

**FIVE STORIES THAT ARE ALMOST TRUE,
BUT NOT QUITE.**

by George Loukas

email: gloukait@gmail.com

A PECULIAR ARRANGEMENT

MAKIS FINDS HIS WHISTLE

YOUTHFUL YEARNINGS AND TROUBLING ENCOUNTERS

SISI

THE SPACESHIP

A PECULIAR ARRANGEMENT

1 RETURN TO EGYPT

The airliner was over Cairo at about a quarter past ten. I looked eagerly out of the window trying to pick out familiar landmarks but could not distinguish much in the darkness despite the city lights. The emotions of my return were varied and confused but there was little doubt at that moment that I was heading back home. A peculiar home, this Egypt, where I both belonged and not. Which I both loved and not. In which I felt both welcome and not and where I felt that at some point in my life I would abandon. Leave it, because it would no longer tolerate me: me the foreign implant. The intolerance increasingly reciprocal.

I was born and raised in Egypt at a time when the romance of the country was being steadily eroded by revolution, nationalism, industrialization, an exploding birth rate and later on, an Islamic renaissance with its attendant religious radicalism and fanaticism. One must be clear: this romance was for the few. Mainly tourists, foreigners, novelists and the native moneyed class. Not much romance for the lower classes; servants, workers, farm laborers and villagers living in squalor and iniquity. With the nationalization of foreign companies and businesses and the departure of the foreign “colonies” from Egypt, the charming cosmopolitan atmosphere of the two main cities Cairo and Alexandria was lost. Socialism was the order of the day and those who experienced it learned the inevitable lesson early on: it does not work. Perhaps in Egypt it had its usefulness. In the few decades before capitalism was reinstated, it liberated from virtual feudalism large sections of the agrarian society and instituted labor legislation, which however, the government controlled with an iron hand through puppet labor unions.

The shrinkage of the Greek community, although slower than other foreign ones, was inexorable. A very special and prosperous section of expatriate Hellenism was returning to the motherland after a century and a half of residence in Egypt to become diluted and anonymous. A sense of superiority characterized the Greeks of Egypt. They had produced poets, novelists and artists of international renown, scores of philanthropists that endowed their fortunes to build schools, hospitals and stadiums both in Egypt and Greece. They were proud of their cosmopolitanism, of their mastery of foreign tongues, of their refinement and good manners.

I would see my mother in a few minutes. I had been so infatuated with Lisa that for days she did not cross my mind. I felt guilty for this disloyalty. She was younger than my father by some ten years, with an attractive face on the borderline of the truly beautiful with light chestnut hair, which gave a reddish hue in the sunshine. Of fair complexion and milky white skin, she had a slim, athletic body for she was an outstanding athlete in her youth. She was one of those women, which within limits, as they age become even more attractive.

She looked as young and pretty as ever as I emerged from customs and smiled happily. We kissed long and tenderly. Then I looked at my father. My mother had warned me that his health was deteriorating and it was evident in his appearance. He walked slowly towards me and kissed me too and I felt his disappointment at the abrupt termination of my studies in the US. My involvement with Lisa caused me to slacken in college. The failure that followed was inevitable.

Next morning when I opened my eyes I wondered where I was. Oh God, yes, Cairo. I can hear the traffic in the street and my father getting dressed for work. I have to get up. It is a significant day for me. A new page in my life. A new beginning. Without Lisa, without my love. However much I ache for her, she is thousands of miles away in distance and already three days past in time. They seem more like three months. A deadly combination of space and time.

I got out of bed and left my room. I came face to face with my father. I approached and kissed him. We were not accustomed to such displays of tenderness but his sadness at the airport touched me and I felt that he shared my sense of failure. I asked how he was feeling and he said, "Well enough". You could not tell whether he meant he was well or that it could be worse. I asked him for some money and he showed me the combination of a safe embedded in the wall of his bedroom. He told me I could draw whatever money I needed from there.

