

AAHA = Amicale Alexandrie Hier et Aujourd'hui

Sultana LATIFA
The Jasmine Necklace
(extract)



"Ghassala's Day", May 1942

Sultana and her mother

Cahier no 42

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Dear AAHA members,

It is during my two weeks' holiday this summer of 2003 that I found the time and tranquillity to read Sultana Latifa's book "The Jasmine Necklace". This 100-page book composed of 25 chapters, illustrated by pictures and rich in Egyptian expressions, deals with some aspects of life in Cairo between the years 1940 to 1960. The life of a family of the middle "bourgeoisie" bathed in the Arab, French and English cultures, as was the case with many of the members of our friendship. It is interesting to note that the ways of life of this class of society were similar in Cairo and Alexandria.

I read this book straight through with curiosity and pleasure. I appreciated the clear writing, the wealth and precision of the descriptions and reminiscences, the humour, serenity and tenderness that pervade this personal testimony.

I thought we could offer an insight into this work by realising an AAHA "Cahier". With Sultana's assent, we chose some chapters (7) high in local colour and some of which are concise sociological documents.

In the name of all the readers of this "Cahier", I thank Sultana, my kindred spirit, for this friendly gesture.

Sandro

Some of my nonno's favourite expressions

"El nagar baboo mekhal-aa"

The carpenter's door is rickety.

"El erd fe ein ommoo ghazal"

The monkey in its mother's eyes is a gazelle.

"Ye shoufak el hakim ou ye hez rassoo"

May the doctor see you and shake his head!

"Roha bala rag-aa"

May he leave and never come back!

"Elle mish met-aa-wed aal bokhur, tet her-e tizoo"

When you are not used to incense, you burn your butt!

"Faker nafsoo sana soda"

He thinks he is so special.

"Tet rebet massarinoo"

May his intestines get knotted!

"Akl ou mar-aa ou elet san-aa"

Food and idleness and no profession.

"El aa-ma ye-mik"

May shit blind you!

"Mokhoo fel hawa bi leff"

His mind is reeling in the wind.

ROSE WATER

In Egypt roses did not have thorns: they gave no pain. All year round, they conveyed emotions; with their long-stemmed Hoover roses offered in loving bouquets; with their dark red petals giving a bitter-sweet jam; with their floral decoration of our Synagogue; with their carpet for the bride to step on as she walked down the aisle...

In spring, at my grandmother's house, there was a very exceptional day! Excitement floated in the air. Furniture was moved out of the way. All the spare tables were set in a long line in the spacious marbled hall. The women were glowing, their cheeks rosy and eyes laughing in anticipated pleasure: it was rose water day!

The doorbell rang and, one after the other, baskets full of red roses were brought in by deliverymen dressed in their *galabeyas*, long gowns worn by men. The fragrance inexorably filled the hall. Breathing became intense, mixing with the anticipation of that unique day in spring that would linger throughout the year.

My grandmother Sarah, black hair in bangles, her green eyes filled with pride, was the hostess. Her brother was the hero about to exert his magic and create something rare. His hair red and freckles on his emaciated cheeks, he was a modest and retiring person. Dressed in a long floating white robe, he gave his instructions to his sister in a soft muted voice and she in turn relayed his words to the rest. He set up his distilling still. Everything was ready for the plucking of the petals. There were eight to ten womenfolk who started this delicate task. Once the petals ready, the mysterious transformation could start.

The long process of distillation went on uninterrupted even during the meal, rarely equalled in good mood, except for wedding feasts. Once in a while, my great-uncle, Moreno Albo, would leave the dining room to check his process. He glided silently, like a shadow, not disturbing anyone, all shrunk and withdrawn in his shyness.

The conclusion was near and eager eyes were watching the transparent white liquid in its still, each one already anticipating the use of the precious essence:

- ✧ As a headache pain relief on a wet handkerchief,
- ✧ In the kitchen to enhance cakes,
- ✧ As a digestive in sugary water,
- ✧ As a face or body tonic,
- ✧ In a bathtub to perfume a sensuous relaxing soak.

Small, delicate flasks filled with the precious water were given to all those who had participated in the transformation. It was a strictly no men admitted session. When the men came back in the evening, everything was over. But in the long run, the magic was re-lived by both men and women, when the scented cakes were eaten, or when women's fragrant bodies left a sensuous whiff in their wake.

