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Fiction



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After the army, Khalid had too many bad dreams and kept seeing the dead soldier. The head abbot scolded Khalid for his inability to concentrate on his studies and said his overgrown bushy hair showed the disorder of his mind. They discussed dismissing him until Abuna Yohannes asked for Khalid at his parish in Upper Egypt. Khalid, after all, had the most glorious voice and would make a great cantor. Abuna Yohannes promised that if Khalid, his dear childhood friend, is not ready to become a priest after the summer, then Abuna Yohannes will

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After the army, Khalid had too many bad dreams and kept seeing the dead soldier. The head abunas scolded Khalid for his inability to concentrate on his studies and said his overgrown bushy hair showed the disorder of his mind. They discussed dismissing him until Abuna Yohannes asked for Khalid at his parish in Upper Egypt. Khalid, after all, has the most glorious voice and would make a great cantor. Abuna Yohannes promised that if Khalid, his dear childhood friend, is not ready to become a priest after the summer, then Abuna Yohannes will

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be the one to tell him. But if Abuna Yohannes can help Khalid focus on his studies again, the head abunas will pay for Khalid's shoulder surgery by Christmas. Khalid cannot disappoint his oldest friend. Abuna Yohannes recommended Khalid for St. George Coptic Catholic Seminary, a chance to have a good living, and now he risked his reputation and potentially his parish on Khalid and his shoulder again.

Khalid walks outside to cool down. The moon is a quarter full. The piles of sandbags on the north side look like ghosts. Abuna Yohannes said the sandbags are for the repairs, but everyone knows they are for security. Christians and Muslims lived in peace in Esna, but then Bedouins attacked the nearby Abu Fana Monastery in Mallawi. They burned Bibles, destroyed altars and tried to force three monks to spit on the cross and recite the Shahada, declaring there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet. The police arrived after three hours, despite their station being two kilometers away. But after the incident, Khalid's father pointed to the 1919 revolution flag hanging in their home, the cross locked inside the crescent moon's tips, and said, "They try to make us fight each other, but someday soon the Copts and Muslims will band together and kick out Mubarak like they did the British *kawagaat*."

Khalid checks his mobile for missed calls, cheaper than texts and phone calls. Five from his mother, reminding him he's the eldest and needs to become a successful priest and his parents cannot afford his surgery. Three missed calls are from the seminarian Wael, probably bragging he's breaking curfew again and drinking Fantas on the cornice, even though his family is poorer than Khalid's and Wael can't afford the sugary drink any more than Khalid can. But since Thomas befriended him, an American English teacher at the seminary, Wael

receives expensive gifts and a key to Thomas' apartment. Wael plays on the American's computer, watches movies, and eats rich food. Khalid imagines drinking a Fanta, too sweet to taste anything like an orange. The last time he had one was before the army, when life still seemed good.

Fishing boats clutter against the makeshift docks and the dirt promenade. In Cairo, the cornice is paved and winds along the Nile, equipped with lights and handrails. After the sun sets and people are released from the heat, they gather on the cornice and visit and eat and walk. Couples huddle in dark corners. But Esna's dirt cornice is empty except for a few shadows.

The men on the church roof walk across beams, kneel down with hammers and saws, wordlessly helping each other. If Khalid didn't know they were there, their shadows could blend into the night sky. Three months ago the khamsin, the high spring winds that bring in the heat, blasted in and tore off part of the roof. Abuna Yohannes joked they were closer to God this way, but even he wanted a solid roof over his head. The church repairs happen during the cover of darkness. In Egypt a mosque can be built any time, but a church must receive government permission to repair a building or create a new one, which means giving baksheesh. The bishop refused to pay off the right officials. If they are caught, then it is God's will.

Khalid rests on the hard ground, risking falling shingles and nails for cooler air. Mosquitoes and ants nip at his skin. Rocks dig into his aching shoulder. Khalid imagines one last tendon in place, about to snap. Each time he washes his hair, picks up a plate, lifts his laundry bag, holds the Eucharist, he concentrates so that it won't be the last. If he has the surgery, he will be able to scrub his hair, play football, lift tables and

chairs. The ground and rocks didn't bother him in the army, but now God has abandoned him and he feels every pain.