It was understood that I would enter the family business. There was no other viable option for me in Egypt. I had a few days' grace before starting work. I went for a long stroll in the city. I was away from Cairo for only a few months and yet it was as if I had returned to an alien world. I had taken it for granted that I would eventually reside in the US but my immaturity, Lisa and my college failure landed me back in my family's lap. I could not decide if that, finally, was good or bad luck. It was the easy way out, that was certain, but as I walked slowly adding and subtracting the pros and cons, I did not manage to reach a conclusion.

Later, when I returned home, I found Anna and my grandmother there. They lived two floors above us in the same apartment building. Anna, my unmarried aunt was much younger than my mother and only five years older than I was. She had none of the beauty and nobility of my mother or even much resemblance either physical or of character. She was a pretty, pert, brown-haired girl of normal height and a nice slim body, which she kept in shape because she was a classical dancer for a time and later became a fashion model. She was cheery, always with a funny story or incident to relate and at all times fun to have around. When she switched to modeling her reputation was tarnished somewhat because at the time the profession was not considered respectable and her lifestyle encouraged moralists to voice malicious comments. She was not intimidated and, I must say, her mother was always a pillar of support. Anna was her one and only weakness.

I kissed both of them and it was obvious that my delight to see Anna again, was reciprocated. My mother could not hide her happiness either. She had a permanent smile on her face.

"I hope you're not taking it too hard Michael," Anna said after I explained why I was back so soon.

"Well, it was a big disappointment. Sometimes I feel wretched and sometimes I wax philosophical."

"Listen Mickey, a little ignorance did no one any harm. Look at me. I did not even finish secondary school and I'm doing fine. I lead the life that suits me. I am quite content."

"Will you stop talking this way, Anna? You give a very bad impression," my grandmother scolded her.

"Oh let her be," said mother, "we're amongst ourselves."

"That's what you think," granny replied, "She tends to talk this way everywhere. She has no sense of propriety. Nor do any of her friends. She has this fellow Raymond, whom they call Moni, who not only is a homosexual but also talks as if he grew up in the gutter. He's from a good family too. He's stuck to Anna. He has

become a fixture at our house.”

“Yes Michael, I want you to meet Moni,” said Anna smiling. “He's so much fun, you'll never stop laughing. I can't go anywhere without him. He's better than a lover.”

“There you go again. I hope, at least, you'll shut your mouth when Michael's father comes.” Granny was getting annoyed.

“How was America, Michael?” Anna asked.

“Oh all right. Though not the dream world we imagine.”

“Did you meet many girls?” Anna broached her pet topic.

“Leave the boy alone, Anna. He did not go to America to study American girls,” said my grandma.

“No, not many.”

“Oh stop being so eloquent. A few, then?”

“Not even.”

“Will you cut it out, silly? One, then?”

“Yes.”

“So? Go on. Hey, what is this? Do I have to jerk the words out of your mouth?”

“No, Anna. But I can't talk just now under Granny's disapproving look.”

“Sure you can. Did you go out on a date? Did you kiss her? Did you make love?”

“For the last time, will you please leave Michael alone and stop being so indiscreet, Anna.” Granny was exasperated and mother smiled. She was probably not averse to hearing a few details herself.

With the meal over, we remained at table while Mohammed, our servant, cleared it and brought us coffee. Anna kept us amused with an inexhaustible supply of funny stories, which my mother loved and granny mostly tolerated with a frown. I looked at Anna. Not an exceptionally pretty girl but attractive because she was so high-spirited. Not innately sexy either despite a slim and well-shaped body. She provoked only with her air of availability and her gaiety. Yet she was neither fast nor indiscriminate in her love affairs. She was of the new crop of young women who, like Lisa, wanted to enjoy their sex life and wanted to have a say in choosing their partners. Without being aware of it, she was in the *avant-garde* of the feminist movement and the sexual revolution. In Egypt, no less.

2

CAMARADERIE

Next day I went to the club for a game of squash. After lunch, Anna called and asked me to go up and talk to her for a while. I told her I felt sleepy but she insisted and I went upstairs to their apartment.

“Don't make any noise. My mother's taking her siesta,” she said and ushered me into her room. It was a tiny room near the entrance of the flat. It contained just the bed, a large cupboard, some shelves on the wall and a toilet-table where she kept her makeup accessories. There was nowhere to sit and we had to lie on her bed, which

was not even large enough. She had a dressing gown on and her slippers.

