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Extract from

Being Abbas al-Abd

by Ahmad al-Aidy

Translated by Humphrey Davies

Chapter 5

Don't believe her.

She'll molest your shattered nerves so she can practice her sacred feminine power.

She'll lick the pavement beneath your feet to make you happy so you'll submit.

This is the truth in all its cruelty, so do as you think best.

His name is Abbas El Abd.

Of all my acquaintances he is the only one to own a jam jar for collecting lizards' tails, a practice he refers to as an "innocent hobby."

And that's not the weirdest thing about him.

If you go all feeble in his presence in front of someone else, he'll take you aside and tell you, without beating about the bush:

"Put your fine feelings in your pocket and don't let anyone walk all over you."

Or

"If someone looks daggers at you, blow dust in their eyes."

Or

"He who wears a collar fears no beatings on the back of the neck."

Then he'll push you towards your opponent and tell him with a smile:

"The kid here says you're the outcome of a contraceptive failure"

and leave you facing the fate of a cockroach in a tap dance studio.

It's three in the morning.

The headache is close to splitting my head apart, maybe because I went onto Partacozine a few days ago.

I sit in the café to sip a cup of coffee, the latter being, as you no doubt know, the refuge of the sick at heart.

The waiters are busy stacking the wooden and plastic chairs on top of one another.

None of them is paying any attention.

"Psst! Hey, you!"

The stranger with the black jacket.

"Hello, how are you, Mr. . . .?"

He said his name was

Abbas El Abd.

He extended his right hand so I took it with my left because I had something in my right. He asked me:

"Sowassup? You still want to rent an apartment or is it 'Than-Q but no than-Q'?"

"Certainly. I asked you"

"So lezz go."

"What?"

"Move your ass. Lezz go. There's isn't much time."

"Give me a moment to pay the check."

"While you're paying I'll get cigarettes on the street and come back, cool?"

"Okay."

As soon as I say it, Abbas turns to the right and disappears and at the same moment one of the young waiters appears and I ask him:

"How much, sonny?"

"Three pounds and twenty-five piasters."

"Have you got change for a twenty?"

His hand goes into his wad of change but he steals a funny look at me.

"What?"

He gives me the change and then sics his nosiness on me

"Who exactly, if you don't mind my asking, were you talking to?"

The nosiness of strangers who make it their business to know your private vice and whether you're thinking of doing it tonight.

"I was talking to whoever I was talking to and what's it to you?"

"Okay, buddy. Just don't push me."

"Push you? Why should I? You out of gas or something?"

He pushes back my face with his right hand and forms the other into a ball—the fake punch fight devotees know so well.

And like it's the last thing I need: the kid waiter wants to get a piece of me. But he's picked on the wrong guy.

I make a mess of his looks with my fist and give him a kick between the legs that will make him weep every time he examines himself.

Gamophobia: fear of marriage.

His two mates rush over to help him.

The first grabs a soda bottle and breaks its bottom off against the wall, yelling to his mate as he lies wounded on the floor:

"I've got it, Hibeish!"

The other unbuckles his belt and winds it round his hand to make a primitive whip. His pants sag a little, so he grabs them with his free hand, and . . .

"Here comes Shubra, the Baaad Part of Town!"

and he lets loose with a flood of fight insults.

Through the fog of childhood it comes back to me still.

Six years old.

