? Doesn't somebody live here?"

"This part isn't connected to the apartments. He would never do it otherwise."

"So you dragged me down here. It checked out. What now?"

"But does it check out? How do you know Omar did it?"

"Cause it has Gordo's stamp on it."

"So?"

"What else am I supposed to know?"

"When do you think this was done?"

"Paint looks kinda fresh. I dunno three months ago, four maybe?"

"Try three days ago."

"Are you drunk?"

"No I'm not drunk."

"Then this isn't a real Gordo?"

"Oh no, it's real."

"Mona, you're beginning to freak me out a little."

"Okay, I'll save you the trouble. I made this one. I'm Gordo."

"Then Omar wasn't Gordo?"

"No, he was Gordo, but so am I."

"You worked as a team the whole time?"

"No, this is only my second one. When I called you from a rehab clinic in Pennsylvania I was telling a half truth. I wasn't in rehab, I don't need it. But I was in Pennsylvania, in Pittsburgh, putting up my first one."

Beyond lending a cinematic quality to these revelations, the crisp, cold half moon hung low overhead while swaying shadows of naked tree limbs became animated against the faint glow of the yellow street lights, revealing a stubborn fanaticism, perhaps even a temporary madness in her eyes. She had the look of always being in motion, unable or unwilling to fight the momentum that led her to this terrifyingly new and uncertain phase of proselytism. As the shadows continued to dance across her face, reminiscent of those film noirs she loved so much, other realities appeared through the fractured light. I saw a person completely aware of, though not at peace with, the prospect of carrying a baton to the finish line of their own undoing.

"What made you do this? What are you doing?" I said, finally.

"He was robbed. He wasn't a junkie, he just couldn't handle it. There's an enormous storage unit, I can't say where, but it's full of hundreds of stencils and project outlines and papers and ideas and blueprints. He wasn't suicidal, he had big plans. He wasn't a quitter."

"You're not serious about this are you? You're trying to continue from where he left off? Like that, like it's no big deal."

"He would've wanted it that way."

"You sure about that? What if he didn't want anything done without his involvement, for things to get done his way?"

“I guess we'll never know.”

“We won't. Even if we did, you'd do it all by yourself?”

“That's where you come in.”

“How's that?”

“Around the time his Gordo persona started to get a lot of attention Omar had a hard time with it.”

“Yeah you told me that already.”

“I didn't tell you the whole story. He felt his work was becoming so recognizable that his celebrity was eclipsing the message. He knew they didn't love his stuff that much. That they tried to buy him out like they did Basquiat.”

“How could they do that if he was anonymous?”

“By making it so that people cared more about the artist than the art itself. People would take selfies in front of the murals as if they were a famous person and not an idea.”

“So what?”

“My point is it became a spectacle more than anything else. They made it so that his work would be sought after by private collectors and public galleries. It became a commodity just like any other thing. Nobody cared about interpreting the works, analyzing them for hidden or even blatant messages on what's going on around the world, which is what he later realized he had to do, to spell it out. Still no one cared. All people wanted to do was hang his work over the mantle next to the flat screen, sit on it until they could find a buyer with deeper pockets than their own. It was a Google stock.”

“I'm no art expert Mona, but can't that be said of all art after a while?”

“This was different. Graffiti needs to stay on the streets. This city has done the

impossible, it's completely wiped it clean. People think it's nothing more than an eye sore, and for the most part they're probably right. But for a time graffiti was like stubborn mold spores showing through a fresh coat of paint. It reminded everyone that there was something rotten underneath the facelift, and more to it than beautiful people stumbling drunkenly out of Chelsea nightclubs and star-studded galas. The only graffiti you see around anymore is in dimly lit museums frequented by people who could give a shit about the social and economic disasters they came from. He tried to make his street art more appealing to the eye, to meet most people who hated the sight of it halfway, three quarters of the way even. But the less extreme and unapologetic his images became aesthetically, at least, the more people tuned out. Pretty soon the only reaction his work got was a "Hey look another Gordo. Oh that Gordo!" He feared he was slowly becoming the Andy Rooney of the art world, you know a curmudgeon people think is cute but never really take too seriously. So he took the show on the road, not just to another state or Western Europe, but to where people don't take things for granted as much as we do. Just look at how social media and cell phone cameras, and art, especially art, the role it's had over the past three or four years alone across Asia and Africa."

"I hear ya. We use all this technology to send dick pics and they've used it to topple regimes and change history. I get it."

"Yeah, I mean a million people will pass by this mural I made every single day and not think twice about it. You put one up in Cairo in January 2011 mocking Mubarak or the secret police and you inspired people into action or at least kept the fire going."

"But was he really needed over there. People don't need to be reminded how shitty they have it, they're already well aware. It's not like he introduced those people to

the concept of writing on walls. Last time I checked Egyptians kinda invented that—”

“He wasn’t deluded enough to think his work inspired all the others but was surprised at how many better versions of his work he found. His influence before he even got there was pretty undeniable. Difference was they took a far greater risk. He had the American embassy on his side if things got really outta hand. But these other guys could face serious jail time or worse. Even for him there was no guarantee of anything given our government’s blessing to the regime, but Egypt was very personal for him and he didn’t care. For two years he went back and forth putting work up all around Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez. What ended his run was Sharm al-Sheik, when they finally caught up to him. Turned out they had a special unit looking for the author of these anti-SCAF images all over the place. They put him in jail for three days. They beat him every day. He would’ve rotted in there for a long time had Frank not gotten the American embassy involved. The Egyptian press got wind of it, but the story was eclipsed by the resignation of Mubarak the same day. Eventually while literally the whole country was out in the streets partying he was released, but banned from ever entering Egypt again.”

“I’m listening to you Mona. I’m just failing to find the part where I factor into any of this.”

“After getting banned Omar became convinced he couldn’t or shouldn’t do it alone. He didn’t want to give up on the revolution in Egypt. The counter-revolution was winning in a big way. He needed to re-assert his presence without physically being there. He needed someone to go on his behalf to show them they couldn’t win.”

“And you knew since the last time we spoke that I was going to Egypt. You needed me for something, that’s why you called me and showed up isn’t it...you needed

a favor.”

“No, it wasn’t just a favor. It was something much more, an opportunity. He knew he had to fight fire with fire. He had to become more than just one guy with a spray can. He wanted to become a brand if you will, with the reach of a multi-national corporation with employees reproducing his work all over the place. Take Andy Warhol’s Factory one step further, make it more accessible and global, and more importantly, give it teeth. But then he realized most people who cared enough to volunteer their services probably didn’t have a millionaire brother to fund their adventures abroad.”

“But I get paid to travel everywhere...” I said, unenthusiastically.

“And your whole jaded, apolitical celebrity persona makes you someone authorities would least suspect as a radical agitator.”

“But that’s just the thing Mona. I’m not a radical agitator, or a Marxist, or an Anarchist or anything like that. I never have, never will. Plus I don’t know the first thing about painting or drawing or any of that stuff. Listen, I got a great job, actually one of the best jobs you can find. It pays well, I see the world for free, I meet all kinds of interesting people, and I don’t see any reason to jeopardize that so I can entertain your idealistic notions of a counter culture. Let’s be honest it’s just another form of escapism. Even if I agreed, posting those things up on random walls...what the hell’s that gonna achieve? It won’t change anything anyway.”

“Do you even know what’s going on in Egypt?”

“No, but I guess I’ll find out soon enough. And what do you care? Your parents are Brits who settled in Saint Martin on a whim just because they could. You lived on a

yacht—”

“Yes I had an amazing life, sue me. My personal biography should in no way dictate what causes I should take up.”

“I know you clearly loved Omar and maybe a part of this is to keep his memory alive. I’m telling you it’s not your battle to fight. Don’t you watch the news Mona? Haven’t you noticed all these American and European journalists getting their heads lopped off over there?”

“Not in Egypt.”

“Well you know what I mean. Foreigners who want to live out some Lawrence of Arabia fantasy in the desert usually get sent home in two pieces. This isn’t a game. Omar was from Egypt, he had a bone to pick. You and I don’t.”

“But it’s bigger than Egypt. American foreign policy—“

“Don’t ‘American foreign policy’ me Mona. Trust me I’ve heard it all. You and I don’t make legislation. We don’t send anyone to war or personally take food out of anybody’s mouth. The government, ours and theirs, can fix their own mess.”

“I’ll just do it myself then.”

“Don’t be so stubborn. You gotta break out of this Che Guevara in training phase. It’s suicidal and ineffective. What does Frank think about all this?”

“He didn’t like the idea. He tried to talk Omar and then me out of it.”

“Oh, I get it now. He opted out and you came running to me,” lowering my voice “and slept with me thinking I’d chase you around like a little puppy to do your dead boyfriend’s bidding for you? Fuck that.”

Mona’s eyes welled up, turning away from me heatedly. She paced down the

sidewalk extending her arm out for a taxi.

“Mona wait. Let me just—“

“Stay away.” she screamed.

A cab pulled over and picked her up. I debated calling her cell, but slipped the phone back in my pocket. I figured she needed a dose of reality. No more apologizing from me. I was saving her life, I thought. As I turned back to walk home I came face to face with the boy with the sling, seeing Mona’s inflexible rage in his wind up, undeterred by nothing.

The next morning I walked Samson and brewed a pot of coffee. Fuel for the Italy script, which I hadn't touched for at least a day and a half. I used to fear these deadlines the way a heretic would the rapture. I eventually learned to write it as I lived it, in real time, tucking it away in my mind in narrative beats. Soon every art scene and music venue I documented fed future monologues and scene transitions that I'd piece together in moments like these, sitting in front of the computer with a cup of black coffee and the luxury of time, trying my best to elevate the ordinary and spit shine the extraordinary. But the template was empty, I couldn't stop thinking of Mona.

Carla emailed me a reminder not to be late for the afternoon meeting with the professor, Paul Wasserman at NYU. I tried blowing it off for another day. But she warned me he'd be on sabbatical soon and this was my only chance to meet with him before he left for Algeria. She ended the email on a pleasant note, as usual, imploring me

not to “fuck this up.”

I got to Washington Square Park a little earlier than I intended to and figured I’d grab a cup of coffee and a park bench. I hadn’t been down there in years. With the place so much cleaner than I remembered it, free even of the ubiquitous bouquet of body odor and urine, the arch seemed out of place now. More a solemn mausoleum than the cultural meeting point it once was, like a white phantom hovering over a battlefield stripped of any remnants of life by the vultures circling above.

I knocked on Professor Wasserman’s door twice, three times, until I nudged it open to find him asleep behind his desk with a book butterflyed across his chest, *The Stranger*.

“Hey Professor?” I said in a forceful whisper. He jumped a little and came to wiping his mouth with his sweater sleeve.

“Yeah?”

“We have a meeting scheduled for now. I’m Jamie Webber, the host of the television show.”