“What's the matter, Anna? What's the hurry?”

“Shhh, shush, let me shut the door. I don't want my mother to wake up and start coming in and out.”

“I was just about to drop off to sleep.”

“So what? Is it too much to ask you to keep your auntie company?”

“I suspect it is more than company you want. You want some juicy details about the girl I met in the States.”

She smiled.

“The juicier, the better.”

“Well, there's nothing juicy about it.”

“Don't kid me!”

“Really. I met this girl Lisa who was a friend of a friend. For me it was love at first sight but by the time she started to respond, I had to leave.”

“Oh dear. So you're in love? Where does that leave you now?”

“Heaven knows. I invited her for a holiday and she promised to come. But the more time goes by, the less likely it seems. And even if she does, what then? I forgot to tell you, she is about seven years older than I am.”

“So if you ever marry, by the time you're fifty, she'll look more like a mother-in-law.”

“I know you're outspoken but now you're being awful.”

“Oh Mickey, don't get upset. Half the things I say are over the moon. You know that. But shall we be serious for a moment?”

“Can you?”

“Sometimes,” she said smiling. “Mickey, the odds are stacked against you. Better forget her, to be able to adapt to your new life.”

“But I love her.”

“I understand. But let me tell you, you'll live a few months of hope and memories and then disappointment will set in and gradually it will dawn on you that the dream was just a dream. And Lisa a character in a romantic short story, as good as fiction.”

“What about your Dani?”

“It's over.”

“How come?”

“Sometimes, one little absurdity suddenly changes your life without any real, solid reason. One day, out of the blue, my mother decided that we had been going out together long enough and it was time Dani, Jew or no Jew, made up his mind to marry me. We were sitting outside in the hall chatting and suddenly she charges in and sits next to us. Boy, I thought to myself, something's about to change in my life. She looked him in the eye and said, ‘Listen to me my boy, I have just decided that you are not at all a serious person and quite a bit selfish as well. You have been going out with my daughter for over three years and probably have been sleeping with her too. In our society, here in Egypt, this is not done. You are ruining her reputation and she will be unable to marry when you decide to drop her. So it's one of two things. Either you marry her or you leave her. Now!’ The boy was flabbergasted. It was an additional difficulty that I was sitting right there with them. ‘Yes, yes,’ he stammered, ‘I love Anna and I want to marry her. I shall discuss the matter with my mother and we shall come to ask for her hand.’ At that my mother said, ‘Very well, I shall be expecting you tomorrow afternoon,’ and she got up and left.

“Dani looked at me and attempted to smile but could hardly manage it. A short

while later, he excused himself and left. He never came again, with or without his mother. He tried to call me on the telephone but I never talked to him after that. The funny thing is, I never thought of marriage. I did not particularly want to marry Dani, or anyone else for that matter. Yes, I was in love with him. He was not the first man I slept with but he was experienced and he taught me everything I know about lovemaking. He had a beautiful, circumcised penis, which I loved to uh, hmm.”

She put her index finger in her mouth.

“I forget the scientific word. I only remember, suck.”

“Anna, you're terrible. The word is fellate.”

“I only talk this way with you and Moni. So don't worry. Fellate, fellatio, yes. Anyway, what rubbed me the wrong way was that, faced with losing me, I believe he was sincere in his intention to bring his mother the next day to propose. But he got the veto from mum. Probably the reason is that Jews are just as racist as us Christians. That, I couldn't stomach. Mum's veto, that is. You see, Daniel's, that's Dani's name, Daniel's father is dead and his mother is a tough old bitch who controls the purse strings of the family and keeps her darling boy on a short leash. To start with, I would never marry the prospect of such a mother-in-law. Secondly, he showed himself weak and a woman cannot swallow that. Had he been strong and ignored his mother and proposed on his own the next day, I would not have accepted his proposal, but at least we would have stayed together despite even my mother's objections.”

“And don't you see him anymore?”

“No we are no longer together. I see him now and then accidentally but the affair is over. When a woman decides that something is over, she rarely changes her mind.”