At twenty-seven, Khalid is too old to search for a new line of work and too young to fall apart with an injured mind and shoulder. He cannot spend a lifetime in this pain. In one month, he must prove to Abuna Yohannes that he is stable and can become a priest. With a fixed shoulder, Khalid can at least work to help his family, whether or not the abunas deem him good enough to become a priest.

Ants biting Khalid's ankles wake him. The dark sky eases into day. Sunrise will begin soon. The men begin to climb down the roof. These are the important men in the community — merchants, butchers, and bakers — not the fellaheen, who would have been too tired from laboring in the fields during the day to work on the church at night. One man sets his toolbox on the ground close to Khalid's foot. Khalid scoots back. Abuna Yohannes reprimands Khalid whenever he acts like a villager; he says men of the cloth cannot be too accessible. When Khalid suggested they should help with the church repairs, Abuna Yohannes said, "They would not be happy seeing the hands that touch the body and blood of Christ holding tools. We will leave the repairs to the men of the world."

The Muslim morning call to prayer rings out. 5:15. One man brings down the last of the tools. He looks ready for the day with his sculpted mustache, pressed slacks and button-down shirt. In the mornings, these men go to work as if they slept all night, like they have for the past two weeks. There is no money to pay the men and if they are arrested, their eldest sons will have to provide for their families.

Khalid forgets to hide. The man looks at Khalid and says, "What is wrong with your hair, brother?"

Something bumps against Khalid's forehead. He swats at the bug but instead touches a thick braid of hair.

Inside the parish bathroom, Khalid studies himself in the mirror. His bushy hair bunches around his head, but a long matted braid hangs against his forehead. Khalid grabs a pair of scissors. Abuna Yohannes would say he should have waited for a proper haircut, but Khalid chops the braid off. Either he is losing his mind or this is djinn, bad magic.

After Khalid showers and prepares for morning Mass, he visits Abuna Yohannes' room. The air conditioning hits Khalid in a refrigerated gust. His skin prickles at the confusion. How is Abuna Yohannes not sick all the time when he keeps shocking his body this way?

"Good morning, my brother. Let's prepare for the new day." Fat bunches around Abuna Yohannes' belt. All villagers know that when a man becomes a priest he grows not only a beard, but a belly too. Khalid wants to drink clean water every day. He wants to take a warm bath. He wants people to look at him with respect. He wants to make his parents proud and not be a burden, and he wants to be able to lift his arm without pain. For that, he must learn why his hair was twisted into a braid and find a way to make the soldier leave his dreams.

Instead of the customary glass of wine before Mass to relax and refresh Khalid's voice, Abuna Yohannes hands Khalid brown liquid. Khalid glances at the bottle with the majestic deer on the label: Auld Stag, European whiskey, a place with green fields and wide-open skies, where cars stop to let deer pass — unlike the car and bus-dodging Cairo. As a priest, Abuna Yohannes cannot be seen entering one of the few

liquor stores. The closest one is in Luxor, 45 kilometers away, a long trip, even when taking the parish car instead of the bus.

"Abuna, whiskey before Mass? Isn't that too much?" Khalid asks.

"My friend, we are not Muslims, and," Abuna Yohannes glances at Khalid's hair, "you need a drink. Your eyes are puffy every morning and now it looks like someone has chopped your bangs with a machete."

"My bed is not as comfortable as yours, Abuna."

"Khalid, my brother, why must you make everything so hard?"

"Some of us have more difficult roads." The bishop had written Abuna Yohannes an exemption letter from the army when he was a seminarian, but hadn't done the same for Khalid. Khalid should be in his fourth year instead of second. Instead he is still stuck in *Tamheedi*, the kindergarten of the priest world; six years from becoming an abuna, and maybe even longer if he can't keep the dead soldier out of his dreams. Abuna Yohannes is only a year older and already a priest with a full-grown beard and belly.

"You must tell me what is troubling you. For you, I will always be Bishoy."