“Oh yes, yes. Please have a seat. Sorry, I’ve been really behind this semester, mostly on sleep,” grabbing the book off his chest and plopping it on the gray metal desk, “you already have coffee I see. I’ve become immune to it.”

“To caffeine?”

“To sleep.”

“Hey was this the old studio 54 building?”

“No that’s next door. Dorms now I think. Costs a lot more to get through the door now than it ever did.”

“And to get high too I bet.”

“In a way you still need showbiz coin to get in and out of there unscathed.”

“Unscathed is the key. I’m currently on a two lifetime repayment plan. I told the bank I was a Buddhist.”

“If college was this expensive when I was growing up I wouldn’t have done it.”

“I honestly don’t think it matters much Professor—”

“Just Paul is fine.”

“They always get you with some sort of debt along the way Paul. It’s the American dream, debt. Everybody willingly enslaving themselves for the facade of making it. Meanwhile we’re all unhappy but don’t know why. Might just be the quarter million on the worthless bachelor’s degree, then another half a million for a picket fence and a driveway to park your lower-end luxury car in. It’s funny, people absolutely detest car salesmen but don’t care about the guy they just signed over their freedom and happiness to at the local branch.”

“I’m happy to say you’re preaching to the wrong choir Jamie. I don’t own anything anymore. I’m old enough to remember when it started to get out of hand. Now I won’t pretend I saw it coming when they started making swish cheese out of the Glass-Steagal Act, but there certainly was something different in the air and you could feel it.”

“How so?”

“Can’t describe it really. Just felt like every time I walked into a bank for a loan they were a little too...eager to help me.”

“Like they were nodding at everything you said while staring at your tits?”

“I wouldn’t exactly put it like that, but sure, the end result would have been the

same,” he said looking down at the novel.

“I read that book in college. I remember it irritating me to no end.”

“The murder you mean?”

“No that was nothing. The punk-rockness of it. If that’s a word.”

“Don’t think it is.”

“By that I mean the tone of the thing, the exaggerated nihilism. Like the author took a gimmick and floored it until it ran out of steam halfway through. Kinda like smashing a guitar through an amp or trashing hotel rooms, seems so dated now you know.”

“It was effective for its time. I’m surprised your take away wasn’t that Camus’ protagonist, as a Frenchman felt very little emotion after killing an Arab. That’s key. The colonialist apathy for the well-being of its subjects, itself a product of intentional dehumanization over time through art and literature in the years leading up to the actual military occupations. Did you get a chance to look at the short analysis of Said’s *Orientalism* I sent you?”

“Not yet. See that’s the thing. I don’t think he would have felt bad about it had the dude he killed been French either. It reeked of um, a literary device right? Just felt like an experiment, a gimmick. And really what was the point?”

“I don’t know about the point so much, but these gimmicks, as you say, are what drive literature and art. They help us recycle culture in fresh new ways. Wow, we’ve gone from zero to sixty here rather abruptly haven’t we? Anyway, we hold up *Ulysses* as a staggering work of literary genius that revolutionized the novel right? Yet what is it really but a clever gimmick? Stream of consciousness style writing many since have done

to death,” he said reaching for his glasses and jiggling the mouse on his computer to awaken it from sleep mode.

“Take one of the artists you emailed me about, Hani. He takes ancient Egyptian art originally intended in ancient times for the high priests and the eyes of the elite, and reconfigures it to make a statement about current day pauperism in Egypt, which you’ll find many artists do there. Basically nothing new under the sun here, just saying what needs to be said in the moment and as subtle as possible under the watchful eye of the *Mukhabarat*, the secret police. It’s all about historical context. Which reminds me...I must say you’ve picked a precarious time to venture into Egypt.”

“You think so? Just gonna be a few interviews, some b-roll and boom we’re out. No one gets hurt.”

“I wasn’t talking danger necessarily, just the timing is what I’m concerned about mostly. The counter-revolution has just about reasserted the status quo from the Mubarak era. General and now President Sisi might as well be Mubarak in a Groucho Marx disguise. You probably would’ve gotten more candid opinions out of people within that two year window just after the first revolt of January 2011, when they still had hope.”

“Well this is what my new overlord wants. I really had no say in the matter.”

“I’m guessing you mean Al Haya? I would tread carefully around those folks if I were you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It’s owned by the House of Thani, the Qatari royal family is it not?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“They’re the main backers of the Muslim Brotherhood, and their meddling hasn’t

been appreciated by the military to put it mildly. The same goes for the Saudi's. Both of them saw an opportunity to win Egypt when it was vulnerable, thinking their resources and close ties with the U.S. would help seal the deal. They completely underestimated just how deep and inextricable SCAF is sown into the fabric of that country. Without exaggeration they have a stronger grip on Egypt than most monarchies or dictatorships around the world could ever dream of having. Any teapot dictator could turn the army's guns on their own people, which is what many Middle Eastern nations often do, but to have near complete and utter control over how the average man or woman feeds their kids is God-like power you simply cannot challenge with sit-ins or chanting in unison."

"The only sort of request they made was that we not focus on anti-Qatar rhetoric. Just do what we normally do, maybe touch on the poverty, and avoid the conspiracy theory stuff. I told him to go play in traffic."

"To call it conspiracy is a diversion on their part. They certainly have their hands in the internal affairs of Egypt, even if their efforts often fall flat, and they're not to be taken lightly. Interesting they focus on poverty. The Qataris probably want to make the case that Egypt is not faring so well under Sisi, and by extension, the common denominator in all this, the military rule itself. Not to alarm you too much, but when you walk through the streets of Cairo just keep in mind you now wear their name on your back. Just ask the journalists at Al Jazeera how that's working out for them."

"Wonderful. Then again we were never out to rustle too many feathers, just do what we always do, film drunk, edit sober."

"Speaking of which, I watched the three episodes your producer sent me. I couldn't help notice you seem to love the occasional drink or two. You know you might

have to temper that down a smidgen while you're there.”

“Yeah that's what I hear. They don't drink over there.”

“That's not true necessarily. There are many drinking establishments across Egypt. Many people drink, they love whiskey, scotch, you name it, but it's hidden in open sight in a sense. Then again Cairo is a bit more cosmopolitan about that sort of thing. Alcohol consumption across the Arab world varies from country to country, even town to town. However as a guest in their country it probably wouldn't be the best idea to walk the streets blitzed with a film crew behind you.”

“You're right. I'll save it for the hotel with the door locked and the shades drawn. Look, I wanna level with you professor. I watch what's going on there, the violence and the bloody standoffs. Not to minimize what we've just covered, but reassure me, is my being American reason enough to worry? Kidnappings...I mean I'm sure most of them are decent people but—”

“You'll be fine. But they have a right to be a little suspicious. After all, Egypt is still in that dicey post-revolutionary phase, so they see anything or anyone that looks out of place, be it a white American male or a long bearded Saudi, as a potential threat in some capacity. The military regularly arrests NGO workers or European and American university students it even suspects of aiding revolutionary groups. Everyone is paranoid, and justifiably so. They all, the ruling class, the masses living on two dollars a day, they all have something to lose in this. Many have lost already.”

“So these folks who agreed to talk to us, would I be increasing their chances of seeing the inside of some torture chamber in the Sinai desert somewhere?”

“It's not out of the realm of possibility. But you have to understand...most of these

artists on the list you've provided, they're no threat to the establishment. They don't intend to be either. Just like any other part of the world, Egyptian contemporary art is being pulled in many directions by powerful forces essentially working to minimize its political and economic potency. Works addressing safe topics with vague, tepid statements on the human condition or general vices such as greed, become prized for what they aren't saying. And you'd be surprised how expensive Egyptian art goes for these days. Also, it's not just the fear of electrodes to the temple that scare many artists into avoiding certain issues. It's largely a sensitivity to market forces, the post 9/11 war on terrorism and the censorship it's really about, the internal dynamics of the art scene in which how far an artist gets depends on who they know like critics and curators, globalization, and cultural and artistic cues from Europe and the States. However, lately this has all been spun into a different trajectory in light of the events of 2011 and all that followed. Street art emerged like a phoenix, most of it technically illegal but tolerated within reason for the most part. The regime realized they can't completely muzzle the people as much as they used to. The new generation has become accustomed now to a little more wiggle room for expression with quite obvious and threatening limitations. What I'm trying to say here is that chances are if someone is willing to talk out of line with a camera pointed at them, they understand the risks and so you must assume they're not afraid."

"Not to downplay the secret police but what about...see I remember a shoot I did in Bulgaria once. Some random guy, a local, casually walks up to my crew, who too were locals, and asked them point blank if I was a Jew. Let's just say even if I was I don't think they'd have admitted it judging by the homicidal look in his eyes."

"Ah I see. Well there is a degree of anti-Semitism in Egypt but it's more directed

at the State of Israel and political Zionism as opposed to Judaism or Jews in particular. I go there frequently, so do many of my colleagues who are Jewish. Do I feel uncomfortable sometimes? Sure. Depends on the environment, current events. Look my father was German Jew who fled Berlin in the 30s, seeing the writing on the wall and such. His family decided on Cairo, which seems crazy to most people nowadays, the frying pan into the fryer kind of thing, but at the time it was very hospitable to Jews. Long story short the establishment of the Jewish State next door complicated things a little to put it mildly. Although the Officer's Revolution, which I'll tell you about in a minute, and the Lavon affair, the Suez Crisis and a host of other major events made Jewish life in Egypt just about impossible, my father stayed a bit longer."

"Was he on that hashish stuff?"

"Not quite." he said, before sliding back in his chair and producing from the skinny drawer of his desk a manila file folder with the word 'Menus' scribbled in blue ink across the middle.

"Miss lunch?" I said.

"Here, take a look at this," he said, pulling out a packet and sliding it across the desk.

"This your dad?" I asked, looking at the black and white picture on the cover.

"No, that's Gamal Abdel Nasser."

"Ah?"

"You're going to have to know this face, his name and some of the history behind it all. It's interwoven into their art, their everyday conversations even, especially after 2011. Abdel Nasser, by the way, was the military officer at the center of the Free

Officer's Movement which toppled the monarchy of King Farouk I in a bloodless coup in July of 1952.”

“Got it.”

“So as I was saying my father believed in Abdel Nasser as a former communist himself. He saw Nasser's move to nationalize the Suez Canal, the construction of the Aswan Dam, attempts at land distribution and so forth as something promising, an opportunity forever lost on the Soviet Union. Although Nasser did make it clear he wasn't a communist, more of a socialist dabbling in capitalism. When he attended the Bandung conference of nonaligned parties—”

“Paul, sorry to cut you off but what does this have to do with what I'm going there for?”

“Nothing and everything. Every culture's art is as much about how they consume as it is how they dream. There's an ongoing identity crisis in Egypt, and really the entire Arab world still not resolved since the colonial era. Nasser set a dangerous precedent. The possibility of controlling their own destiny, finally awakening them from their slumber during the Ottoman period. Egyptian art then, like in the songs of their Aretha Franklin, Oum Kalthoum, is in that sense no different than what jazz or poetry was for African Americans in their state of limbo after emancipation. Questions of identity or inferiority have to be resolved before any further steps are taken.”

