

The Last Supper

An Egyptian Short story

This is an adaptation of a contemporary Egyptian short story, written by the novelist Yousef Gohar. It was recently published in the local press, and depicts aspects of Egyptian life far away from the tourist scene. It also shows glimpses of Egyptian lives and the interaction within rural families. The story could be true of life in Egypt 50 years ago, or indeed this year. Nothing much has changed. The title and names of the main characters have not been changed.

Six months after getting married, formalities dropped between Bahiya and Fawzy. One night, Bahiya found enough courage to look her husband in the eyes, while he was kissing her, and ask him with a trembling heart, "Will you get us a TV set?". Fawzy fell silent for a while, and Bahiya was shaking like a leaf. In her village, before she came to Cairo to get married, women did not demand anything of their husbands. She expected Fawzy to slap her face or at least shout at her, but he only murmured in a soft voice, "God willing". That is it. No crisis, no fright. She could not believe she was safe. She almost fainted with relief.

Fawzy was not a hard man. He was not like her father who shouted at her mother daily and divorced her when she questioned him one night about coming home late.

Fawzy could not help but notice Bahiya's respect and owe of him. He played the role of the master quite well with her. Yet, when he tried to play the same role outside his household, people of the alley laughed at him. He forgave everyone except his boss Usta Mohsen the barber. Usta Mohsen knew that Fawzy was recently married, but continued to treat him like a lowly hand, and commanded him with the shout, "Boy!".

Fawzy started working at the barber shop when he was ten. His job was to swat the flies away from the customers. Now though, twelve years later, he is a good barber himself. He also has a wife. How dare Usta Mohsen call him a boy, and send him to buy his wife's shopping from the market?

One night, he said to Bahiya, "I can't take this anymore. I will have to open a barber shop of my own."

Bahiya took off her gold bracelets, her only security after she left her family's house, and gave them to Fawzy. He looked at her gratefully and said, "I have not I forgotten what you always wanted. God willing, I will buy you the TV set."

Bahiya lived a radiant dream, watching many customers come to her husband's shop. It shouldn't be long now before she has a TV set. She dreamed about the many films and songs she will watch, and the loud volume she is going to hear and make all the neighbors listen to.

Months went by, and every time Fawzy noticed that she is about to ask again, he would

say, "God willing". She would smile and dream of the latest set she saw in the nearby shop.

Months turned into years, and the dream remained a dream. The first year business was slow. The second, Fawzy wanted to add another chair and replace the mirror. In the third year, Fawzy put up a neon sign announcing, "A private section for Ladies". He also employed a pretty girl as a cashier.

He finally came to Bahiya and said, "At last now we can buy the TV set!" But she was not keen on the idea. Her dream had fell to the bottom of her wishes. She was not the same woman any more. She was fed up with the loud radio next door. She found enough courage to plant a kiss on her husband's cheek and say, "If you really want to buy something for me, I want my gold back. I feel ashamed every time my father visits me and I always hide my arms.

Fawzy fell silent again. At least with the TV set he can pay in installments, but in the gold market everything is sold for ready cash. He hugged Bahiya close to his chest and said, "God willing". This time he meant it.

The following year, was not a happy one. A tax inspector visited the shop. He came on a day when the shop was full of waiting customers, and thought business is booming throughout the year. When Fawzy received an official letter from the government he felt important for the first time in his life. But, he screamed with horror when he read how much tax was due. He went home crying and saying to Bahiya if he had earned half as much he would have bought her back her gold. The only help she could offer was to ask him to consult Usta Mohsen, his old boss about what to do.

Usta Mohsen looked Fawzy up and down and said, "You come to me after the deed is done. Neon lights, a private section for ladies.. and a pretty girl on the till. Do you think I like to leave my shop in that state with broken chairs and cracked mirrors? I do that so I don't have to pay tax".

"Anyway, if you ask me, the only way out of this crisis is to pay some money to the tax inspector. They all take money to cancel your tax."

Fawzy followed Usta Mohsen's advice. He paid with three years in jail, for trying to bribe an official.

But the shop was kept open. Bahiya ran the shop better then her husband did. She waited for him to come back. When he was released she received him with music throughout the alleyway. He could not see her alone until dawn, she smiled at him and said, "I paid all the taxes, and the lawyer's fees. I also bought the next shop and expanded ours!"

Fawzy was gloomy. He looked at her and moaned, "How about the gold. Please don't tell me you bought back the gold! I had nightmares about not buying you the gold before I went to prison."

She replied, " I only wanted the gold so you can see it on my arms and hear its rustle. After you went, the desire vanished. In a few years time, our daughter, Fawakeh, will need some gold to get married".

But he insisted on getting her back the gold bracelets . This time she had her full courage to say, "If you really want to fulfill my dream, let me go Makkah to do my Hagg soon". Fawzy thought for a while. He knew that the Hagg season was a few months away. He finally said quietly: "God willing".

Bahiya waited.

Fawzy had a friend from jail who came to have a haircut every few weeks. His friend had a persuasive tongue and ambitious projects. Fawzy took him for a partner in a project to build a new perfume factory. He mortgaged his shop and house and gave his friend the money to start the big project. The friend took the money and disappeared.

One night Fawzy smiled at his wife reassuring her that she is definitely going to Makkah this year. She said nothing. She could not tell him that the pain started with her when he was in prison, but she endured. She had no time for check ups when she was running the shop. When Fawzy was dreaming of the perfume factory, she went to the doctor who told her it was cancer and she needed an operation urgently. But she did not want to worry her husband after he was cheated out of his money.

The pain went for a while. She thought she was cured. Now the pain is hardly bearable; it is also incurable.

Fawzy insisted that she was going to do the Hagg this year, but she uttered she could no longer make the trip. Instead she asked him to buy a private plot of land to build a family tomb, "It is horrible after a hard life to be buried in a common grave", she cried. He was convinced she meant it, and finally said, "God willing".

One evening, Fawzy came home shouting, "Bahiya, guess what? I caught the thief. He was terrified of going back to jail and gave me back all the money. Now we can buy the plot of land and build a private tomb."

Bahiya did not answer. He shook her arms, but she did not move. He looked at her. She had a bashful smile on her face. He was a little too late. She waited for him, but he was a little too late. His supper was ready on the table.

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