

Shattered Glass

“I wonder what Alexandria is going to be like”, Sherif Wahid thought to himself as he gazed through the window of the first class car of the train taking him from Cairo to his hometown. “It’s been ten years since I last saw the streets of my hometown. I never thought I’d be back. Were it not for Mama’s pleas that sent tears running down my cheeks thousands of miles away in the US, I would have never come back. But she was too sick to come visit me. She’s probably dying and this could be our last time together. She had never wanted me to emigrate and she’s probably never forgiven me. But I had to leave. I just had to flee this open air prison to preserve my sanity and humanity. Even for a doctor like me, life in this giant elephant graveyard was impossible.”

Sherif admired the lush Egyptian countryside rushing by, interspersed with cows grazing and little boys and girls playing with chickens and jumping into streams. The serenity and tranquility of the scene he was now admiring brought back one of the very few good memories of his teenage years. He had met his wife on this very train against this very backdrop during his first year of college while commuting between his hometown of Alexandria and Tanta, where his university was. Aside from one other sweet memory of walking by the Alexandria Corniche, the Egypt of his youth filled him with bitterness and cynicism. An Egypt so despondent and pathetic he had fled as quickly as possible after receiving his medical license, defying his mother’s pleas. “I still remember the miserable, despondent, dirty faces of working class Egyptians haunting me every time I would step out on the street.; Tthe monotonous complaints about the hardships of life., Tthe fights between random strangers over even the most trivial of things with their legendary lung power., Tthe dirty garbage ridden streets littered with even dirtier beggars surrounded by barefoot children robbed of their innocence., Tthe futility of the everyday life of millions of youth robbed of a future by a wanton class of corrupt politicians and their cronies and parasites.”

Sherif opened his briefcase and pulled out a newspaper clipping that was dearer to him than his family. It was from *Al Ahram*’s front page on February 11th, 2011, the day the tyrant Mubarak had been toppled. On that day, for the first time in his life, Sherif was proud to be Egyptian. He held it delicately and read the red headline for the thousandth time; “The people have taken down the regime”. It was a treasure he would surely hand down to his children.

“It was only on January 28th, 2011 that I started to believe there was hope. Only then, as Mona and I sat glued to our TV screen, did I imagine that change was not only possible, but inevitable. The courage of my fellow countrymen and women, whom I had distanced myself from years ago, made me wish I were with them on the streets of Alexandria, standing before the riot police and defying tear gas, rubber bullets and death itself. I probably would have been on the front lines actually. If I had continued my meaningless existence in Egypt, I wouldn’t have had anything to lose. I feel traitorous and selfish that I wasn’t with them, but I guess this is the destiny that God has planned for me. I’m destined to come back and help rebuild a new Egypt

with the skills and knowledge I've acquired. I owe it to the martyrs of the revolution."

"For the past eighteen months, my heart has been in Egypt even though I was physically in Baltimore. I've slavishly followed every development on the newfound political landscape since Mubarak was toppled. I participated in the parliamentary and presidential elections through my embassy. That's right.; *Mmy* embassy. Only recently did I regret applying so enthusiastically for a US passport and trying to dissipate my identity. But now, I am proud of my identity.; *Mmy* heritage., *Mmy* citizenship. I have a newfound sense of identity and pride in my country and people, and I'll never be ashamed of my birthplace again."

"I wonder what the people will be like now. Surely they'll be different. The streets will certainly be cleaner just like the civilized youth of Tahrir Square cleaned up the square after dismantling their sit-in. People will be polite and cultured just like they were during those 18 days that captivated the world. And why not? What happened in Egypt last year was no small thing. Not only was it a life changing experience for me; but also it must have changed the collective psyche of millions of people. It's not every day that millions of people of different backgrounds unite together in the name of justice and dignity. Even with all the setbacks that have occurred in the past year and a half, things have progressed dramatically. The future is almost certainly better than the past. I can't wait to see how things have changed. I took a taxi straight from Cairo airport and fell asleep on the way so I haven't had any contact with my long lost country yet. Yet, I noticed that people were so nice! The custodian in the bathroom was very courteous and gave me a tissue, an airport worker happily offered to carry my bags for me and the taxi driver was so respectful and agreed to take his payment in dollars because I didn't have local currency. Surely things will have taken a turn for the better. Surely – "

The screeching brakes of the train signaled the end of the journey. Passengers jumped up in random fashion and reached for the shelves above their heads to pull down their bags. One passenger pulled down his bag too quickly; dragging down the bag below it and making it tumble to the ground. The owner of the fallen bag bent over to examine it and then yelled in protest at the man responsible. The responsible man, rather than apologizing as Sherif imagined he would, yelled back at the top of his lungs, saying it was the other man's fault. The exchange became heated and disruptive, and was only resolved because the other passengers loudly protested that the train aisle was blocked. The two men separated, each one muttering insults about the other man's mother. Sherif got to the front of the car and stepped off, tripping over a bag of garbage and falling flat on his face. He got up and collected his bags and walked through the station to the exit. Mahatet Masr was the same as always; noisy, dirty and dusty. Beggar women with children in ragged clothes were placed every twenty meters. Sherif coughed several times as he inhaled the thick dust on his way out.

Finally, he reached the exit. He stepped outside with now blunted enthusiasm and tears welled up in his eyes instantly at the sight he saw. In Shuhadaa Square before him, things were certainly different. Every few feet there were groups of people getting into fights with random strangers over parking spaces, dented cars or minibus fares. A teenage girl walking with her mother was

harassed before Sherif's eyes by a pack of dirty looking young men. The street was not only muddy from recent rainfall, but sewage water formed small streams adjacent to the sidewalk. A deafening horn from a bus driving in an illegal direction alerted Sherif and made him run to the sidewalk through the filthy water to save himself. The pavements were destroyed and the piles of rubble were separated only by heaps of wet garbage spilled from garbage cans overturned by rummaging homeless people. Tens of new illegal buildings towered over the train station, already dangerously tilting. Street merchants blocked what little that was left of the road with their cheap merchandise. A *rubabikya* dealer was standing with his parked donkey a few feet from Sherif, waiting for the donkey to leave its mark of dung on the streets. A little boy stood with his face to the wall of the train station and urinated.

Sherif, shocked, closed his eyes to shut out the horrid sights and tried futilely to escape the sounds of quarrels, donkeys, and car horns, and the smell of dust, smoke and urine. He turned his gaze towards the heavens to see the blue Alexandrian sky he missed so much. As he opened his eyes, he saw in the distance atop the train station, towering above the square of dilapidated chaos, the torn, faded remains of an Egyptian flag.