“But Egypt didn't turn out so great though, right?”

“Not for lack of trying. As time went on, wars, coup and assassination attempts, all kinds of outside pressure and domestic infighting, Nasser's star began to dim. My father called it his George Washington moment. He thought that, like Washington after

the revolution, Nasser had the option of either becoming a king or a president of a republic. Although many of my colleagues justify it for a number of reasons, he chose to be king. Not literally of course, but in spirit and authority, certainly. When this was becoming more and more apparent my father washed his hands of it all and dragged the family to Hoboken.”

“He became a dictator then?”

“My father? You can say that,” he laughed. “But no, not exactly. Nasser created a bloodless line of autocrats, themselves the face of the real power structure the entire time in Egypt, the military. From day one they got their hands on everything they could from industry to tourism. With each successive leader, Sadat after him, then Mubarak, they increased the stranglehold of the military on the economy, which many put at forty percent currently, but I think it’s much, much higher.”

“So Nasser turned out to be a Mussolini that everybody wants to forget or is he more like an FDR type? You said people still talk about him?”

“Oh sure, most definitely. But they choose which Nasser to look back on, you understand? Take Americans. We look back on Lincoln as an emancipator, the president who saved the union, freed the slaves, but we don’t dwell too much on his imprisonment of ten thousand dissenters, his illegal use of eminent domain to grab himself a nice chunk of land, and his plans to never integrate African Americans into white society, just to ship them off to Africa or someplace where they wouldn’t continue to be our ‘problem.’ Movies and books about Lincoln usually portray him in the same light Egyptians depict Nasser. Actually Washington is probably a better comparison but you get the idea.”

“So it’s subconscious. Like a void left by a father-figure?”

“In a way, sure. Like a father that promised the world to you as a kid and probably meant well, but left your family in perpetual debt and enough ‘what ifs’ to keep you always second guessing yourself, or you giving up entirely and waiting for the second coming in whatever form it took.

“How did it show itself? These daddy issues.”

“I’d say in Tahrir Square in 2011 where many of the youth held up portraits of Nasser or inserted his face onto murals in the streets. Although Nasser is forever tied to the creation of the police state, his image reminds Egyptians of a ‘better’ time in Egypt, a Golden Era, no matter how much it may be inconsistent with the reality. Also what they were getting at by holding up his image was to demonstrate a clear disparity in leadership and other great qualities between Nasser and Mubarak and those wielding power in the shadows. They never held up pictures of Sadat, which speaks volumes. Look, Egyptians are smart, I’d say a little too cynical, but very bright nonetheless. They’re all very aware of Nasser’s flaws, they didn’t want to revert to another military dictatorship necessarily, but his memory gave the revolutionary rhetoric a bit more fervor and direction.”

“Like the Crisis of 1848.” I said with a kind of enthusiasm lost on me since my collegiate days of flip flops and cheap beer hangovers.

“What about it?”

“I was reading an article on the plane coming home that tried to compare the situation in Chile now to how the French started looking back on Napoleon Bonaparte decades after he died like he was the best thing that ever happened to them, even though he was a miserable tyrant. The guy who wrote it was clearly a fan of Pinochet, but to each his own I guess. ”

“Yeah, that’s a decent comparison. You’ll find a lot of eerily common characteristics between Egypt and France during their revolutionary and post-revolutionary phases. And it isn’t over yet.”

“So then it would be dangerous to bring up Nasser while I’m there?”

“Not at all. The current regime, in its state propaganda, is trying desperately to prop itself up as the continuation of Nasser. In one way it is. It already outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, something Nasser did, but that’s really where the comparison ends. The current regime is just a continuation of Mubarak, a once major political, cultural and militarily force in the Arab world, now a shell of its former self and a slave to billions of American dollars and Gulf dinars.”

“I’m sure every country has its fair share of problems professor. I have no interest in going there to pick at old wounds. Wouldn’t most Egyptians just want to look past it and focus on their own lives? It’s not as if Egypt is North Korea right? Can’t be that bad.”

“Interesting you say that. No, North Korea it certainly is not. But there is more censorship and state violence than you’d think. We can’t put blinders on and ignore it. The fear, the paranoia, the cynicism caused by it reverberates all throughout their society. It’s really not up to you or me to set up our own narrative. They may justify the police state by stamping out terrorists in the South or fanatic Muslim Brotherhood members running wild against the police and sure they want to maintain a level of security like any other society, but censorship is not only out fear of radicalism. Egypt is a military dictatorship with an aristocracy it must keep satisfied and which acts as a buffer between it and the millions of dirt poor. Mubarak maintained the Emergency Law as a perpetual clampdown on the population. It wasn’t fear of speaking out against its foreign policy

only, as it applied to Israel after Camp David, it was more about maintaining the money flow, the billionaire and millionaire's clubs, the money never seeing the people who needed it most. In a nutshell, it was the complete transformation of the Egyptian economy using USAID for the benefit of the few at the expense of the rest. All this while debt accumulated to comical heights. No regard for the people or the future of the nation itself."

"I can't escape it then?"

"What was that?"

"Oh nothing. You ever hear of Gordo?"

"The street artist? Who hasn't?"

"What do you make of his work in Egypt? Think it's worth a look? For the show."

"I think so. I got a look while in Cairo at some of it, before they covered it up with green paint."

"You think he was on to something?"

"I think he was, if I understand you correctly. What he was doing might have already been something everyone else in Egypt already knew, but if you noticed most news organizations gravitated more toward his stuff because of who he is. He knew what he was doing, the kind of attention he'd bring to the real issues. It was a much needed alternative to the clichés and fear mongering of cable news networks and hack journalism. Having said that I personally think he overstepped a bit though."

"Overstepped?"

"Yeah, by that I mean it wasn't his battle to fight. The idea of a Brit going over to

Egypt, one of the oldest continuous civilizations on earth to educate them about what already knew. Although he had good intentions, to pretend as if he knows better than they do...it just comes off a little condescending.”

“Hold up. I thought his identity isn't known. Did I just hear you say he's British?”

“Judging by his accent, from the few words he said. Yeah I'd say English.”

“You spoke to him? While he was doing...his thing?”

“Well more of a one way conversation. He didn't exactly want to talk to me. Kind of politely told me to buzz off.”

“You're kidding. This was in 2011? What does Gordo look like?”

“Oh I don't know, kind of a medium build, little bit of a gut I'd say, although I'm not one to talk,” he said patting his pot belly, “curly reddish hair, a little pale, clean shaven, beady eyes. Has a happy-go lucky quality to him, like a man-child. He looks almost like that actor who plays those idiots in those movies...what's his face? Actually you know what, he sorta looks a lot like you...” he said, squinting his eyes suspiciously.

“You caught me. When was this?”

“In the middle of it, January 2011. Right outside Tahrir. I was having morning coffee with my colleague from the American University at Cairo, Samir, a real character. He's the type you can never tell if he's is being serious or not. He's a big practical joker, that sort of thing, and so when he turned to me at the table and said, 'Gordo gets around doesn't he' while pointing at some white guy with a keffiyah hanging from his neck who was spray painting onto this steel garage door just twenty or thirty feet away from where we sat. Neither of us made anything of it, almost forgetting he was even there, until the mural came into focus. Then we both just looked at each other with our jaws on the

ground. We knew instantly what...who we were looking at. So once he finished up and put his mark on it we walked over to him, casually, playing it cool as you would, I guess just hoping to strike up a conversation. We played dumb of course. But the way he acted around us, he knew we knew. Then he just kind of bowed politely and went on his way. It all happened rather quickly. It's funny, I remember being a little disappointed afterward. I've always harbored a secret theory that Gordo was Mayor Bloomberg," he said, laughing to himself.

"You said he put his mark on it? What did you mean?"

"Did I say that? Look I'm not an art expert by any stretch of the imagination, but Samir is. So that's how I knew. Samir is an authority on—"

"No, no, wait a second here. You said he put his mark on it. What mark?"

Wasserman could no longer contain his smile, a reluctant grin of secrecy exaggerated by glistening smoker's teeth.

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," I said rather nonchalantly, not expecting anything out of this minimal attempt at reverse psychology.

"What the heck," he said, still grinning, "it's a long story. I learned it from an art forger believe it or not. Someone trying to pass as Gordo. A bunch of years back I did an ethnography, never published unfortunately, on the proliferation of American and European art forgeries across the emerging Middle Eastern economies, with an emphasis on the UAE. Around the time Dubai was in the middle of its construction boom and they wanted to as fast as possible begin competing with the great museums of Europe and in the States. They were desperate to fill them up quickly with the world's finest art, a mad dash for whatever they could get their hands on and at whatever cost. Ridiculous sums of

money were being thrown around. Forgers were practically salivating it was such a hot, untapped market with some of the most reckless spenders anywhere. Not to mention all the private collections of princes and wealthy playboys looking to impress their European girlfriends. So I devoted part of the study shadowing as many art forgers as I could find and who were willing to let me tag along, one of whom was this Gordo imposter. I met up with him about once every two weeks for about eleven months. Smart guy though, little bit of a shifty type, but really talented in his own right. Most great forgers are, unfortunately. At the time he was working on getting Blek le Rat down, but all of a sudden, about a few months in something changed his mind. Told me he got his hands on some kind of windfall as he put it, something huge. Later I found out it was Gordo's signature. I never knew he even had one."

"How?" I managed to get out in time before a shakiness could reveal itself in my voice.

"That's the most unbelievable part about this whole thing. He told me Gordo himself gave it to him."

"Why would he do that?"

"He never explained. Honestly, I didn't believe a word of it. There was always something calculated in how he chose to share information with me. However he did show me some of his Gordo forgeries. They were spot on, from the technique to the signature. It was uncanny."

"Not to toot my own horn or anything, but I'm pretty well traveled. I've seen Gordo's all over the world and have never seen a signature. How did you know what you were looking at?"

“I didn't. Only until I saw Gordo in Cairo many years later did I realize this forger was telling the truth the whole time. The invisible ink stamp wasn't something he just made up. I've since learned this was a well kept secret only a few trusted people in the art world and the auction houses knew about. So either those high society types with a helluva lot to lose gave away this secret to some petty con artist or Gordo did actually give it to him.”

“Invisible ink stamp?”

“Yeah. It's quite ingenious. It's only detectable through blacklight.”

“And you saw it in Cairo, his name on the mural?”

“Not quite his name, a symbol...the ancient lotus flower, an archaic fleur-de-lis encircling the letters *O* and *Y*, I believe.”

“Any idea what they stand for?”

“Not at all. Could be his real name, then again it could be anything.”

“Then how would anyone know the difference between a real Gordo and a fake?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“And you just found this guy how exactly?”