"*Ma'lesh*, Abuna. Do not waste your worries on me." The lump of hair presses against Khalid's chest. He wants to tell his friend about the soldier and his dreams, but Abuna Yohannes' name is no longer Bishoy. His loyalty is to the church and head abunas now.

Abuna Yohannes sets his cup on the dresser. "Then we will talk after Mass. It is time to prepare for our congregation."

Khalid sniffs the whiskey, a rich sweet smell. He's tempted, but he doesn't trust himself. He pours it down the sink.

Abuna Yohannes shakes his head. "Aye Khalid, God wants you to be relaxed. Your voice is the instrument of his work. You must oil it."

During morning Mass, Khalid forgets about the dying soldier in the sand. He imagines his voice sailing up and plugging the hole in the ark-shaped ceiling, covering the congregation like a heavenly cloud. No wind or dust can trouble them if his voice rings its protection. Each time he sings, it reminds him he is no longer in the army. Clean water is plentiful. A nice living is attainable. He is on the path to honoring his family. But this morning an old man in a gray *galabaiya* stares at Khalid and frowns. Khalid's voice slips. The braid, still tucked in his pocket, prickles against his chest. He imagines all the parishioners staring at his hair and seeing the djinn that visits Khalid at night and twists his hair. Khalid loses the hard notes. He wavers. This world of security begins to slide away. He stumbles along until, mercifully, the sanctified loaf of bread imprinted with the ankh is finished.

Khalid kneels in front of his bed, begging God not to leave him. He didn't listen to Jesus when he betrayed the soldier, but please God do not have his voice desert him. It is all he has left.

Abuna Yohannes stands outside Khalid's door. "Come to my room and cool down."

"It will make me sick, Abuna. It's too hard to go from a hot room to a cool one."

Abuna Yohannes insists, and Khalid follows. They may be friends from their village, but they are no longer equal and Khalid is now the cantor who is unable to sing.

Abuna Yohannes sets his vestment on his chair. "You must tell me what is wrong. Your glorious voice has slipped. You can have wild hair, but your voice must stay intact."

Khalid pulls the braid from his bag. For that, he can trust his oldest friend's discretion. "How is this possible?" Khalid pats his missing

bangs; sure his future waits in this slip of hair.

"Sounds like djinn." Abuna Yohannes rubs his thick beard. "I'm worried. My friend Mahfouz has still not come back from the army."

Mahfouz, protector, was Khalid's nickname. Even though he was the smallest child, whenever someone was threatened or blamed, Khalid took his side. When Bishoy stole extra helpings of bread at school, Khalid confessed to the theft and endured Bishoy's whippings. Before the army Khalid believed whenever he faced a bully Jesus protected him. Khalid's small size didn't matter because he had Jesus' might.

"I did something very bad, Abuna. At night I dream of it. God will not forgive me." Khalid holds the braid tight. "Our sergeant was a hard man. He made us exercise in the hot sun and wouldn't let us drink water, even when a man collapsed. At night I see the man's dust covered lips, the moment when life left him. The rest of us kept exercising, following the sergeant's orders. We did nothing."

"It's hard to disobey orders, my brother. The sin is with your sergeant."

"The sin is with all of us who watched and did nothing." Khalid doesn't tell the rest of the story. The braid itches in his hands. "The man haunts me at night."

"We will go to the most holy man I know, and he will cure you."

"The bishop?"

"Of course not. The bishop, may God grant him long life, has disappointed you, has he not?" Abuna Yohannes pats Khalid's shoulder. It strains against the large touch. "The bishop has disappointed me, too, many times. The poor man is from Minya; it cannot be helped that he says one thing and then does another. He has two faces, but a bishop should be better. No, this man is an Orthodox monk."

Khalid frowns. "The bishop would not approve of that."

"The bishop doesn't need to know. This man has powers no one else does. He will rid you of the djinn."