The kitchen. In front of the refrigerator.
Awni wraps me in a blanket, even though it's summer, gives me a hard hug,
and says:
"Don't be afraid."
Then he opens the huge refrigerator, which he's emptied of everything in it.
He presses the light switch so that it'll stay on after the door is closed.
"One day you'll understand."
He puts me inside
He closes the door.
I call out.
"Ooooooy! Please, Uncle! Uncle, pleeeeeeease!"
I scream.
"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"
I beg.
"Please, juft for me, Uncle!"
I kick. I call out. I cry. I scream. I beg.
But the fridge door doesn't open.
Mighty Freon, tell me . . .
was I imprisoned in there for hours?
Four minutes and a half, and it was enough.
Claustrophobia: fear of enclosed spaces.
The two of them lunge towards me.
I fling the coffee cup into the air in the direction of one of them so he lets
go of the neck of the broken bottle and catches the cup with an instinctive
movement. The other brings the belt down on my face but I ignore the pain
and drag him by the belt with my left hand, so he raises his to get one in
but his pants fall so he grabs on to them again.
Then I give him a box on the side of his face and he starts in on me. And the
other joins him.
I could stop here and go on about the use of appropriate proverbs such as
"Discretion is the better part of valor" and "A word to the wise" but such is
not my nature.
I roll myself into a ball and shield my balls with my right hand and my face
with my left arm while the feet pound my private physiological space.
I lose all sensation in my extremities.
And memory returns to the attack.
I'm on my bed and Awni ties my hands and feet using sheets, and takes a
jam jar that's half filled with cockroaches and empties it over me. Then he
turns off the light and goes out and I hear the door being locked with two
solid clicks.
The tiny feet walk over my face. Over my neck. Over my legs.
The rustle of the wings.
Haphephobia: fear of being touched.
I scream.
"Unnnnnnnncle!"
Automysophobia: fear of being dirty.
Welcome to Awni's world.
A blow to the head sends me to the world of the unconscious with
immediate effect.

"Welcome back!"

The sunlight is burning my eyelids, so I open my eyes cautiously.

"Where am I?"

"Think of it as your own home."

Abbas?

It was time to change my position in the bed, which I did with lots of pain and screwing up of my face.

"How come if you don't like fights you go around grabbing onto people's collars?"

As he said this he started playing with the zipper on his black leather jacket:

Zizzzt. Zittttt.

"How did I get here?"

"The good Lord sent me just in time to save you from the mob, I threw you into the first taxi to come along, and I brought you here."

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Abbas."

"Say nothing. But do me a favor: no Mr.s and don't come on all lah-di-dah with me 'cos it gets up my nose."

He went on:

"Your servant Abbas . . . just plain Abbas, no vegetables."

I rubbed the place where my headache was.

"But how could you take on all the kids in the café on your own?"

He opens his jacket zipper, then closes it again.

Zizzzt. Zittttt.

"No big deal."

"You beat up on them on your own? 'No big deal'? Of course it's a big deal."

"Who said I beat up on them?"

But

"What do you mean?"

He said he wasn't a school kid or wet behind the ears.

He claimed he'd heard the sound of the brawl and intervened appropriately. (Crash! Wallop!)

He claimed that if he'd "gotten involved" with them, he would have ended up worse than me.

"So I beat up on you. I went for you like I wanted to make you into a pancake. Pow! Pow! Like I was shaking out a rug."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious, kiddo. It was like either that or it would have been curtains for you. I beat up on you to save you from your own dumbness. You should have seen it The kids started pulling me back and grabbing hold of me, and there was all the usual 'That's enough, buddy!' and people kissing one another's heads and trying to break up the fight."

I won't pretend that Heaven's Mighty Vault had Fallen or anything as far as I was concerned (even if that was what did happen).

"So how come they let you drag me off with you?"

"Like I said, no big deal. I told them you were a known offender and I was going to take you straight to the police station to have you taken round all the stations in the country to see if any of them had anything against you and asked one of them to come and be a witness with me. That's when they

all starting pushing their friends forward—*Me? – You. – No, him!* The main thing is I got out of there with you.”

Thanks. Abso-mucking-lutely.

To have to thank someone for treating you like a rug on a date with fate over the balcony railings!

He patted my shoulder and said:

“Don’t get mad. That’s just the way it is. ‘Medicine ever tasted bitter’.”

Then he continued with another bout of . . .

Zizzzt. Zitttt.

His fragile logic seemed not unreasonable to me.

Hair of the dog. Isn’t the antidote to poison a poison they dilute before they give it to you?

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot. . . Here’s your bag.”

The black shoulder bag was in the corner. As he told me this he held out his hand to me:

“Gimme two bucks.”

“What for?”

“Pull yourself together, brother, and pay attention. Like I say, I delivered you from the jaws of death there in a taxi.”

Take them, hell and damnation to the one who spawned you!

“Now I’m going to clue you into the program, my friend.”

With friends like Abbas, who needs enemies?

He drew the drapes to stop the light from using the apartment as a throughway.