“It was easy. Posted an ad on Craigslist. Forgers are some of most intelligent people on earth but at the same time the easiest to bait. They're attention whores, for lack of a better word. Think Elmyr de Hory or Clifford Irving. Most of these people don't do it for the money necessarily. At first maybe, but then it takes on a life of its own soon after they make their first buck. Most of the time they're already comfortable financially. Let me put it this way, I received so many replies to the ad I had to politely turn down literally dozens of crooks who wanted to essentially out themselves. Thought they'd be

immortalized in some serious book. Imagine that. The Gordo forger impressed me though. He had exactly what I was looking for. He exhibited the classic narcissism and megalomania you'd expect, going as far as to say he was better than Gordo and how he deserved the fame and the glory, etcetera. Real mental case. On top of that he actually thought he was untouchable, above the law even. Bragged openly about selling some Gordo's to these Chinese collectors and then celebrating with a batch of the purest opium and finest hookers Hong Kong had to offer. Wouldn't exactly invite this guy over for supper with the family, but a great case study nonetheless."

"So whatever happened to this guy...um, wait you never told me his name."

"Oh he was a phony through and through. Even his name was a knock off. Called himself Houdini...you okay Jamie? You don't look too great," he said studying my face. As my senses processed this revelation, numbingly, the converging darkness of the room around his pale, bearded face, the muffled sounds of passing cars outside the window, I nodded mechanically, as if on auto-pilot, giving myself enough time to collect my bearings. Pretending to have received a business related phone call, I broke away from the lesson momentarily to rush downstairs, party to catch my bearings, but debating whether to call up Mona.

I returned to his office more or less in working order. That was until he showed me the bloody and mangled corpse of Khaled Saeed, the twenty eight year old Alexandrian beaten to death for uploading online a video of corrupt police officials pocketing the spoils of a drug bust. Like the millions of Egyptian demonstrators who hit the streets like an angry, foam-crested tidal wave after witnessing how the police state thanked him for his efforts, neither could my insides any longer sustain its ebbing and

flowing tides of apathy and self-preservation.

I got home and went straight for the opened Macallan and the TV remote. I promised the Wasserman I'd return for rest of the lecture. I had no plans of honoring that promise. I got the gist of it. Egypt was in a shambles, a nation at the mercy of predatory lenders of the highest order with no desire to get their money back any time soon. It was neo-colonialism enforced by perpetual debt, sweetened by neoliberal policies that left most Egyptians fending for scraps while the billions in USAID and protectorate Gulf money went to the berets and their cronies, claiming whole industries and public sectors for themselves, amassing fortunes on par with the Buffets and the tech gods of the world. Egypt was nothing more than a dumping ground for stuff we no longer had any room for here and needed desperately to push onto other shores with space to fill, creating in our image those gasoline and grease scented junkyards of bad decisions all over the planet. And fill it Egypt did, usually without a say in the matter and to their own detriment, as the once self-sustaining manufacturing base took the form of a commercial one, a job killing one, a certain vacuum of legitimate career prospects, jobs, and hope for the future. For any fan of stand up comedy, the next logical, disturbing step in the famous George Carlin bit about 'stuff.'

Then there was his constant reference to this “dictator bubble,” a dotcom of sorts for despotic startups guaranteeing America unfettered access to natural resources, trade routes, and cheap labor that burst once the global financial crisis hit with the kind of impact only the language of natural disasters and biblical tales of devastation can describe with any accuracy. As the money pumped into this industry lessened, so too did the veneer of stability vanish, or at least long enough to show the world this time around

the untenable hamster wheel within. The dictator bubble, he went on, was the biggest of them all, and in fact one of the more tangible ones propping up all others. It was what helped build Wall Street and Fifth Avenue, keeping the lights on for a while until money became more creative and abstract than it already was, finally imploding close to home in South America and to a lesser extent the Middle East during the Arab Spring, or as he liked to call it, “the winter of American capitalism's obsolescence.” Clearly, not as catchy.

The professor was all doom and gloom though, probably a Marxist at heart, but like most serious people who follow the money, I doubted his account was that far off from the truth. I'd find out soon enough, and straight from the horse's mouth no less. More than that, geopolitics and jet-setting pirating aside, I grew more despondent by the hour deciding whether or not to tell Frank about Houdini. He'd probably gun him down and I'd have to live with his blood on my hands for the remainder of my days. No matter how much I genuinely detested the guy or the degree to which the boundaries of my conscience seemed to recede by the year, I didn't want this following me to bed every night.

As if the serendipitous momentum of the past twenty four hours wasn't through showing its face, I turned to the local evening news, already half-way over. Following a story on the new multi-billion dollar redevelopment project along the West Side, the news program, quite shrewdly, presented the story of the new Gordo mural behind Lincoln Center, Mona's latest effort. I didn't know whether to credit the effect of the single-malt on an exhausted, preoccupied brain, but I'd never felt so simultaneously alive on such varying planes of competing reality. I tried dialing up Mona, but she wasn't

picking up. Then I lit a cigarette, exhaling as I caught site of the Gordo across the room against the wall, almost surprised it was still here. It had to go.

The next day I searched the internet for phone numbers, Frank's establishments, hoping to get lucky and find him in one of them. By the third attempt I got a hold of one of his employees at the Queen of the Nile. Very guardedly he asked me who I was and returned after placing me on hold for about five minutes, "Frank's been expecting you. You need directions?"

"No," I said "I know the place."

The hookah bar had been given a face lift at some point in the near past. It was less Middle Eastern themed than I remembered it, appearing more like any run of the mill wine bar except clouded with mint and apple scented smoke and a three man band in the far corner setting up a mic stand, *darbuka*, and *oud*. The skinny waiter with the nearly ironed-out Arabic accent I quickly recognized as the man on the phone, saw me standing alone holding the portfolio bag.

"Follow me sir," he said.

He led me around back, through a door labeled "Employee's Only" and down a short hallway of scuffed walls to a metal door, inconspicuous in dull gray with no markings on it. He knocked, "Mr. Yassine?" A few moments later I heard the familiar voice say in mid yawn "Let him in." His employee left me alone as I walked in with the Gordo under my arm, more nervous than I'd thought I'd be in the cab on the way over.

From the vantage point of the claustrophobic hallway I didn't expect to find inside such a spacious, bright office. Two Persian rugs laid down parallel to one another functioned as a subtle barrier between the two natural halves of the elbow shaped room. The more practical side, furnished with a bulky mahogany desk reminiscent of something out of a period piece set in the Roaring Twenties, matching chairs, solid file cabinets and two computer monitors. It stood in contrast both in time and function to the other half of the room, a space with two modern leather couches, a Noguchi coffee table and an unassuming wet bar in the corner with top shelf bottles of liquor displayed prominently. Although I couldn't pinpoint the paintings on the wall, I knew from many hours spent chasing tail at the MoMa they were most likely some of the lesser works of American pop art.

I turned the corner and saw Frank working at his computer, from my perspective appearing as if he'd aged ten years in the span of three. In that time he surrendered to the forces of inevitability, electing to shave his hair clean off and giving his scalp a shine as if to spite the retreating follicles that betrayed the war effort. To his credit it worked for him considering he had some color to his skin. The genie look was infinitely more preferable to Mr. Clean. Just above his polished cranium a soccer club scarf adorned with the colors of the Egyptian flag and bold Arabic characters running from end to end. Underneath it a Gordo depicting two men, one Coptic, one Muslim, judging by the crucifix and the crescent moon each one sported on their respective sleeves. Both men, practically nose to nose and armed with crude weapons, are being wound up from behind like vintage children's toys by two other men in military uniforms, identical in appearance, both of whom are wearing sinister grins on their faces.

"Jamie. Sorry to keep you waiting. Come, have a seat," he said, still mostly absorbed by what was on the screen. Looking up he takes a quick glance at me. "You look like shit. You need a blanket or something?" he said, in reference to my hangover bags.

"I'm fine. What happened to your hair man?" I said walking over to his side of the room.

"I donated it to science," he said sticking up his middle finger.

"It looks good Frank. You look like a young Telly Sevalas."

"I'll take Kojak over whatever you got goin. Ralph Malph without the good looks?"

"He wasn't good looking."

"Exactly."

"We sound like old men with these references."

"If staying young is only good for keeping your jokes up to date then what's it all for? Anyway, how's everything, considering?" he asked, focusing once more on the computer screen again.

"It's a strange time for me I guess. Frank, I never got to say how sorry I was for your loss. Omar was a great guy and—"

"Oh thank you very much brother. It's um...it's been...never get's easy. You want something to drink? Should even you out," he asked, getting up to pour me a glass before I could respond.

"How's business going?"

"Can't complain. Couldn't be better actually. Good thing about Manhattan these

days is the rich kids had no idea there was a recession going on this whole time. Shit, even had to renovate the place just to make it seem expensive enough.”

“Tell me about it. I mean I can’t complain too much either. Consider me lucky.”

“Not luck Jamie. Money is a living thing. It’s got an immunity to broke people. It seeks out other money to stick to.”

"Frank, look, I came here to give this back to you," I said, unzipping the portfolio bag.

"Give back? It was never mine to begin with. Omar wanted you to have it. I think you should keep it," he said pointing to a bottle of gin questioningly.

"Sure, on ice if you got it. But look, I can't take this. It was given to me, you know by Mona, in a time of confusion and maybe depression and it’s just, I think it was a mistake."

"This wasn't some fly-by-night thing. My brother wanted you to have it no matter what you decided to do."

"Why?"

"It's kind of a long story but basically he knew you would've been of great service to the movement."

"The what?"

"That you could be more dangerous than he ever was with half the effort. Without even lifting a finger even.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Your natural inheritance.”

“I never had any inheritance.”

“I’m talking about your skin bro.”

“Because I’m white?”

“White, rich, and famous, well sorta famous. Famous enough. Nobody cares what poor whites have to say. Let's not get carried away here.”

“Wait rich? I have a show on basic cable. Let me get this straight Omar needed me for PR?”

“His thinking was that most Americans don’t care what happens to brown people in some far away place, even if they themselves are brown. It doesn't matter how anybody feels about it either. It is what it is, for now. Every great cause needs a white face, a prominent white face, as an intermediary for everyone else to empathize with, to aspire to, to finally catch up with the rest of the world. Shit, even slavery needed white abolitionists to shake some sense into people. We’re just fucked up like that. Whoever has the biggest guns and the largest treasury at any given moment controls the levers of compassion. It's that simple.”

“But Omar was anonymous. People probably thought he was a white guy anyway, at least I did.”

“And he wanted to keep it that way. Which is where you come in. I'm sure Mona told you he got caught in Sharm al-Sheik. Thank God the police in Egypt were slow to realize who they had on their hands. It took them a while to realize that he wasn't just some bratty American shit kicker working for an NGO. Still, somehow, when word got out on Arabic social media and everywhere else that the great Gordo might be some Egyptian born dude with an afro and hummus breath, he was afraid his brand would take a hit. He didn't think anyone wanted to listen to an ethnic prophet anymore. It’s all about

whose image is closer to the God of the moment. You know, the all-powerful underwriter in the sky, the one that'll answer your prayers only if you promise to put your home up as collateral."