“And what about this Moni?”

“After I left Dani, a hundred people rushed to fill his place. Please don't think me vain. Everybody wanted to take me out. Of course, you understand their way of thinking. They figured I would be heartbroken, would fall for the first comer and provide some easy sex. It was amusing the way they jockeyed and maneuvered around me. Like vultures over carrion. Not that I didn't go out and even sleep with one or two. Meanwhile, I was modeling for the clothing firm owned by Moni's mother and I got to know him. He is the designer of the clothes she produces. The *modéliste*. They say that domineering women tend to produce weak and sometimes abnormal sons. Well, Moni's mother is another tough cookie and her son is homosexual. But he is the sweetest, funniest friend I've ever had. Apart of you, that is. I started seeking out his company and we got on so well together that we have become inseparable. In fact, there's this stupid joke going around, that we share the men, which of course, is absurd. And to tell you the truth, despite the fact that we have been seeing each other for so many months now, I know very little about his sex life. I don't know if he has any lovers or if at the moment he's going through a period of abstinence. I want you to meet him and a further surprise is in store for you. Tomorrow evening he'll be here, please come to meet him.”

3 MONI

Next day, early in the evening, my mother entered my room to tell me Anna had just called. “His Excellency Mr. Raymond Homsy had arrived.” I went upstairs

and as soon as Anna opened the door, she jumped on me and gave me a resounding kiss on each cheek. I kissed her back. She was all made up and looked very attractive.

“At last, my two best friends meet. Michael, this is Raymond. Raymond, this is Michael.”

She was smiling ecstatically.

I looked at him. I remembered Anna told me the meeting would be a surprise. It was. His physical appearance. He was very short. Shorter than Anna. He was very thin but perfectly proportioned. With black hair of normal length perfectly cut and combed and the most beautiful face I had ever seen on a man. Not handsome; beautiful. Fine featured; a lovely smile with a milky white set of teeth and a striking pair of blue eyes, which dazzled you with the aura of their blue color. He was perhaps just entering his thirties. Anna sensed my surprise. She looked sharply at me for my reactions with a smile on her face.

“I heard so much from Anna about you,” he said, shaking my hand. “You are my big rival.”

“Rival?” I did not understand.

“For Anna's affections.”

“Oh hardly. From what I hear, you are not only friends but you have the same temperament and interests, the same sense of humor and sense of fun. How can I rival that?”

“True, true. But love is unpredictable. Although she did not say it in so many words, I think she has fallen for you since you returned from America. She keeps talking about you.”

“Surely you're exaggerating.”

Anna looked incredibly happy. She did not speak to deny or confirm what he said. She just smiled. She bid us to sit down and went to fix us a drink. “Whisky for all,” she decided.

“Isn't he beautiful, our Moni?” she told me when she came back with the drinks.

“She always talks about me as if I'm her pet dog. I know I'm half a mouthful, but mercy!”

“You're more than a mouthful, my dear. You know, Michael, he is a fantastic *couturier*. As good as any of the big names abroad. I tell him to go to Paris. I'm sure he'll have an extraordinary career there. But he's a mama's boy, just like you. Only more so. He doesn't want to leave his mother unaided. He says the business needs him. I personally think he's dead scared of her. He's afraid he'll get a spanking or something. I told him if he goes to France, I would go with him. Be his muse. Be his mistress if he'd have me.”

Moni smiled.

“One thing I am grateful about,” he said, “is that I am not overambitious. I am happy with my work. I am not famous but I have independence. I cannot create some of the more daring clothes that I would perhaps have been able to create in Europe but what I do is appreciated and it fulfills me. And I have my mother on hand to give me a spanking when I need it, as Anna says. She is here to take care of me and restrain my impulsive nature.”

“Oh rubbish. Your mother is smothering your talent with her iron hand. Phew, you mother-lovers.”

We sipped our whisky and nibbled at salted biscuits and peanuts. Anna initiated conversations with the intent of cementing a new friendship, Moni's and mine. Her earnestness was touching. She was praising each of us to the other. She

made me into an intellectual because of the few books I had on the shelves in my room and a romantic one at that by attributing my failure at university to the love affair which took too much of my time.