We agreed to split the rent and then . . .

Zizzzt. Zitttt.

“Come on, let me show you around.”

Furniture battered but comfy. Kitchen a maze of unwashed dishes.

Bathroom fine, and dirty.

Pointing to the end of the corridor, Abbas says:

“Forget about the second room. It’s not in the deal.”

“Why?”

“You’ll find out later.”

He made us a lunch of tuna with thyme and lemon, stirring the mixture with the kitchen knife.

Grace. Just a mouthful to make do.

I’m stretching out my hand when . . .

suddenly . . .

a gecko (all perky and sweet) pops out of a crack in the wall and Abbas leaps towards it, knife in hand.

Schupppppp!

The blow cleanly severs the perky gecko’s tail, removing its pride and joy.

Body and tail fall to the ground,.

The tail writhes on the spot but the gecko keeps moving and disappears into the nearest crack, promising Abbas he’ll put a moth in his soup the next time he falls asleep.

Abbas bends over and picks up the tail. He shies the knife through the door into the kitchen, where it crashes against the sink and falls to the floor.

Then he goes over to a kind of bedside table and pulls out of it a jam jar half filled with . . .

with . . .

Crazy son of a bitch!

He tucks the jam jar under his arm, opens its top with his free hand, and lets the tail drop into the midst of its peers.

"What's that?"

"What do you think it is?"

"Those are lizards' tails?"

"No, pears."

"You're being sarcastic."

"It's just another hobby, like collecting stamps."

"Call it a filthy habit, not a hobby."

"What, Stamp collecting?"

"No. 'Pears'."

"So, great. Look at you making jokes just right as rain."

I say we'll never make progress as long as there are people of his type around – time-killers and lizard-tail collectors and so on and so forth, the gap between us and the West will continue so long as we treat History as nonchalantly as a student without parents to make him study.

The West and the ^{East}.

There and ^{here}.

There they say: "In order to succeed you must go far."

And when they give you a negative assessment, they say, "He won't go far."

But here they'll tell you, "Why go to such lengths?"

"You, Abbas, will not go far."

Here Abbas explodes like a sewer pipe that can't hold the shit any more.

"You want us to progress?"

So burn the history books and forget your precious dead civilization.

Stop trying to squeeze the juice from the past.

Destroy your Pharaonic history.

And when you've done, please, stop boring through new walls in the Pyramids.

What will it avail you if you discover their true entrance or where was the *entrée* where the Great Pharaoh used to receive his hand-outs from the envoy of a Friendly Power before offering him the *petits fours*?

Try to do without the trade in the dead.

We will only succeed when we turn our museums into public lavatories."

Abbas pulls out a cigarette and shoves it in his mouth.

Flame. Intake of breath.

And re – hoooooofff! – lease!

And . . .

Zizzzt. Zittttt.

He takes hold of his cigarette and waves it around – cough, hack, "sorry" – and goes on:

Why should a company turn out a *cartouche* of cigarettes bearing the name "Cleopatra" and announcing, with great pride, on one side:

Warning

Smoking is Injurious to Your Health
and Causes Death?

Is *that* going to make you believe in a better tomorrow? Huh?

You shave your beard in the mirror, whistling, and then knock into your brother by chance on your way to your room, as though you were a guest from another country staying at the same hotel. And maybe you come home to a woman who puts on a show of quivering with pleasure only to say to yourself, with a wisdom born of painful experience:

"There's nothing worse than this."

Bullshit.

You need to UPGRADE your wisdom and UPDATE your experience:

The worst thing that can happen is to have nothing worse to fear.

Anyone who reads the history of most Third World countries will discover a painful tragedy. Many have been liberated by the Revolution from "the foreign occupier" only to fall into the clutches of "the national occupier." In a third of the countries of the Third World – approximately – you need to have an American passport in order to be treated like a respectable citizen. "Okay, so what do you want to do about it now?"

They say, "If you don't do something to one of them, they'll do it to you."

I say, "If you don't do something to yourself, they'll do it to you."

And now, please,

Do yourself a favor and don't waste time.

Know the hidden enemy within yourself and let him out. Give him your weak points. Give him your blemishes and your mutilated heart.

Then kill yourself.