"So he wanted me to go public as Gordo instead?"

"In a way. He wanted you to pretend to be Gordo, pose for a few pictures while you're busy at work, that sorta thing, but never clear shots of your face. Then upload them to the internet, send em anonymously to news agencies, whatever it took," he said handing me the glass.

"But I'm kinda known though. What if it backfired on me?"

"That's the beauty of it. The pictures would be too grainy, too far away, or whatever so you could easily deny everything, but knowing how conspiracy theories never die out it would lend a sense of mystery to the whole thing. Maybe even work in your favor career wise. More importantly, keep the fallacy of the Nordic blue-eyed Jesus alive."

"Wouldn't I be followed? With that kind of a reputation you'd think they'd have eyes on me at all times."

"The work would be done by someone else. It would have all coincided with your show schedule. You would never be caught or seen anywhere near the actual productions."

"This plan was already in place? Were there people working for him while he still alive?"

"What makes you say that?"

"I just find it hard to believe this all rested on my decision. Was there no one

else?"

"No one. He never got it off the ground."

"You sure Frank?"

"What's with the grilling? Of course I'm fucking sure. Nothing could get done without my knowledge, my money. I mean there were previous attempts, test runs if you will, but that was a while ago and it kinda blew up in our faces."

"So you're aware of all the fake Gordos out there?"

"Of course. So what?"

"Even the ones using his signature, his real signature?"

"He gave that up himself years ago. At some point he decided that he wanted his brand to become as watered down as possible by hundreds or thousands of indistinguishable forgeries. He wanted his stuff to be as rare as Coca-cola cans. He hated the life artwork took after the artist was gone. He always talked about that."

"You saying he knew he was gonna—"

"No, not exactly. Look, I never really figured it out entirely and I'm his brother. Maybe he did think he was going soon. He wasn't fatalistic at all. Never really mentioned it. Something in him told him to work like hell. Just in the past two years he filled up two nine by twelve storage units with work. And mind you he normally paced himself, took things kinda slow, but for some reason he became really prolific right before he died. And no he wasn't suicidal, at least as far as I could tell. Though he did seem distracted to be honest. I never got to the bottom of that."

"I'm still not sure about something. Maybe you can help with this. See I always found it odd he would pick me of all people considering me and Mona—"

“He wasn’t blind to what was going on between you and her and the past. Don’t misunderstand, he didn’t think you were fucking her, but he knew you could if you tried hard enough. He wasn’t the jealous type, believe me bro. Mona lobbied on your behalf pretty hard for this whole thing in the beginning as one of the prime candidates, said she owed it to you or you owed it to yourself, some crazy shit like that. Then he just thought it’d be better to have you on his side than against him since she obviously had you on her mind all the time. Omar still trusted you a lot more than any of his douchebag friends.”

“Did they know he was—”

“Nope.”

“Not even...Houdini?”

“How do you know about that?” he said, looking up at me intently.

“I found out by accident.”

“Mona?...it doesn't matter. Anyway it was his decision. I didn't like it at all. I still believe he was the one who ratted him out to the police in Egypt. He was with him at the time. Omar brought him along, hired him with his own money after I refused. We put together something, got a bunch of non-artist types to come along with him during the uprising in 2011. We paid their airfare, hotel, everything. We also hired some locals, cousins actually. All in all thirteen including Omar. His plan was to put up one mural per person all over the country, in every major city, every single day we were there. He prefabricated the stencils, trained everybody. It was all running smoothly until they grabbed him.”

“What makes you think Houdini was behind it?”

“For starters he was only one of three people who knew he was in Sharm al-Sheik

that day, the other two being his cousins, two guys who would rather see a prison cell than turn on their own blood. Plus Houdini's a piece of shit. Everybody knew that except for Omar. He had to have seen it. Sometimes I think he secretly wanted Houdini to ruin him.”

“Huh? How'd you manage to get your brother out of it?”

“I pulled some strings. A few people at the State Department owed me a favor or two.”

The candidness took me by surprise, but confirmed what I mistook for drug induced paranoia several years before when mutual friends, behind Omar's back of course, would whisper accusations about his brother's collaboration with the Feds in the years following 9/11. The logic being these hookah bars were potential revolving doors for fundamentalist crazies with short visas and loose lips.

"If this was already underway, what did it matter that I was involved?"

“It didn't....well where you really came in was more so in the next phase of his plan. Films.”

"Films?"

"Yeah short films. He saw the potential in it. Authorities could always paint over murals, but with films they couldn't do anything about it. With Youtube and everything going viral and all that shit I can never keep up with he thought short bursts of guerrilla filmmaking could potentially reach wider audiences, pack more information. Plus you can't reduce a film as easily as a piece of art by making it worth a whole lot of money. You can download it for free and own it forever on your phone or whatever. No amount of wine and cheese parties at marble-tiled galleries can take the sting off of it. It's an

incorruptible middle finger. He left a bunch of storyboards behind and some b-roll stuff he took in the slums of Egypt. Nothing really earth-shattering...except for that one piece of footage."

"Of what?"

"It's kind of a big deal...I'm still deciding on what to do with it."

"Mona never mentioned any of this."

"That's because it was a sore spot for her. She wanted to make them with him. He didn't want her to help at all."

"What? Why not?"

Frank pulled out a pack of cigarettes, offered me one, which I accepted, and tossed me the lighter after getting his started.

"I might as well tell you. Omar was planning on leaving her. He met someone else, a hairstylist from Brooklyn named Stacey. They were seeing each other secretly over the past year and change."

"Mona knew?"

"I think she did. She had to. But maybe she didn't, who knows."

"If not, it's better she does. She has these crazy ideas about continuing from where your brother left off. She's way in over her head."

"Oh trust me bro I know. I gave her those two stencil cut-outs. Never thought she'd do it honestly. Never thought they'd make the news either. But I gotta say, seeing those murals on TV the other night, the way they talked about my brother as if he was still here..." he started choking up, something I didn't anticipate when deciding on whether to disclose the information I had acquired the day before. He took a deep breath.

"I panicked. Was afraid if I told her she might do something...stupid. I couldn't have that on my conscience."

"I dunno Frank. The longer you hold out the worse it'll be."

"I don't know about that. That's why I was happy to hear you were back in her life."

"What does that mean?"

"I was just thinking maybe you could take her mind off—"

"Frank...as much as I care for Mona, I feel like I've gotten stuck doing Omar's dirty work, first with the Gordo stuff and now...I feel like I'm mending the things he left behind, like his last days are bleeding into mine. It's...it's eerie, finishing up where another guy left off."

"Never thought of it that way. But nobody planned for this. I wasn't gonna get you involved at all, until I saw how Mona was holding up. Like I said, I panicked. I led her to you. Told her the old plan might still be worth exploring. I filled her head up with these ideas."

"So this whole thing was you?"

"Most of it, yeah. Not the personal stuff, between you and her, she's not like that, which you know better than I do. She clearly still loves you or cares about you. I did it for her sake not mine. Don't be upset. I know you're pissed. Hear me out."

"There's nothing more to really talk about Frank. Just take this back. Leave me out of this whole thing. I never wanted in," I said, placing the canvas bag on the desk.

"That's fair bro," showing me his palms.

"As for Mona, I'll have to see what happens. She isn't too thrilled with me at the

moment,” I said, looking up at the family pictures above his head on the wall. “How's your mom holding up?”

"Surprisingly well. You can thank the Alzheimer's for that."

"She has no recollection of him at all?"

"No she remembers him. She just forgets he died sometimes. It goes in and out, just never really sinks in the way it should. I don't know, maybe she's just better off that way. Omar was her baby. He was everything to her, especially after our father got killed and I was out getting high, leaving them alone like that."

"What exactly happened to him? I remember Omar alluding to it once, but he just—"

"Yeah he never ever liked to talk about it, not even with me. Some worthless crackhead shot him in the back of the head while he was driving his cab into Queens, in Jamaica. There were no partitions then. My father didn't even see it coming, he had no chance. He was murdered for something like forty bucks, maybe even less. I remember his manager gave the money to my mom in a white envelope like it would make a difference, what a fucking asshole. The police caught the guy though, he put up a fight, and they shot him to death. Omar was only a kid then. My mom was fresh off the boat, almost no English, and didn't even have a job. My father was too proud for welfare."

"Christ...how'd you guys manage?"

"For a while there we were in some deep shit, but luckily our neighbor at the time, this old Lebanese woman who came here decades before we did had a son who was a lawyer somewhere in Midtown. He spoke Arabic, referred us to another attorney who specialized in those kinds of cases. Long story short, we sued my dad's employer for not

putting security measures in place to ensure his safety. My father's case was actually one of the reasons the partitions in yellow cabs are there now. Took a bunch of swarthy dead bodies for cab companies to figure it's cheaper to put plastic dividers up than dole out a few million to each grieving family. His death could've been avoided. It's not like partitions were this futuristic gizmo no one ever thought up before. And the city was a hundred times more dangerous in those days than it is now. If cabbies ever needed protection it was then. Just comes to show you the fear of losing money is the only thing that changes the world Jamie. Activism and all that shit are just farts in the wind if it doesn't appeal to that universal fear of having less cash in your pocket."

"Why didn't your family go back to Egypt? You could've taken that money and lived like kings over there."

"Simple, because we weren't allowed back. My father was exiled by Mubarak in the early 80s."

"For what?"

"He was an agitator, a nuisance. They couldn't wrap their heads around his ingratitude for the crumbs he was given for a steak dinner's worth of work."

"Huh?"

"He was a Communist, and not the bourgeois kind in the capital yapping aimlessly in cafes. He was a textile worker in Mahalla and helped organize rallies and strikes, most of them put down with savagery. Those motherfuckers don't mess around. A few of his cousins got their heads blown off cause they'd just fire into crowds like savages, and a bunch of his friends and co-workers were put in prison indefinitely. The killer was that whenever anything happened in the city, whether it had anything to do

with him or not, they came for him anyway, either while he was at work or at home. They'd break in and cuff him, we'd all be crying, and then they'd toss him in the back of this paddy wagon with the other usual suspects. They'd usually keep him locked up for two days, sometimes a week, three weeks, they liked to spice it up apparently. And of course they beat him like he was full of candy. It was scary shit, all because somebody asked for a little more job security.”

“Why'd they single him out?”

“I think what they hated the most about my father was how charismatic he was, and that's not me praising my old man. He could've easily went up there during those rallies and called everybody shitheads and pulled down his pants, something I'd probably have done, and gotten the same amount of support from the crowd. Instead he destroyed them with wit, humor, passion, you know those qualities they can only respond to with batons. I remember on a few occasions seeing women just bawling during his speeches. I was like ten or something. The only other person I ever saw make the ladies cry like that was Elvis. The last thing the regime wanted was this guy running for some kind of office. They just needed an excuse. They got it. What did him in was the underground political pamphlet he co-edited. He was one of like five or six editors. So this one issue they published, one he actually had no part in, called for the head of the secret police and Mubarak himself to step down in response to the Emergency Law. That's when the shit really hit the fan. They locked up my father and a few others up for t two years and basically told them the only way they'd let them go is if they promised to leave Egypt for good and never come back.”