If Khalid were a spirit, he wouldn't worry about disappointing mothers, destroying opportunities for siblings, money or food. He would hide the abunas' vestments and the Eucharist, play with the boombox's volume during Mass. He would do nothing truly sacrilegious, but enough to make the head abunas and seminarians lose their bravado. He would exchange the richer seminarians' thicker cotton shirts with the poorer ones; let them experience the thin, scratchy material. Khalid would move the sex movies from the American's apartment and place them in the head abunas' rooms. Khalid would take library books and surround his bare, concrete room with the beautiful museums and rich artwork. He would steal fresh fruit and lamb from the vendors, take as much Fanta as he could, and relish the good food and drink.

But he is human and has to follow Abuna Yohannes so that in five months he can sing at Christmas Mass with a fixed shoulder. He will risk disloyalty to his faith to have the ghost leave him and his hair alone. Leave it to Khalid to get the djinn with hairdressing interests.

They take a car to Deir Al-Fakhouri, the Monastery of the Potter, who, like the ancient god Khnum, sat and created the world out of mud. A priest is a rich man with a car. He doesn't ride a donkey or bus, like Abuna Yohannes did when he was Bishoy. Abuna Yohannes wears a gold ring and clothes of export-quality cotton. Khalid shifts in his seat and straightens his thin pants, his best pair. The

material grates his fingers, the black color worn. A stranger would never guess they grew up together. Abuna Yohannes orders the driver to turn the air conditioning on high. The cold gusts chill Khalid. This is going to make him sick, but then, at least, he might get some rest.

The Coptic Orthodox monk kisses Abuna Yohannes' cheeks five times to show his great affection. He has a full head of hair and a trimmed mustache. He grasps Khalid's hand and gazes at him. The monk tests Khalid's braid against his tongue. Khalid relaxes. A showman, not a holy man. Nothing can be learned from tasting hair.

The monk examines the braid. "This will take some time. Nehal will take care of you."

A young woman in a crisp tan suit and slight heels serves them tea and then leads them into the church to wait and pray.

Khalid and Abuna Yohannes recite the rosary for two hours. On the church's walls is the ever-present image of the holy family fleeing to Egypt, the Giza pyramids waiting in the background. A host of centuries-old churches claim to have been part of the Holy Family's route. Some of the first Christians were Egyptian, followers of St. Mark, writer of the oldest gospel. The old religion comforts Khalid, back when the rules were clear and people lived in caves and old pharaonic temples to avoid taxation and bloodthirsty Romans. The first Christians desecrated the ancients' hieroglyphics, certain it was the work of the devil, but evil and good can live side by side and be hard to detect. That's what Khalid's time in the army and seminary has taught him.

The young woman returns and leads them into the monk's office, cluttered with ankhs and statues of Jesus and Mary. He sits behind the desk, looking like an important businessman, a hotel manager.

He frowns at Khalid. "You face a hard and strong war from someone

who hates you. His djinn will make you unsuccessful and unhappy all the days of your life."

Khalid sits back. "Forgive me, but I don't believe this is true."

Abuna Yohannes begins to apologize for Khalid, but the monk says, "You doubt me? I spend my day in prayer, not Mass." He relates a story of a troubled Muslim man who came to visit him last week.

"A Muslim came to see you?" Khalid asks.

"A holy man is a holy man," Abuna Yohannes says.

"We all believe in Abraham's God. I am Orthodox and yet here you are, just a Catholic," the monk says.

In old Cairo Khalid saw Muslim men and women place St. George's ancient iron collar on their neck and wrap his chain around their bodies. They kissed the chains and shook and writhed to feel the warrior saint's suffering. They kissed statues and pictures of Mary and Jesus. They said prayers. Sometimes tears trickled down their cheeks. But Khalid has never stepped inside a mosque or tried to experience a saint's suffering.

"This man, a boy really, was troubled just like you. The djinn possessed him so much that he tried to break the cross," the monk says. The boy had a bad relationship with a girl. He was happy with her, yet he became greedy. Her friend was pretty, too, even prettier, and he strayed. His girlfriend went to a Sudanese sorceress and put menstrual blood in his food to curse him. A demon from the Libyan Desert took over his body and even his tongue. His friend had to tell the story, because the demon was not to be trusted. The monk prayed for this boy and made a hard chant for forty-five minutes using the psalms and then finally drove out the demon. The boy kissed the cross and returned to being good, safe from bad demons and women.