“Oh Anna, please don't exaggerate, I can do without compliments I cannot believe in.”

“On second thoughts, you are rather thick,” said Anna incensed, “and modesty will get you nowhere. Look at my sweet little Moni; he loves compliments. He just laps them up. And why not? I believe what I say. He is clever, cultured, well read. He is a *collectionneur* of rare books and paintings. He is knowledgeable about furniture, carpets and antiques. Is liable to pass outside an antique shop and drool over a broken chair. He loves everything that is worn and old. Mrs. Homsy tells me that had she not put her foot down he would have filled their house with the most repulsive artifacts. Just the other day, he went to work carrying a life-size erect penis he had just bought made of polished ebony and created a commotion at the atelier when he showed it to the girls working there and asked them if any one of them wanted to borrow it for a few days. Isn't that so my little Moni?”

“Yes, we had a good laugh,” said Moni with a smile.

“He jokes with the girls and at times when they do something wrong he screams at them like a shrew and insults them. They love him just the same. They know his bark is worse than his bite. As you see, he is a bundle of antitheses. He is cultured and vulgar. He can be extremely kind and at times unbearably cruel. He is cheerful most of the time although he has his black moods as well. Tonight he's on his best behaviour. I told him you were a serious person and he's out to impress you.”

“I am sure not. He doesn't have to try. I am impressed because he is an artist, a gifted person. Anna, you are lucky to have such a fine friend.”

“Thank you,” said Moni.

“Thank you Mickey,” said Anna, “I am so happy you two got on so well together.”

The conversation developed easily with discussions on all sorts of topics. Very often, it drifted inevitably to their everyday life, activities and amusements. They had a super-active social life especially since they became a couple of sorts. They had an amazingly large circle of friends and acquaintances and were themselves very popular. They were present at every big party, every important social event and absolutely relished the fact. So now and then, they slipped into their own particular interests and carried on a dialogue in which I had no part. They would talk of people and events, the latest gossip or scandal, ridicule this and that and laugh heartily together. The theory that opposites attract, did not hold in their case. They were, in fact, so attuned to one another that they could have been a single person talking to himself. When they would suddenly realize I was out of the conversation they would apologize.

“Oh, don't apologize. I enjoy listening to you enormously. I get a taste of what an active social whirl is like. It's something I will never know first hand because by temperament I am an outsider. I cannot stand receptions, cocktail parties, dinner invitations and the such. I find it difficult to talk to people. I have absolutely no talent for small talk.”

“It's a matter of practice,” said Moni. “Of doing often what may not be agreeable at first. Eventually one gets the hang of it and may even enjoy it. I never did go out as much as I do these days. And it's because of Anna. We have so much fun together, such a merry time. You know, we are out every night. If by chance, once every few months, we find ourselves at home, we wonder what happened.”

“You're not going out tonight are you?”

“Sure we are,” said Anna with a smile.

“Then I'd better get going.”

“No, no, stay. I'll start getting dressed and then we'll all leave together.”

Anna went to her room and I stayed with Moni and asked him about his business. He explained that ever since his teens he was interested in clothes. His mother had a small dressmaking business and when he finished school and went into the Fine Arts department of Cairo University, he used to spend his afternoons at the atelier where he learned the nitty gritty of dressmaking. He said art in modern Egypt is practically ignored. There is a tradition in poetry and Egypt has produced some good poets. Only a few great novelists, most of them laboring in an antiquated literary style, and one or two outstanding filmmakers. Nothing exceptional in painting, sculpture or architecture. As for music, he could not offer an opinion. Middle Eastern Arab music did not agree with his ear.

He left the university because he could no longer stomach the pomposities uttered by his teachers and worked full time at the atelier with his mother. Whereas previously they made dresses for individual clients that were selected from foreign fashion magazines, Moni little by little started making changes in the designs to fit a client's personality and after he gained both experience and confidence, started designing his own clothes. The business flourished and grew and they began exhibiting their models in major hotels in Cairo. The Revolution gave a major boost to their business when it restricted imports and Moni became a well-known persona in the local *haute couture* circles and with women that could still afford to dress expensively.