“Ain't it ironic? Same thing happened to Omar. The same ultimatum.”

“These assholes do one thing well, ultimatums. They're professional thugs and the only language they speak in is absolutes. Mubarak, shit, all these Middle Eastern potentates are dumb as bricks, mostly illiterate. They govern over all these educated people with ideas and talents and real things to offer, many of whom get fed up and wind up saying 'fuck it' and leaving for someplace better, even if its only to drive a cab or sell stale pretzels on the curb. I mean why would any rational person with options stay in a country that doesn't value you at all when you can come to America or Brazil or Canada or wherever and potentially carve out your own little empire, become your own man?”

“Oh come on Frank. Not this American dream shit. Look I love 'em to death, but I come from a long line of miserable working stiff with sclerosis livers who'd kindly tell you to go screw. They had talents and ideas and dreams and brains, but the closest they ever came to the American dream was when they played the lotto. The odds were better.”

“Fuck you, you're right,” he said taking a sip from his glass, “I gotta watch myself, talking like Don King over here. I got a head start, I'm not denying that. But it cost me my father. Like a blood sacrifice to the gods. But you're right. And maybe it is the same wherever you go, for the most part. What's the story? You study hard, get into a decent school, land a cozy little job and over night you've become something respectable. Meanwhile, depending on how smart or psychic you are, it'll occur to you either a few years or a few decades in, maybe after comparing tuxes one evening at a gala your boss was just evil enough to invite you to or the cars ahead of you at the valet, that you've peaked, and your status, whatever arbitrary title you rubbed in the faces of the losers beneath you, is the greatest lie ever told and the easiest one you ever fell for. You're just another one of the million uppity saps who's nothing more than a glorified patrol guard

for the elites. Your entire life was spent making sure no dirty fingers ever scuffed the pristine fabric of their worlds while they laughed at you behind your back and spent your entire progeny's net-worth on antique vases they kept in storage. It takes a village to protect the chosen few, I know it well. Still, I'm glad we wound up here. It hurts that this country took Omar and my father from me and my mother, but my father died with dignity and just look at what my little brother became in only thirty-three years. People will remember his name forever. He got the last laugh. All the jerkoffs who think they run shit will die in anonymity. He's immortal."

Two weeks passed in an instant, a wormhole journey of fourteen days condensed into a split second, and on the other side a sunny, yet incompatibly windy Friday morning where I was happy to report the bulk of the post production work on the Italy show was finally done. I laid down the voice over the previous afternoon at a recording studio in Tribeca, and it was now up to the video editors in their musky dungeons lit only by the glare of monitor screens to marry sight and sound in a union of coherence and watchability. All my bags were packed for the following day's direct flight to Cairo International Airport. Samson, seeing the luggage piled up against the wall, rather familiar by now to what that meant, curled up next to them with his snout buried under his front paws. He refused to look up at me after repeated calls.

I dialed up Mona. I made a routine of it over the past few weeks, trying but failing to get in touch with her, even supplementing my chances with the occasional text.

I didn't want to make the trip without seeing her first or hearing her voice if that was all she was willing to concede. After trying once, twice with no success, I decided then and there to make the trek down to Brooklyn, East Williamsburg, the heart of darkness, the ten thousand-Kurtz buffer zone between the gilded and the damned.

While dressing I ran into the kitchen after hearing the unmistakable dance of the phone, set to vibrate, against the walnut surface of the table, grabbing it just in time before it can make it over the edge in one final anthropomorphic act of self-destruction. It was Carla, sounding flustered, distracted even, insisting I see her at once. She wouldn't explain anything over the phone, telling me to meet her in her office at once. Consequences for not playing fetch with the new master I wondered?

I arrived half an hour later expecting a pink slip reeking of Doha, or Monaco, or wherever Waleed's gaudy yacht was presently moored. A part of me even expected to see him in the flesh, one last condescending stare down before producing my severance from his pocket without compromising the general girth of the wad, that bogus compensatory bulge of paper that took the place of personal integrity and human equality in the age before currency, B.C. Instead, I walked in only to see Carla alone, behind her desk, wringing her fragile, thin skinned hands.

“What's wrong?” I said, interrupting her meditation.

“Have a seat Jamie,” she said, barely looking up at me, “It's been canceled.”

“The Egypt show?”

“I got the call literally minutes before calling you.”

“Why? What does this asshole Waleed want from me? Let me talk to him. This is bullshit.” I stood up reaching for her phone.

“Hold on. It wasn't him. He actually fought hard for us. It was the Egyptian government. Al Haya has been banned as of yesterday, just like Al Jazeera was not too long ago.”

“They can just ban us like that?”

“They can do whatever they want, it's their country.”

“But we weren't planning on doing anything crazy.”

“They don't care. Guilty by association.”

“You can't be serious...so what now?”

“Now we count our losses and plan something local to meet the timetable. We never got to do Texas. Austin's art scene--”

“Carla wait a minute. Forget Austin for a second. Have the plane tickets been refunded?”

“Not yet. Why?”

“What if we still did Egypt anyway.”

“Okay maybe you didn't understand me the first time--”

“I got it, trust me. Al Haya is banned, but I'm not.”

“You can't do the show alone. You don't even know how to work the cameras properly.”

“Don't know how to work the cameras? I used to be a filmmaker, I could run circles around most of the DP's we've hired over the years. I used to do everything myself, sound, lighting, everything. I never needed anybody before and I still don't.”

“Jamie even if you did, we can't air it. It's not worth the trouble.”

“So that's it? What about the rest of the Middle Eastern tour?”

“I don't know. They don't seem too thrilled to see it through now that Egypt is out.”

“Ah I see now. Then this really was about sticking it to the regime in Egypt. Professor was right...”

“What are you talking about? Jamie my head is killing me as it is, lets not get into this again.”

“Have you at least tried the consulate? Maybe we can work something out.”

“I haven't had the chance but you're more than welcome to. I'll have Lara set it up, but don't expect anything from it. What can they really do from here?”

After disappearing for a while, Lara returned to inform us the General Consul was out of the country on business. However his right hand man, Mr. Sadiq, was technically around, just not in the office. After tracking down his assistant on his cell-phone, who we learned from the consulate secretary accompanied him on the trip, Lara worked her magic, getting me five minutes with Mr. Sadiq, wherever he was.

“So where am I going?” I asked Lara.

“The Jacob Javits Center. His assistant Hani will meet you at the door once you let the front desk know you're there.”

“Haven't been there in years. Thought it wasn't making enough money. Ain't it a casino now?”

Once I arrived at the Javitz Center, entering into its first quadrant of negative space colored by the afternoon sky through the ubiquitous glass ceiling, I tagged up with Hani. Once inside, past the initial buffer zone of security, we passed under a silver banner welcoming all to the annual “*International Defense & Security Expo.*” On each side of

the banner two model predator drones built to scale hung dramatically from a series of wires, both bearing the names of leading defense firms.

In the long walk over to where Mr. Sadiq was waiting, Hani, who I'd met once before in the planning stages of the show, couldn't stop badgering me about the non-existent perks, those imaginary benefits of D-list stardom. While I was busy deflecting a barrage of peculiar questions designed to ascertain the classiest establishments to simultaneously get blow and get blown, I couldn't keep my eyes focused amidst the expanse of armored vehicles, gun racks, smoke canisters, flash bang grenades, video and sound surveillance, visual demonstrations on large screens and the whites of over enthusiastic eyes ready to use it all on God knows who. Most of the gear I could barely identify, as it wasn't your run of the mill military armaments. I've seen enough movies and actual war footage to tell a tank from a bulldozer. But these spit shined monstrosities were mounted with contraptions I'd never seen before. Sitting atop impenetrable tonnage of metal plating they appeared malevolently whimsical, painfully cutting edge. As for the sellers, the grinning, homely middle aged men with white credentials around their necks hanging from black lanyards as if they were pushing home appliances at a big box store in the Midwest, could barely keep from drooling at the site of the brown, yellow, and black foreign dignitaries with presumably low approval ratings back home. Clearly, these gadgets would never see a battlefield. I had the feeling of having walked into the wrong screening room of a movie theater, expecting the previews but instead looking up from my bucket of overpriced popcorn to see the dim glare of a totalitarian porn-flick for the crowd control fetishists in trench coats seated conspicuously around me under the cover of darkness. I felt out of place to say the least. Luckily Mr. Sadiq was in sight just past

the bone crushing water hoses, sound and sight inhibiting shock wave canons, rubber bullet machine guns, and a dictator's wet dream of other toys of domestic domination.

"I'm so sorry we have to meet this way Mr. Weber," said Mr. Sadiq, extending his hand out to me.

"No need to apologize. Just happy you made time to see me at all...should I really be here?"

He laughed, signaling Hani to fetch something for him from a salesman nearby who had been filling out paperwork on a fold out table.

"You're fine. I understand you're a victim of bad timing?" he said, studying a glossy pamphlet.

"You can say that. We had everything set up, plane tickets, hotels, equipment rentals, handlers, not to mention the man hours it took to research it all, to find and contact people of interest to interview, and really everything that goes behind putting such a production together."

"I can empathize Mr Weber. I used to be a newsman myself."

"Then you understand. Is there anything that can be done?"

"Unfortunately, no. I can put in a good word for you. That would be the extent of my reach.

"And the General Consul?"

"Afraid he would be equally powerless."

"We had an understanding weeks ago. There seemed to be no problem then. What happened exactly?"

"Well the ban was being proposed for some time now. Al Haya lobbied my

government for over a year, trying to state their case that they were nothing like Al Jazeera, and had no interest in our internal affairs. However, recent events proved otherwise.”

“What happened?”

“I wish I was able to disclose this information but it is classified by my government.”

“Forget Al Haya. The United States, we're allies with you guys.”

“Of course and we value this relationship immensely. But you must understand, your government casts a wide net across the Middle East, usually with conflicting outcomes. Sometimes we must take the necessary steps to ensure our security isn't jeopardized. And don't think we haven't sacrificed for this stance either. Nothing is free in this world sir. You believe the funds your government provides us with each year come with no strings attached? Let's not be naive. As you may know, the United States has placed an arms ban on our military for our lawful removal of president Morsi. With the instability across the region this is a troubling development we have to contend with.”

“But with all due respect you haven't used your armed forces since the early 70s right?”

“What are you implying Mr. Webber?”

“What good are tanks and fighter jets when you won't use them?”

“And we pray we never have to, but that does not mean we must stop maintaining and updating our forces.”

“You had opportunities.”

“Come again?”

Hani returned with a note from the salesman, which Mr. Sadiq calmly looked over after resting his glasses on the bridge of his nose as if the frames weren't worthy enough to touch his face. He then gave Hani a nod and put his glasses back inside his dark blue suit jacket.