Khalid leans back from the superstitious, village talk. His father offered too many sheep to cleanse rooms and bad spirits, a waste of money and meat. If a wise old man suggested a sacrifice, prayers, oils or special drinks, his father did it. He offered up too much to unnecessary spirits instead of protecting their family. When Khalid left for the seminary in Cairo, he vowed to put his faith and belief into God alone and leave superstitions behind in the village.

Khalid folds his arms. "Should I slaughter a sheep to appease the djinn?"

"No more innocent blood." The way the monk looks at Khalid makes him feel as if he is truly seen and he isn't clean. "This is not a *naddaaha*," a sea genie that lures men to watery deaths in the Nile, "but an *afreet*," a spirit that comes from the blood of a murder victim. The worst spirit.

"But who would curse me?"

"You know who. While you were waiting for me, I prayed to discover your problem. The unhappy dead can cause many difficulties."

Khalid shifts in his seat. This monk can see into Khalid's weak soul. He will have to leave the seminary and dishonor his family and suffer an injured shoulder for the rest of his life.

The monk turns to Abuna Yohannes. "Abuna, will you allow me the honor to talk with Khalid alone?"

Abuna Yohannes hesitates and then whispers to Khalid before leaving, "Remember your place." A reminder that the monk is Orthodox, and it is bad to expose any failing of their Catholic faith. A rumor can easily turn into a scandal.

The monk closes the door. "Tell me about the man you killed. I have no relationship with your bishop. You are safe with me."

Unlike the bishop and head abunas, this must be a man of God.

Khalid tells about the sergeant that made the men exercise in the middle of a hot July day. He kept pushing them, even after one man collapsed. Khalid heard Jesus from within his heart, commanding him to stop and help. Khalid brought the man water, but when he was about to tilt it to the man's lips, the sergeant yelled at him for coddling the weak and demanded he return to exercising. Khalid hesitated, the water still in his hand. The man looked at him, too dehydrated to speak, but his wide eyes pleaded for help. He had a blunt head and hands as large as Khalid's thighs. The sergeant kicked Khalid between his shoulder blades. He threatened imprisonment if Khalid didn't obey orders. Khalid set the water next to the man, just out of his reach, and then went back to exercising, all the while trying to moisten his mouth with saliva, pushing thoughts of water and heat away. Before going inside for dinner, Khalid glanced at the man, dust clinging to his lips. He seemed smaller, as if he had collapsed in on himself. Khalid couldn't tell when he died, but knew it just the same.

The monk looks at Khalid again. "There is something else, is there not?"

To punish him, the sergeant made Khalid and three other men hold a large wooden platform while a man did push-ups on it. The tendons in Khalid's right shoulder thrummed, like strands of old rope about to snap. Khalid did his duty, until the sergeant called Khalid's mother a whore and said the men in his village spend their days with her. Khalid let go of the platform and the men tumbled to the ground. Khalid grabbed the sergeant's baton and beat him. With each hit, Khalid saw the man dying in the dirt with the water just out of reach and Khalid too weak to save him. Khalid broke the sergeant's nose and cheekbone. Even though the other men were Muslim and Khalid was Coptic

Catholic, they lied for him to the colonel, because nothing is worse than cursing someone's mother.

Still, Khalid was placed in solitary confinement. His mother prayed and fasted for a week, and then she searched for more earthly help. Her youngest brother was a general in the army and became an important man when he appeased villagers during the bread riots. He arranged for Khalid's transfer to Aswan, a calmer assignment, until the end of his two years. He even arranged for Sundays off to pray, instead of Friday, the Muslim holy day.

The monk sets a golden scale in front of Khalid. "You have been away from your studies, but do you remember what Job the prophet of patience said?"

"When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold."

The monk nods. "When faced with bad circumstances, there are three categories of men. The first resents the circumstances and God. The second receives his hardships in silence. But what does the third do?"

"The third gives thanks, even in the heat of the furnace, and emerges stronger than before."