It was a day to mark with ...a ROSE.

"MAKWAGHI" and "GHASSALA"

A *makwaghi*, was a man who not only ironed clothes to perfection, but also came home to fetch the pile of women's dresses, blouses, men's shirts, trousers and anything else that needed ironing. Each quarter had its *makwaghi*. Ours was the emperor of *makwaghies*.

His shop was full of steam. A can of water on a shelf, three or four different sized black irons heating on a Primus, he worked behind his workbench with his arms, hands, feet and mouth. The plank was covered with a blanket and over that a yellowed sheet. To test the iron's temperature, he picked up one of them and put it close to his cheek. He slipped three fingers of the other hand in his mouth and as soon as he brought them out damp, quickly and fearlessly tapped the sole to check if his tool was ready. He then took a large mouthful of water and sprayed the *mekarkesh*, crumpled piece, to iron.

He set to his task with his hands first and when necessary, he took off his *shabashed*, slippers, jumping on to the plank using one foot to hold a long-handled iron. It was no longer a foot but a five-fingered tool, each toe having a precise job. The foot glided the iron over large surfaces, once he had done that, he jumped down and took another smaller iron to even out the corners and make a perfect, smooth finish.

Because of the heat, men's shirts were worn and washed in incredible quantities, sometimes as many as four a day. One shirt in the morning to go to work, one after the midday shower, another one in the evening and when the young men in the family had a date they changed into a more elegant silk one. In my grandfather's house, there were three young, not easily pleased bachelors, plus my grandfather who slipped into his cotton white robe after work, and that kept our *makwaghi* happy and busy. He came over to get his daily pile of clothes to iron.

There were no washing machines then, but the *ghassala*, washerwoman, was the indispensable complement to the *makwaghi*. Our *ghassala* was a stout, large-breasted, good-natured woman in her thirties, forever bearing children. She would bring the baby with her and put it in a corner, breast-feeding the child with her generous milk when it cried. She had so much of it that it poured out and wet her dress.

Her realm was a room on the flat-roofed terrace. Surrounded by brass *toshts*, basins, of varied sizes, she kept a supply of hot water by heating it in a big metal pail poised over the "primus", adding it to the cold water in the *tosht*. In the first she put the dry clothes, sheets, towels and such, then scrubbed with her cubic soap energetically, all the while singing in Arabic songs of the much beloved *Om Kalsoum*, known all over the Middle East and beyond. In the second *tosht*, she renewed the scrubbing in clean water; in the third rinsed the soap away. The fourth was used to dip the white items in a bluish rinse that was extracted from a small, rounded blue-powdered sachet, bringing out the beauty of Egyptian cotton.

Her strong hands twisted the sheets or towels until not a drop came out. The rest of the drying was the work of the sun. It did not take long to dry clothes. A dazzling cleanliness no machine could ever equal was the final result. Her pride in her job well done was touching. After her lunch break and at the end of her

washing and drying, our *ghassala* folded everything and brought it down through the service stairs ready for the *makwaghi* next day.

Our *makwaghi* never needed a written list of anything he took; besides he could not read. My grandmother counted the shirts, sheets, handkerchiefs, napkins or towels and they all came back exactly as counted. We knew these Egyptian workers from one generation to another. They were part of our family. Often, a son or brother would take over the job. He was then known as the son, brother of Ahmed, Mustapha or Ali. The same was true of Aicha's, Zenab's, Fatma's daughter or sister.

Once in a while when an unknown person was hired, there were hitches. Silver disappeared and then my mother had an infallible way of getting her things back without the intervention of the police, who were heavy-handed with their batons. She let the word go round that she would consult a medium who would "see" who had done it! Mysteriously, the missing goods developed legs and came back to the rightful owner.

It never happened with **our** *makwaghi* or *ghassala*...

Of LICE and FRIENDS



After having to go through uniform inspection at school, I had to be inspected for *kenim*, lice, by my mother at home. She made a great fuss about lice. Living in that hot country, they multiplied very quickly and if you did not eliminate the *aml*, nits, they produced tens of small baby lice; which then became fat black ones. *Kenim* had the speciality of jumping from one head to another. They were not very particular about the social standing of their hosts or whether the hair was blond, black or auburn. One hour a head could be perfectly clean and the next, just by going out in a crowded street, start itching persistently. It was the first sign of infestation.