“My apologies.”

“No problem. You in the middle of closing a deal of some kind?”

“Almost there. One of our biggest problems as of late, believe it or not, is trying to curb vandalism. The problem with times of instability is that it brings out all the crackpots and hoodlums who just need an excuse to destroy or deface federal and private property. It costs us a fortune and creates an atmosphere of anarchy we simply will not tolerate.”

“How can that be stopped? Seems like an unavoidable problem to me.”

“There are creative ways. We're looking into this ingenious new nanoparticle-based paint that is graffiti proof. And what that cannot cover, these state of the art surveillance camera and motion sensor night lights,” he flashed the pamphlet in front of my eyes, “these will be mounted around highly sensitive areas like police barricades, cultural centers, public squares, universities and other high traffic areas. Roaches hate the light. We cannot give them anymore breathing room. Enough is enough. They've had their fun. All children need to grow up at some point, even the motherless bastards. Unfortunately, sometimes you can't expect people to do the right thing, you just have to make it impossible for them to do the wrong thing,” he said, pressing a tan handkerchief against his dark, narrow lips and gazing up through the glass ceiling at passing clouds as if to validate the apparent objectivity in his analysis with their pareidolic forms.

“Interesting...so all of it, the past four years, was nothing more than juvenile delinquency?”

“It is one of the age-old quirks of the developing mind. Young people think the world is at their feet. You were very young once, you remember. It takes time, a little more life experience to realize that no, the world is certainly not at your feet but that you're actually standing upside down, and it is only gravity that allows you to enjoy this illusion.”

“And who plays the role of gravity in this scenario? I'm curious.”

“Let me explain. Egyptians, my people, they are a great people, very proud people. However, there are too many who want to tear it down and not enough to move it forward. Many want help from the state and yet are unwilling to put anything back into it.”

“Seems your friends set the precedent on that one huh?”

“Excuse me sir? Is there a problem?”

“No problem. You guys shut us out on the grounds of some vague national security threat that Al Haya or Qatar poses through their propaganda and whatever it is you don't want to disclose. And between you and me I'm not too crazy about them either. But what is the real threat here? What is this all about? Egypt isn't in danger of being invaded. Terrorism is limited to the Sinai area right? Not to brush it aside--”

“You're showing your ignorance. Terrorism is an enormous threat to our national security. It plagues every city and town in Egypt. We face it on a daily basis. Why do you think I'm here, in this very place, if it was not?”

“How are smoke grenades and water cannons supposed to neutralize suicide

bombers and AK-47s?”

“Show's how much you know. Terrorism is an attitude, a movement before it becomes organized violence. You must drive these ugly ideas underground before they infect the rest of the people.”

“Isn't that insulting to Egyptians? You're basically saying they're more susceptible to carrying out acts of terrorism than anyone else. That they're incapable of independent thought, like robots with two functions. How are they different than any other nation of people who don't think in the black and white terms of either embracing dictatorial rule or joining Al Qaeda? Or is this just an Egyptian McCarthyism that never died out? Didn't something like seventeen million people march against Morsi and the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood?”

“And we listened to their calls, yes.”

“But don't twist my words. Weren't the crowds even bigger against Mubarak? The Muslim Brotherhood wasn't a terrorist organization until you declared it one right? The people came out in droves because why? They thought Morsi and his party were hardliners, maybe a little too socially and religiously conservative? But wasn't it more so that nothing was getting better? No progress was being made? Isn't it more likely they realized, rather quickly, how impotent these boogeymen actually turned out to be, and who still holds the real power? Who take from the state, as you say, but never put anything back into it. Maybe they were done with all the facades, the parades, the speeches, and wanted just for once for those on the inside to come out into the light and stop treating them like children.”

“You have an interesting take on reality sir. The *Ikhwan*, the Muslim Brotherhood

has been a sore on the ass of my country for decades. After they cheated their way into office they couldn't handle the heat. They had their opportunity and became violent once they sensed their end was near. And yes they are unequivocally a terrorist organization. They sucker the poor into following them with their charity and their populism. In reality they're out for themselves. You are ignorant of their history so please do not try to lectu--

”

“I'm not defending them. I could give a shit really. What I'm asking is are they terrorists in the truest sense of the word or did they just step on the wrong toes? Seems to me they were an ideal target, considering how unpopular they were amongst many Egyptians, and also the most visible and disposable of targets to destroy as an example of what should happen to those who challenge military rule, to challenge the architects of the great lie. Yet the Brotherhood wasn't your biggest threat was it? Clearly they weren't or else you wouldn't have been so brazen in the way you massacred them in broad daylight, in a public square no less, shock and awe style. You did it knowing the same people who were the driving force in January 2011, the untold millions of fresh eyes and ears, your very real existential threat, that they would all be looking on in horror as you beat your chest asking, 'who's next?' ”

“This is nonsense. The military has become the scapegoat. We do not threaten our own people, we protect them. The Ikhwan were armed and they instigated the clashes. Also, President Sisi is an honest man, a good man. Unlike them he has ideas for progress based in reality. He's actively seeking ways to save our economy. It won't happen over night.”

“Didn't people say the same about Sadat? And look how that turned out. I'm sure

you'll find people who thought Mubarak was an honest broker too. I can give you seventy billion reasons why he wasn't. So lets not kid ourselves Mr. Sadiq. You denied us filming rights not because you fear the Gulf countries will unleash some disinformation campaign. You gladly accept aid from them every year with no qualms. And it certainly isn't because what we might reveal will in some farfetched way fuel extremism. That's silly. We couldn't possibly show Egyptians what they already know. I think what you're really afraid of is what our little show will keep alive, what it won't pretend to forget. You know Mr. Sadiq, the victors can no longer write history like they once did. You can no longer dominate the story with exaggerated tales of crazed clerics and raging hoodlums. Deflect as much as you like, you'll never prevent the world from realizing that after all the blood and the protesting and the drama that unfolded, ostensibly to remove tyranny, that the old vampires still run the show, that most of your people have nothing to look forward to, that the revolution failed because you succeeded.”

“*Ibn Sharmuta*. I offered to help you and this is how...it is quite startling Mr. Webber, the disconnect between what your government is doing and what Americans like you think you have all figured out. The image and the reality are always inconsistent, yet you have no clue either way. You all get so worked up about things you never knew existed just a week ago and know about now only through your government's propaganda arm, its cheerleaders, or what you call the media.”

“Don't give me that horseshit. No one ever tells me what to say. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but we don't receive any daily government briefings or get a visit from the FBI if we say the wrong thing. I don't receive weekly checks from Zionist bankers. Unlike your news agencies we don't--”

“You're too literal minded my friend. Of course there are no memos, but you know your limits, even if they are unspoken. Your media becomes more preoccupied with the logistics of a war instead of doing what you should be doing, questioning its justification or putting your leaders to task before they send other people's sons to die. They got rid of the draft after Vietnam to keep the probing and public anger to a minimum, as you know, or do not know, clearly.”

“How does any of this change what your own government is guilty of?”

“Perhaps I should speak slower for you. You know, next to soccer, the world's favorite pastime is bashing Americans. I'm starting to see why. There are always two debates going on around the world; the one that reflects the real story of American hegemony and dominance and then there is the one you and your media friends have amongst yourselves and force on the public. While your government brings the world to its knees, destroying whole civilizations or threatening to, you are all busy, in some alternate reality, talking about democracy and fairness. Don't you ever stop to ask yourself, Mr Webber, why of all of a sudden and how so conveniently in the build up to a war or intervention you're all so concerned about our women? Our poor? Our minorities? Where you see a fresh new humanitarian cause, everyone else sees it for what it really is. And not only are you being manipulated like children, but your memory is shaky as well. America was built on some of the worst humanitarian crisis in modern times or any time, and continues to spread the wealth in this regard to unsuspecting peoples all over the world, and now you want to pat yourselves on the back from a safe distance because half a century ago you gave people some voting rights? The same people who still live in ghettos and can only survive on food stamps?”

“It's better than what you give your people. Anything beats nothing.”

“You know nothing. The only reason why Americans even care about Egypt's problems now is that you see yourselves in us. It has finally caught up with you, your privilege is dwindling. This is the reality you fail to understand. You take it for granted because your peace of mind, your cushy existence thus far came at the expense of everyone else you have raped and colonized. But your influence is waning. For all its wealth and power, America has squandered the greatest fortune in human history in record time. And no one took it from you, you gave it away. You've siphoned out the coffers of your treasury, your future, for what? For the short term benefits of a fatter bottom line to satisfy greedy investors who will sneak the money out of the country anyway? It has become a cliché to say your society revolves around fast food, fast cars, fast women, fast returns, but what else can explain this? Your entire history is a montage of one successive coterie of swindlers after the next taking as much as they can get their hands on before the pitchforks and torches are in sight, even leaving their own progeny behind to fend for themselves. The next wave of bastards only know the model of theft and fatherless irresponsibility left in their wake, only to refresh the cycle. Except this time the wheel has stopped spinning. Your dominance came as fast as it went, a wild streak, a century of profit quickly loaded onto ships and planes and electronic wires for foreign banks. Except you didn't realize it until it was too late. This false reality was protected by oceans, ICBMs and luck. Capitalism doesn't bleed red, white, and blue Mr. Webber and it doesn't fear the bomb. It ate you up and spit you out. On to the next paper tiger. Our economy on the other hand, as modest as it is, is securely in our hands. We won't let it slip away for cheap thrills and a quick release. The military you vilify, the one

in which I have proudly served, has kept Egypt from ruin, from invasion by Israel, France, England and from the scourge of terrorism, both foreign and homegrown. It has kept order and peace in a nation of eighty million people, all with competing interests and ideas on how to mold society in their selfish image. Unlike you we understand the world and our place in it in the context of the thousands of years our civilization has existed and the thousands to come. We don't think in terms of financial quarters, or efficient market theories, we think in terms of forever, in everything we do, in family, in community, in security, in God, hand in hand toward our destiny. Until we realize that glorious end, we'll have our fair share of problems, and we're okay with that. We'll be here long after America's light burns out and the barbarian hordes strip it clean. Rome was a brutal empire replaced by ten others. America will be no different. Meanwhile Egypt will always be here, *Inshallah*.”