"You want to do good, I can tell. You are weak, like Simon Peter, but he became strong and founded the church. *Insha'allah*, you can redeem yourself and return to the seminary."

Khalid glances at the door. He lowers his voice. "I love the Catholic faith with all my heart. I have a good relationship with God, but in the seminary, it is hard. The abunas have two faces. They say one thing and do another. I cannot trust them."

The monk nods. "Sometimes men of faith can be more interested in rising in the ranks than God."

"The bishop could have saved me from the army, but he didn't. I've smelled perfume in his office and seen lipstick on his cheek. But the abunas are no better." Khalid tells about his friend at the seminary whose uncle declared their house and land for himself after his father's death. The abunas would not help his friend's widowed mother and younger siblings, and blamed him for not concentrating on his studies.

Khalid says, "How can these be holy men? The head seminarian sneaks out to an American's apartment. He even showed us sex movies. He said to become a celibate priest he should know what he was giving up."

Khalid hated himself as he sat on that couch, watching things that should have been between a husband and wife. He and the other seminarians were supposed to be studying to become men of God, not of flesh. But despite himself, at night, Khalid thought of those sex movies and the women's breasts like full moons and the way they moaned and he found himself beneath the sheets. He told himself that at least he wasn't soiling himself with a woman, but then he remembered Abuna Yohannes saying being celibate doesn't mean the urges don't exist. God gave men those temptations as a test, to prove themselves in God's favor. When Khalid handed the nuns his dirty laundry each week, he hid his sheets in the bottom of the bag.

"Sometimes at the seminary I feel further from God," Khalid says.

The monk taps his desk. "Bad company corrupts good character. I will tell you a dangerous secret. Many laymen have a stronger faith than priests. If you stay at the seminary, you will become a great man, a bishop. If you want to be a layman and marry, God will give you a good wife and you will be a great person. But you must do what I tell you."

He hands Khalid two bottles. "Each morning you must fast, pray the

Our Father and Holy Mary three times then recite: 'Oh angel of the Lord ask God who triumphed on witchcraft and the devil to help me have strong faith.' Then recite these seven psalms of David. Afterward, anoint yourself with this holy water and oil. If you do this for fifteen days, the bad magic will be powerless against you. Then you will decide what type of future you shall have."

Khalid kisses the monk's cheeks in thanks. They exchange mobile numbers, and Khalid promises to stay in touch. In the car, he tells Abuna Yohannes, "He is a great man." Abuna Yohannes gazes out the window at the hot, dusty fields ruined from the tumultuous khamsin winds and says, "*Insha'allah*, you remembered your place."

Each morning Khalid abstains from drinking wine with Abuna Yohannes and chants the psalms on an empty stomach. When he recites from Psalm 6 about his foes, "For there is no sincerity in their mouths; their hearts are corrupt. Their throats are open graves. ... Declare them guilty, God; make them fall by their own device," a sweet incense smell fills his small, hot room. He checks, but there is no source. The incense lingers for a few minutes until he finishes his prayers. He imagines Jesus keeps him company. During the day Khalid tends the church with Abuna Yohannes and sings the liturgy for Mass, his voice rising stronger each time. Each day he feels a little more like he deserves to be in an important church like this one.

The men still work on the church at night, but their hammering and saws do not keep Khalid awake. The dead soldier comes to Khalid after he falls asleep, but the soldier is not angry. Sometimes he asks about Khalid's studies and classical Arabic. He stopped school when he was

twelve to help his family. He recommends times for Khalid to take a shower, when it's not too cold. In the army the water was always cold and dirty. They had to shave every day, and their skin was constantly nicked. The dead soldier says he wants Khalid to become a priest so that he will be a successful man like Abuna Yohannes and he won't have dark days like he did in the army.

Khalid suspects the man's appearing to him is still djinn, but Khalid sleeps through the night and no braids appear in his hair. After the fifteenth night, the dead soldier doesn't return.