There were special white combs with very fine teeth. I had very long hair and going from the skull to the end of the hair required perseverance and a sharp eye. When the head was clean the comb came down all white, but when the lice had settled snugly, they came out on the white surface squirming and poised to jump. My mother crushed them with her nail making a cracking sound. Then the suffering began. There were no special products or shampoos to clear the head. There was petrol and alcohol. Usually it was petrol that was scrubbed into the parted hair, onto the scalp. It burnt terribly, your eyes started to water and tears dropped out. The smell was disgusting. It was like plunging in a petrol tank. There was no arguing and it was either this or come back from school with a very polite note asking the parents to keep their child at home until a certain sanitary problem had been solved. It was very humiliating for the parents but also for the children who were pitilessly ridiculed by their mates. The good thing was when almost all the class had lice, then no one could say: "*Ha ha ha, you have lice!*"

When a child started scratching in class, matron was called and she would go through your hair with an air of disgust. She proceeded to put you in quarantine. Sister then made you sit at the back of the class with no one next to you and at recess you were ostracised. So it was worth it going through the suffering.

Anyway after the petrol treatment and a good wash, your hair was silky, shiny and had a pleasant squeaky texture.

One day, after washing my hair without first checking for the revolting creatures, my mother thought she might just as well look through, just in case. Truly enough, there were fat juicy lice sitting happily on my scalp, and worse even, nests of nits ready to burst out into adulthood. Hair-dryers were uncommon in Egypt; we dried our hair in the sun, even in winter. There I was my 60 or 70 centimetres of wet hair, a home for the dreaded insects and the impossibility to get rid of them. With no further ado, my mother left the bathroom and came back with her scissors, a determined look on her face. I pleaded: *"No! No! Please don't cut my hair! It will be too short to plait and I'll be punished if I go back to school with my hair loose."* She did not answer and quickly gathered my wet hair in one long braid, then cut it as closely as possible to the skull.

This time it was not the petrol that made me cry. I had been growing my hair for several years now. No one in my class had longer hair. However, it now dried in no time, was curly and felt lightweight. The long washing and combing sessions were over and lice inspections short and pleasant. The curls were close to my head as was the fashion after Ingrid Bergman played the leading role in *"For whom the Bell Tolls"*. My aunts cried out in horror and scolded my mother for not even keeping the plait as a souvenir. But as it was wet, it had been flushed down the toilet.

A new era began. My mother could no longer catch me by my plaits and twist them round her knuckles when she was furious at some foolish thing I had done. We ran round and round the table but she could not get me and I laughed saying: *"Serves you right, cutting off my hair!"* I think perhaps she regretted her rash act. In any case lice never bothered us again. That, in itself, was a tremendous relief.



Of all the creeping insects that graced our homes, the sorsar, cockroach, was practically impossible to eradicate. Cockroaches came in different sizes and colours ranging from the tiny brownish to the very large dark adult flying one. The tiny ones were very quick to escape, they hid in the dark nooks but mainly in the kitchen. Medium ones were heavier and unpleasant to look at with their eyes on the side and long antennae. If you were quick enough, you could run and crush the invaders with a slipper. They died with a dreadful cracking sound leaving a spot on the floor. By far the most terrifying were the black adult flying specimens with their protruding eyes and their antennae almost as long as their bodies. Measuring about seven to ten centimetres, they were the size of a coal tit, but certainly not as pretty!

Small, medium, large or king size they all had in common their lust for scraps and rubbish. The least garbage, the tiniest crumb on the floor, table or in the sink was their moment of triumph. Like ants they lived in communities. When you found one, there followed the wife, husband, children, grandchildren, cousins and distant relatives. Ants were mainly attracted by sugar and anything sweet. They marched endlessly back and forth, workaholics similar to some of us humans. Cockroaches on the other hand were sly, worked silently in the dark and ran off as soon as the light was switched on.

I shall always keep in mind a memorable summer evening when we all sat in my

grandfather's home. It was very hot, the windows and balcony were open to make it less stifling. Happy to be together, we nibbled and talked about the latest family events. TV had not entered our lives, nor could anyone imagine that a machine would one day take the place of honour.

Suddenly through the balcony, a large black winged "thing" came in with the muffled sound of an engine flying right at us creating a commotion. It was an adult cockroach probably feeling lonely outside. Screaming "*sorsar, sorsar*", shouting and gesticulating with either a slipper or a shoe in the hand, we started chasing the intruder in a strange ballet. The big beast was afraid of the small one! All our efforts were directed at shooing it towards the balcony and making it fly out. It would then swerve and come back at us sending everyone in a frantic, noisy tribal dance.