Before I could respond I felt a sandbag-like mass envelop my entire forearm and half of my bicep. I looked down to see a meaty black hand as broad and heavy as an unabridged dictionary attached to one of the largest human beings I'd ever seen that close up. I couldn't decide if he was standing there the entire time, slowly eclipsing the setting sun or if he had just then arrived with Hani, who went and fetched him while I argued with his boss. Either way I was soon out on the street, where I informed the giant, from a safe distance and not exactly in these terms, that he should be careful who he muscles around, that I was on TV, kind of a big deal, and that I could squash him like a bug for his sins if I wanted. I assured him I was the Goliath in this scenario, that his physical advantage was obsolete, only mattering in a time when the purse couldn't outdo the sling. His hysterical fit of laughter only heightened the stakes of my comical threats. In an

instant of pure rage, with the two-fold effect of being told my future was doomed by some Arab from a third world country and being roughed up by a black man in the first world, two ends of a color spectrum of dominated peoples slowly breaking free, a reality I had repressed in good conscience as a white kid in the inner city, I unwisely suggested I have his 'nigger ass' locked up. He chased me. I ran. But he suddenly stopped in mid stride, perhaps after rightly sensing I was only trying to get a rise out of him and that maiming me for life wouldn't solve the scourge of episodic racism born from a desperate and juvenile attempt at one-upmanship. He then turned and headed back to his post inside the Javitz Center, shaking his head at another member of the security team who had stayed behind to watch what would have been my certain end.

As petty and full of guilt as this left me, and not just the white variety, I was glad, in retrospect, to have purged these last remnants of an instilled sense of entitlement and latent ownership from my system. The kind manifested in subtle self-affirming glances of superiority I'd receive from the institutional guardians of my birthright, teachers, store managers, and police, while in the presence of minorities. This test of character, which I failed, at once exposed and destroyed what was left of that scared, spoiled child within, the one who secretly believed in nihilism as a fun exercise until his destiny kicked in, when predetermined order prevailed and the matured princes were separated from their subjects. It freed me. It was the moment I finally grew up. It was also the moment I decided to quit my job.

While I dragged my feet up the relatively barren stretch of Eleventh Avenue, my phone gave off a slight vibration that I initially mistook for a phantom call. It was Mona. I did most of the talking at first, explaining what happened, leaving out certain

embarrassing details, and more importantly, how much I missed her and other hastily articulated sentiments I heard drop down a bottomless pit of silence on the other end. She didn't seem impressed by my sudden awakening, or depending on how you looked at it, one of many postponed concessions to the inevitable. Instead I picked up on a sense of frustration from her end, as if I had arrived too late, missing the boat. She was moving to California, she said, and I couldn't persuade her otherwise. Mona was gone, this time for good.

It was mid May, one of those schizophrenic spring days in New York at once too breezy, cloudy, and cool to keep the windows wide open, but too warm and muggy to keep them completely shut. I didn't know what to do with myself. Newly unemployed and on the other end of yet another burned bridge in my short career, I had plenty of free time on my hands. It didn't take long to realize just how challenging leisure, at least the kind I enjoyed, had become to the reintegrated flâneur. Not too long ago I used to be able to kill entire afternoons floating through music, movie rental, and book stores, most of which didn't cater exclusively to children's lit and the endless industry of strategically timed, ghostwritten memoirs by delusional over-reachers who would never see the inside of the Oval Office, let alone stink up the place for a term or two. Where these vendors all wound up, the internet, seemed to make homebodies out of everyone irrespective of how they felt about it. Yet the web lost something in this acquisition. Though its early days were marked by sluggish dial-up modems and anemic ram, the internet was on to

something then. For a while it was the cool record store, the eccentric book dealer, the fanatic film-buff proprietor. And not unlike those vestiges of character and genuine communal life, as steeped as they were in commerce, it was snuffed out, suffocated, and over its modest foundations an enormous, brightly lit shopping mall took its place. I dreaded the prospect of looking for work in this new era of television, a medium almost completely absorbed by this great homogenizer of human experience.

Luckily, later that afternoon, my agent of six years, Jerry DeGregio, who stood by me after my hasty decision to part ways with *One Way Ticket*, and who would never allow any cultural decline to keep him from his cut, called me up with news of an interview he had lined up with some studio executive out in Long Island. He was one host shy of a pilot and was willing to give me a shot. I didn't care what the show was about, sparing Jerry the sales pitch.

The following morning they sent a car. The sheer difference in the weather no more than twenty-four hours later suggested spring might otherwise be a state of mind. The ground we covered, from Central Park West and 83rd Street, to Broadway, 79th Street, and NY-9A, took on that distinct vernal glow from the back seat of the Lincoln Towncar as it propelled itself gracefully to the score of sports radio and small talk between myself and the driver, Eddie, a middle-aged Salvadorian with a deep, booming voice perfect for broadcasting or in earlier times as a heel in one of Mona's crime noir films opposite to Bogart's hero. Once we jumped onto the Cross Bronx Expressway we hit heavy traffic. Twenty minutes and a hundred feet later, I grew anxious. I tried calling the studio office to inform them I'd probably be late, but a weak signal rendered my phone useless. As we floated along the river of break lights, my restlessness turning

numb, I spotted it out of the corner of my eye.

There among dozens of other tags, some overlapping others, situated high on the tiered wall of an abandoned and hollowed out factory of century old red brick facing the parkway, it jumped out at me like my own image amidst a crowd of strangers. After recalling what Mona told me in my apartment that day, I reasoned this had to be it. Gordo's first attempt, and ironically, also his future calling card; the lotus flower and initials prominently displayed at the center of a dollar in place of Washington's Mona Lisa-esque smirk. Directly above the oval in bold capital letters the Latin, *IN HOC SIGNO VINCES*.

There was movement around the structure, a scurrying of hardhats and diesel trucks with mud flaps. Hanging above the scene, casting a long, thin shadow over the Cross Bronx, was a blue painted crane with a pear shaped wrecking ball being hoisted up into place. It swayed gracefully like a fully grown, ripened fruit in the wind, if not the shiny Sword of Damocles, waiting for its cue from nature or the white hat with the clipboard to meet its target.

Traffic started to move just then and we picked up speed quite suddenly. I wouldn't be late after all. Eddie, noticing how completely absorbed I was by all this, asked me in his Old Testament voice what I kept staring at, by then a shrunken brown spec behind a line of trees a mile behind us. I could only respond to his question with one of my own. "You believe in ghosts Eddie?"

Conclusion

To the profound disappointment of all the brave souls who stood up to the brutality of the Mubarak regime during those historic eighteen days in January of 2011, many of whom lost their lives, the situation in Egypt has for the most part remained unchanged. The military still exerts almost complete control over the political and economic destiny of the country while informal work and high unemployment continue to plague an ever-growing population of young, highly educated youth. Rightly or wrongly, the outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood and the recent sentencing of former president Mohamed Morsi to death demonstrates just how little room is left for dissenting voices. Furthermore, in solidarity with Egypt's fight against ISIS, the United States has lifted its short-lived arms ban on the largest Arab army. The military coup of Morsi, the stated reason for the ban in the first place, has essentially been forgiven in light of the great threat ISIS poses to American interests in the region. Therefore, this can in many ways be interpreted as a greenlight for the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to continue what it has been doing for nearly half a century, and this time without the threat of economic or political consequences from its main benefactor and the international community at large.

Where in the past social movements were forced to hide in the shadows once the state tightened its grip on power, the internet and social media have ensured they can live on in one form or another. Here this energy can continuously be channeled as well as evolve through underground networks of Egyptian activism, most notably in the contemporary art scene as demonstrated over the past few years by such local artists as Ganzeer, Alaa Awad, Ammar Abou Bakr, Omar Fathy, Hassan Emad Hassan, Bahia Shehab, and Basma Hamdy, among many others. Although the style these Egyptian street artists employ borrows heavily from Banksy, the

infamous guerrilla street artist and rather obvious inspiration for the character of Omar, it has been appropriated like many other art forms to articulate in new and effective ways what Egyptians face on a daily basis. In a similar vein, Hip Hop played a pivotal role in the lead up to the Tunisian revolution with its anti-establishment messages against ousted leader Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. Although this appears to be a classic case of neo-colonial populations utilizing their colonizers modes of expression to combat said control, in reality it is only part of the story. Egyptians have exhibited a long history of resistance in many ways specific to their own culture and identity, most of which have been brutally suppressed by the police state. Thus these Western inspired tactics of guerrilla art or social media mobilization are only the most visible and recent components of an exhaustive arsenal of activism dating back several decades. Conversely, the Occupy movement and the anti-austerity movement across Europe seem to have been largely inspired by the Arab Spring.

In a rather well-timed coincidence while writing this novella, I became aware of Banksy's most recent project, a statement on the Gaza crisis in the form of a short film clearly made from within the besieged city. His foray into film, a decision my fictional character also makes in the novella, and that I wrote prior to hearing the news, came as a surprise but made complete sense when considering the trajectory of technological trends and the growing inter-connectivity of 'First' and 'Third World' activism. With this novella I set out to demonstrate how although the average American observer, embodied by Jamie, may not be terribly familiar with Egypt's internal power dynamics and day to day struggles, he becomes aware of the common denominator affecting his place of birth as much as does Omar's and all the nations in between. That capitalism ties most nations of the world together in a web of relationships underlined by varying degrees of give and take, is by now evident to all. However, what is notable this time

around is the increasing sense of uncertainty and vulnerability felt by those for whom this economic system has historically kept mostly contented, namely educated middle class or bourgeois Americans and Europeans. In the wake of the global financial crisis, stock market crashes, mass layoffs, home repossessions, and rapidly changing local economies and neighborhoods made headlines of discontent in the Arab world feel all the more closer to home as they revealed, albeit on a magnitude far beyond our own, those similar themes of unemployment, debt, wealth disparity, unchecked corruption, and greed.

More than ever before global economic forces dictate, with as much ease, the cultural, political, and economic direction of a New York City or a London as they would a developing city such as Cairo. The cultural and social institutions that once served as a voice for the voiceless and that functioned as a built-in resistance to unfettered capitalism have largely fell silent over the past few decades. Consequently, the distinction between the First and Third world in terms of freedom of opportunity and by extension true socioeconomic agency is perpetually decreasing as the wealth gap between the wealthiest and the poorest on a national and global scale regularly increases. As China rapidly eclipses the West economically, American and European multinational corporations and financial firms earn record profits while their respective national GDP's fall and perpetual unemployment and underemployment become the norm. Capitalism has evolved past its earlier function as a dominating tool of one nation, empire, ethnic or religious group over another. It has finally become a state all unto itself maintained by a revolving door of guardians of all colors with less of a reliance on bourgeois complicity and a truly global pool of loosely associated workers to draw from and discard once it no longer needs them.

What is left is free wielding capitalism without borders, divorced, now almost entirely, from a sense of obligation to one's homeland, and along with it the homogenization of societies across the world under the banner of consumerism and debt. What emerges are internationalized cookie cutter cities with identical problems of varying magnitudes. Consequently, as a natural reaction to this stateless economic force, so too does human experience become more focused, and perhaps more resistant to a single strand of global leadership. As an outgrowth of this resistance, art will no longer stay local until it is eventually appropriated by the periphery, but will instead be propelled by the marginalized and vice versa, until all forms of expression are owned by all with the same amount of value attached. In essence, Gordo's symbol will potentially belong to everyone in equal measure, becoming blind to its owner just as hard currency is to the person holding it. Ultimately, radical art and other modes of expression will move closer to the mainstream as the symptoms of what is ailing society become more identical and familiar.

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