Khalid still devotes his mornings before Mass reciting the psalms. A week later the heat bears down and he can barely lift his shoulder. Even raising the decanter in Mass causes him pain. Khalid risks illness and grabs his English book; a break in the luxury of a cool room can also be a break from studying the scriptures. Abuna Yohannes left for Luxor to meet with the bishop, but outside his room, the sweet incense smell emerges, along with gusts of cold air. Khalid hears a voice, waits, and then knocks, "Abuna? Is everything okay?"

It's impolite, but Khalid opens the door. A young woman from the parish fastens her shirt. Her green eye shadow matches her top. Behind her Abuna Yohannes puts on a rumpled shirt, as if he is an ordinary man, as if he is just Bishoy again. He meets Khalid's eyes. The woman excuses herself and shuffles past Khalid. Her myrrh perfume lingers in his nose. He smells sweat and sex, and his body hardens.

In his hot room, Khalid kneels on a piece of wood and recites the rosary. On the second round, when the wood digging into his knees is

almost unbearable but the hardness in his lower body begins to ease, Abuna Yohannes opens the door. He wears slacks and a button down shirt.

Khalid sits on his bed to rest his knees. For once, his shoulder doesn't bother him.

Abuna Yohannes gazes at the picture of St. Mina above Khalid's head. "Women like to have relationships with priests. It's safe because we have to keep it a secret. Their honor and their family's honor remain intact."

"You are a man of God."

"But I am still just a man."

"You could have become a married priest."

"But I could never be bishop. I wouldn't have studied at the seminary."

Khalid sees his friend, younger again, back in their village. He smells the donkey and cumin, sees the hard, unmanicured hands. Even with Abuna Yohannes' fancy ring and clothes, the village lingers around him.

Abuna Yohannes says, "The church stopped allowing priests to marry because their children inherited their wealth. Chastity isn't important for religion. I pray every night for God to have mercy on my soul."

In the army men bragged about meeting with prostitutes, a few even had girlfriends. Muslims can take on however many wives they want and cast them off just as easily. But Khalid and Bishoy are Coptic Catholics, a faith where men can only have one wife and cannot divorce. Surely that is closer to what God planned. He certainly did not want the leaders of His church to have unclean relationships with women.

"Little brother, the abunas are waiting for my opinion on whether

you should resume your studies. I know your shoulder causes you pain. Do not make me disappoint you." Abuna Yohannes presses his hand onto Khalid's shoulder. The tendons pull and Khalid breathes through the pain.

That night, the men greet one another outside of the church for the nightly repairs. Khalid recites the psalms then asks God to watch over these men. Outside, their shadows loom on top of this sacred space. These merchants have wives and children, but they put their faith into action at night, chancing arrest from the government. They are the faithful.

Khalid thinks of his father in their concrete home with his flag of the 1919 revolution hanging in their dining room as if keeping vigil. His superstitious father who is willing to smear sheep's blood around their home in a desperate search for salvation, talking endlessly about how he was born into the Republic of Egypt that his father helped create, and about Mubarak's imminent departure as if it's been preordained. Khalid can see the way his father looks at him, the eldest, silently saying, "This is your generation, you must begin to speak up and fight," and for a moment, Khalid feels like *Mahfouz* again.

He climbs the ladder, his right shoulder thrumming with each step. The tendons pull tight, with each outstretch of his arm they might rip. This is good pain, what God wills. On the roof, Khalid greets these shadowy men, "Good evening, my brothers."

The moon is down to a crescent, a promise that it will return to its full glory and on that night the roof's repairs will be finished. No one tells Khalid to rest for morning Mass or comments on what a beautiful singing voice he has. In the shades of night, where only the outline of each person is visible, they are all the same. Khalid is just a man, hardly a

man of God, but he will spend his life trying. Khalid ignores the stinging in his shoulder and begins fixing the roof, repairing the covenant between God and man. ■



PAULA YOUNGER PHOTO

Paula Younger's writing has appeared in many literary journals, including Harper Perennial's Fifty-Two Stories, The Rattling Wall and The Nervous Breakdown. She earned her Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Virginia, and received the Henry Hoyns and Bronx Writers Center fellowships. She teaches at Lighthouse Writers Workshop and University of Denver.



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