The truth was that we were loath to hit it because then it would drop on the floor and be put to death inexorably, crushed by either a slipper or a shoe, making that cracking noise and splashing its remains. Then we would have to clear away the broken wings, dislocated body and wash the marble floor. No one looked forward to such a chore. So we continued playing tennis, back and forth: backhand and forehand, hoping someone else would get it. Finally a good shot sent it out for good, that evening anyway.

We could go back to our chatter and nibbling...



Deban, flies, were forever taking our body for landing strips. Their main pleasure was to run quickly over our uncovered legs or arms tickling us, making it hard to go to sleep. A strategy was put into place and before going to bed we fought the fly-campaign. Two soldiers were needed. Armed with big towels we co-ordinated our movements shooing them towards the open window. When the main bulk was disposed of, half the shutter was shut and part two of the strategy could begin.

One of the two fly-fighters stood by the window waiting with the towel ready to get in action and to prevent the flies from circling back while the other fighter renewed the first manoeuvre. When almost all the undesirable and uninvited guests were out, the shutter was completely locked. With a quick flip of the wrist, the survivors were shot down with a fly swatter. We could now sleep in peace.

However, either a male and female had escaped the massacre and made babies during the night, or they passed through the slits of the shutters and drove us crazy in the early hours of the morning, taking their revenge. Every summer night the same battle took place. It was only in winter when flies were less active and we were more covered that we could doze off without being startled by their ballets.



Mosquitoes were not bad either. Mainly busy during the summer nights when most of us were happy to sit in the open-air restaurants or cafés, they made use of their infrared sight to prick where they were sure to get what they wanted. Ankles and bare arms were one of their favourite biting sites. Some people attracted them more than others and these were sure to receive their unwelcome visit. Fortunately for us, the tsetse flies lived somewhere else in Africa. But not only did ordinary mosquitoes leave a sore spot that itched for days on end but

some also gave Malaria.

My aunt Judith, who was afraid of almost everything that flew, was the one to catch Malaria. She was the only member in the family to have it. There were no antibiotics or sophisticated medication to treat that illness, only quinine. It appeared with a very high fever and shivering spells hard to stop.

Mosquito nets sometimes equipped bedrooms but it was not the majority of homes that had them. There was not much that could be done to fight mosquitoes except wear socks and cover as much of your body as possible when you went out in the summer evenings.

It was rumoured that the English had an efficient protection: whisky. After biting them, the mosquitoes fell drunk to the ground where they were crushed pitilessly. It was not in our habit to drink whisky, so we could not really check that rumour.

It is amazing that with all the creeping, flying and invisible creatures, we survived.

Living in Egypt, we were perhaps simply lucky to have to fight off only the smaller beasts...

"HALAWA"

Hairy legs, arms or armpits, moustachioed upper lip and other secret parts were poorly considered. Foreign women were distinctive by their hairy bodies. Perhaps the most distasteful sight in summer was to see long armpit hairs waving in the breeze, not mentioning the stale smell they produced!

Halawa is a candy sugar depilatory that comes from Pharaoh's times. The ladies then were already conscious about their appearance, taking milk baths and massaging essential oils into their bodies to make them smooth, desirable and caressing.

Halawa is at the same time easy and tricky to prepare. For a normally hairy person, the measure is: half a glass of sugar, half a glass of water and the juice of half a fresh lemon. All the ingredients are gently heated in a pan till the sugar melts leaving a whitish foam that yellows in no time. The trick to get it right is to stop the heating between the white and yellow foam, spread it on a damp plate immediately otherwise it goes on cooking. You then pick it out as hot as possible mixing, kneading and stretching it with the help of a spit or two. The saliva makes it more malleable and gives exactly the right resilience to the preparation. Often when the *halawa* is over-cooked and dark yellow it can be eaten as candy.