Anna called from her room, “Moni, come see how I look.”

He got up with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders. I looked at him as he moved to the bedroom. It takes all kinds to make a world, I thought. A perfect body with smooth movement and yet so short and thin. A beauty of a face; so attractive in speech and expression, smile and laugh. A pleasant voice that reflected his cheerful disposition. Yet a homosexual. Well, nothing wrong in that and in any case, nothing to be done about it. One just thinks of the difficulties and obstacles this will cause in his life in a country like Egypt, where homosexuals are held in the greatest contempt and are figures of ridicule.

Moreover, the incongruity of his relationship with Anna. Perforce a brother and sister relation. I was sure Anna loved him very much and may even be in love with him. She would sleep with him willingly despite his size. But that cannot be. They go out together and are constantly seen to be inseparable. Mother was probably correct in saying that Anna is developing a peculiar reputation. People must be wondering what she is doing with a homosexual to the exclusion of anyone else. Someone who is interested in her will be reluctant to approach her. Not only that: if someone shows her clearly that he likes her and is interested in her and assuming the interest is mutual, would she let Moni go? Would a potential suitor put up with Moni even if he knows there is no sex between them? She is not only cutting herself off from marriage, which in any case claims not to interest her. She is cutting herself off from sex.

Suddenly it struck me. A Machiavellian thought. Was Moni, by insinuating that Anna was falling in love with me, trying to throw us together? Perhaps he was conscious and troubled at her impasse and I presented him with the ideal solution. I would become her lover and solve her sex problem, which left unsolved might cause her eventually to turn to someone else for sex. With me as her lover, he would

guarantee not to lose her. Ours would be a semi-incestuous, hidden love affair with no marriage prospects, which would allow them to continue the mad life they enjoyed so much. So Moni, a homosexual, in his own way loved a woman and did not want to lose her. Where did that leave me? Confused, to say the least. The idea excited me. How could I be so fickle? Not a week had passed since I said good-bye to my love. Oh hell. Is it the men who are the pigs after all? Yes. Probably.

They came out of the room and I let out a gasp of surprise. Anna was stunning. She came up to me smiling and did a full turn so I would admire the whole of her.

“Anna you look gorgeous,” I said.

She said, “Yes,” and smiled happily. She agreed. No false modesty. She wore a black dress with a white embroidered collar, a pair of high-heeled pumps and a black coat over that. All with an impeccable fit. What made me unable to take my eyes off her was the fantastic way she was made up.

“You are a modern-day Cleopatra!”

“Thank you. It's my Moni. He made me up. He said let us give Mickey a surprise. He's my Pygmalion. He makes me up, he designs and sews my clothes in the atelier. I am like a mistress. He even wanted to buy me jewelry but I did not accept. That's why I am not wearing any.”

“They would add nothing to your appearance. Nobody would notice them,” I said.

“That's sweet. Don't I have a lovely nephew, Moni?”

“Tonight, it's you who's sweet and lovely,” answered Moni. “Shall we be going?”

They took the elevator to the ground floor and I went by the staircase down the two floors to our apartment. It was past eleven and my father had already retired. My mother was waiting to hear my impressions.

“We talked several times about Moni but you never told me a thing about his physical appearance. Of course, I got a shock. First his height, then the fact that he is so thin and lastly his beauty. Why didn't you tell me?” I asked her.

“I did not think to. I get so much grumbling from your grandmother that he is part of our everyday life, almost part of the family. It slipped my mind to tell you of his peculiarities.”

“If he were not homosexual, I am certain they would have been lovers.”

“Yes. What a crazy girl!”

“I don't think there's much we can do under the circumstances. I think the only thing is to weather it out. Perhaps they will tire of this frenzy. I don't know what to think. I cannot foretell how it will end.”

We talked with mother some more but mainly we went round in circles.

4

A SURREAL PROPOSAL

A few days later Anna called me and asked me to come up. I visited her the following afternoon as I had promised to do. As usual, she was in high spirits.

“Mickey!” She shouted when she saw me, “here you are, just when I thought you had given me the slip once again.”

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