When you "catch " it, you know it is ready by its stickiness and adherence to your skin. *Halawa* is stretched out on your forearm to begin with and pulled off in one piece with a decisive movement of the hand. You can suffer it out in a solitary session or have a martyrdom-shared one. In Cairo, there was always a supportive aunt, cousin or friend ready to draw your attention away when it came to the delicate parts. Armpits were soar spots and the *halawa* had to be pulled out quickly before the pain hit you. Anyone trying to pull off the sugary depilatory and failing was in for intense suffering. Sometimes the armpits bled but that was because the sticky *Halawa* had not been pulled out correctly and quickly enough. The nightmarish part was the inside of the knees. You had to twist your body to

spread out the paste and it was practically impossible to pull unless you were a contortionist in a circus. In that case you were willing, but trembling nervously, to send out an S.O.S. Trust in someone else's ability was not automatic. No matter who came to your help, you knew the pain would still be there.

To look human and not apish, you stuck the *halawa* on to your moustache and after a quick agonising jerk your smooth upper-lip was rewarding. You looked in the mirror and were pleased with the result. For those who were too delicate for that treatment, there was what we called the *friendly moustache session*. You applied peroxide with a piece of cotton to your upper-lip hair and sat in the sun until it turned blond. It was certainly less painful but most of us were tanned all year round and that blond moustache was the first thing you saw when talking to a non-*halawa* adept. The contrast was too great.

Halawa professional women earned their livelihood by going from one family to the other to do the job no one ever wanted to do. They were also female "chiefs of the alley", and knew all the gossip. Future brides had all their body depilated, including the intimate parts. In that case only the *halawa* woman and the victim were in the bathroom. Behind the door you could hear the muffled moans of pain and the encouraging voice of the torturer: "*Yalla, yalla, ehna khalasna*", Come on, come on, we are through!

That very particular session was held two or three days before the *MIKVE*, the Jewish pre-marriage ritual bath, giving time to the body to stop burning and aching.

Incompetent hands should not meddle with *halawa*. Hesitant plucking of stamp-like surfaces can only exacerbate the pain and leave a harlequin patchwork on the skin. A forearm is executed in three bold straps, a leg in four or five strokes. Repeated on a monthly basis, the body keeps its smooth and satin-like texture longer.

Finally for lack of fighters the combat ends. The hair does not grow any longer, its bulb completely voided of its substance. Then the word *Halawa* comes into its own right and deserves its other meaning: "*Ya halawa*", Oh sweetness! "*Ya helwa*", Oh you sweet! From pain to sweetness, all the suffering is forgotten.

Nowadays people call the edible *halawa* : *Halva*. It can be bought in any Greek or Turkish grocery. Made of crushed sesame seeds and sugar, it was the common man's sweet he ate with his *eish baladi*, peasant bread. It has been enhanced with chocolate or pistachios and nuts. Considered as a delicatessen, it is sold in fancy boxes as something exotic. The taste is still the same but it costs a pretty penny more.

For a very tasty sandwich, spread a layer of butter on a piece of toast or preferably French baguette, add your *halawa* / *halva* and munch happily. It is better than any sophisticated cake on the market. If your *halawa* / *halva* is the plain one, then you can begin with a layer of chocolate spread and top it with that "sweetness."

However, a warning should be included on the packages:

"CAUTION: *Halva* can be addictive!"

The EVIL EYE, etc...

It is difficult for Americans or Europeans, except perhaps for Italians who firmly believe in it, to evaluate the importance of *el ein*, the eye, the evil eye. The worst thing about it is that anyone can give it to you, even friends. Envious or frustrated people can throw their eye "at" you just by giving you a look. If things in your life have worked out well, you have a home and family, in short everything is more than satisfactory: BEWARE! An evil-hearted, envious or unsatisfied person can make things change, your child can fall into a strange sickness, your lover turn away from you, or you can get the blues, and not in music...

In fact some individuals naturally have an evil eye. Sometimes someone in their family had it before them. True or false, this heredity when known to others is hard to carry. No sane individual wants an evil-eyed friend.

In Egypt, signs to ward off the evil eye were present everywhere. First you protected the entrance to your home by hanging a *sabarra* above the door. This plant, a star-shaped cactus, was known as a *reliable* safeguard. You needed a ladder to hang it over the door, and you were lucky not to fall off. But then the *sabarra* was there to protect you! When you couldn't find one, garlic cloves eventually did the job.

As soon as babies saw the light, a safety pin with a blue pearl and a David's star was pinned on their clothes. Baby girls had their ears pierced with a needle at day two or three. A string was passed through the hole. When the piercing healed, real earrings with that favourite gem, a turquoise, replaced the string.

Arabs and Jews had a hand in common: Fatma's for Muslims and Myriam's for Jews. The five fingers stretched out and repeating "*Khamisa ou khamastashar*", Five and fifteen, was an effective protection. If you added a spit or two on the back of the hand, the results were better.

Whatever you said, you never knowingly praised your or anyone's child to their face. Sentences such as: "What a beautiful child!" or "What a healthy appetite!" were to be banned from your vocabulary. That is why when such a faux pas was made, the child needed all the protection it could get, blue pearl, David's star or other symbols.

Other harmless everyday devices could be applied. You called in a Rabbi for Jews, a priest for Catholics or an Orthodox pope for Armenians and Greeks. They moved around the house with the *bokhur*, incense, in a burner held by chains, swinging it and muttering prayers. In this way they chased away the evil right out of the door. My Greek friend Nina living at the Extaday Hotel and her mother, who had persistent headaches, often called in an Orthodox priest. He not only went round the room chanting in Greek, but also on the landing. I don't know if the headaches came from the evil eye or something else, but Nina's mother was always better after such a visit.

There was a Synagogue in the what was called "le Vieux Caire", Old Cairo, renowned for setting things right. You went there and slept on a mat for a few hours or for the night. I recall, as in a distant dream, going there with one of my aunts: it was very peaceful. I don't remember whether we brought home water from a miraculous well. The family was divided: there were those who believed

and those who doubted very strongly that sleeping in that synagogue would put an end to the evil eye. It was a matter of heated discussions, often ending in rude words.

Some food, in particular, caught *el ein*. Fish, *samak*, especially when still uncooked had this reputation. At my nonna's house, there was a neighbour, a terrible busybody. She regularly knocked on the kitchen door leading to the service stairs that were common to both apartments. Curious about what was being prepared, especially for the Shabbat supper, she came snooping. If by chance fish was being cleaned, my grandmother quickly covered it up and stood with her back to it to prevent the neighbour from guessing. This Polish Jew had lost her only daughter. She kept telling my nonna, whose much beloved Alice had gone, how lucky she was to still have eight children left, whereas her only child had died.

After such a visit, shaking all over with apprehension, my nonna would quickly take a handful of salt and throw it after the neighbour when she left. She could also have hurled an olla, the earthenware jug, placed on the windowsill with water in it. But that made a lot of noise and you had to clean up the mess afterwards.

When things got out of hand and none of the known everyday "safeguards" failed, then some resorted to sorcerers. No one scoffed at the evil eye nor was the prevention or the cure considered outlandish. Some took the evil eye so seriously that they went around fearful of everything and everyone, delivering themselves into the hands of charlatans.

I have personally never seen any dolls pierced with needles, but they existed and it was only whispered about. Those willing to step into that realm were rare; you never knew how it could end.

One of my mother's numerous cousins came to us in a pitiful state. He could no longer eat or sleep and was convinced his wife had paid someone to put the *ein*, the evil eye, on him to get rid of him. According to our cousin, there were a lot of clues to prove that, but the most tangible one was the large spot of oil he regularly found on his doorstep when he went to work early in the morning. As his wife did not leave the apartment during the night, then it was surely someone else she had paid who was responsible. He was convinced that one day he would die in an accident or catch a deadly disease. Everyone was offering advice to undo the *ein*.

Finally, that love match ended with a divorce.

No one died nor got a terrible disease but his wife's reputation was wrecked because she was feared and people in the Jewish Community looked at her with suspicion. I don't know whether she resorted to a sorcerer to end it all but she remained alone. Besides being divorced, which in itself was very badly considered, the rumours of her act grew stronger and it was talked about endlessly making her appear as a witch.

As for the other "superstitions," Egyptians were great believers in oil reading to find out hidden truths. Mediums specialising in that field were kept busy. Hands or coffee- dregs had no secrets. No one ever drank coffee without glancing at the drawing made by the dregs to find out what the future had in store. At parties,

we even played at soothe-saying, inventing all sorts of silly predictions.

It was very common to find oneself suddenly confronted by a fortune-teller who grabbed your hand and who would not let it go before you gave her a coin and agreed to let her "read" your hand. This usually happened in public gardens or when you went on a picnic away from the big town. Influenced by all sorts of stories, even though we were reluctant to play the game, we were nevertheless afraid of refusing just in case she would curse us and disrupt our life. In general when you agreed and handed her a coin the predictions were good! I was told that: "You will be very lucky and have a very long life."

To read the coffee dregs, you first drank Turkish coffee, and then spinning the small cup, you quickly overturned it on a saucer. After a few minutes, both your present and future were outlined to the initiated one. Once again I was told that I would be very lucky. No mention was made of my longevity.

It is very stupid to believe in the evil eye. It shows a complete lack of reflection and no pragmatism at all. However when I was in Milan, Italy, working as secretary, one of my colleagues, a widower forever worrying whether it would rain or not and if he would need to water his plants, looked at my ring. I wore it very rarely. It was a pretty little thing that I cherished. Left to me by my aunt Alice, it had a black onyx stone and a small pearl in the middle. He said: "What a pretty ring!" Two or three hours later the stone crumbled to pieces! Was it a coincidence? Was he one of those individuals with an evil eye?

It is said that a mother should be strong enough to throw back the *ein* to the sender. The main problem is being aware of such an act and consequently able to do something about it...

Apply this advice to avoid the evil eye:

Don't show off your wealth!

Complain about your health!

Say your children are not bright!

That nothing ever turns right!

This is a sure way of leading a happy life!

ALEXANDRIA

The school year ended in mid-June. It was already hot enough to make the tarmac soft under your heels. We were getting ready for the yearly summer expedition that would take us far from the stifling Cairo heat, which could sometimes reach 45 °C in the shade.

As unusual as was *Ras el Bar*, Alexandria was unbeatable in beauty. The endless shoreline boasted famous beaches. These were:

- Stanley Bay, the big and small bays.
- *Ramla el Beida*, white sand and clear crystal water you could only reach by boat.
- Le Trou du Diable, the Devil's Hole, a dangerous diving rendezvous for reckless young men wanting to show off.
- *Sidi Bishr* exclusive and VIP.

- *San Stefano* with its Casino on piles accessible as long as you paid the high entrance fee.
- *Montaza*, King Farouk's private beach that was later open to the general public. I did not enjoy that beach: though it was extremely beautiful, it was absolutely deserted. "*Ganna bala nass, maten dass*", Paradise without any humans is unbearable!

Not wanting to renew the traumatic Ras el Bar Hotel experience, my parents rented an apartment in a two-storied villa a few metres away from the beach. The big Alexandria migration could begin.

My father had a front wheel grey Citroen with enough room for three in front, two on the foldaway seats and three at the back. On this trip, there was my nonno Brahim, my best friend Jacqueline who was going to stay with her cousins, our faithful servant Farag, my mother, father, sister and myself. On top of the car a huge mountain of trunks and suitcases strapped with strong ropes.

To reach Alexandria by car then, you had to take what they called *the desert road*. It was a long drive along a snake-like track flanked by desert on either side. Once in a long while you came upon some villagers selling fresh figs, prickly pears, red dates that cracked under your teeth or soft brown sticky ones. We were driving along peacefully, all the windows open, suffering in silence and looking forward to the cool seaside air in Alexandria. Suddenly we came upon villagers holding out gleaming red chunks of batikh, watermelon. I pleaded: "Stop, stop, please stop!" Instinctively my father stopped the car. We all trooped out happy to bite into the refreshing slices. Not only was it a necessary halt, but it would also give us strength to bear the rest of the journey.

We regained our oven and my father tried to start up the engine. There was a dead silence, the car refused to budge. Farag went out to twist the crank while my father sat at the wheel. The engine sputtered and died. There we were in the middle of nowhere, desert to the right, desert to the left, the villagers looking at us "strangely," or so we thought. We got out and pushed except for my nonno who had to be forced back into the car. To our relief, we heard that reassuring sound once again when my father started to drive off. He stopped to pick us up, but by doing so the engine stopped as well. We had to push all over again and subsequently jumped in as gracefully and athletically as possible into the moving car.

My friend Jacqueline and I were laughing so much we had stitches in our sides. My father on the other hand was not at all amused. "Don't you ever tell me to stop again to buy dates, watermelon or anything else!" He was very red in the face and it was not only from the heat.

We reached Alexandria a few hours later, tired, sweaty and as sticky as brown dates. Our ordeal was not over. We reached the summit of frustration with the 24-hour ban on swimming because my parents were convinced that before doing that, we had to adapt to the climate. Here was the dazzling water beckoning to us like the serpent in the Garden of Eden and all we could do was look at it. We dare not sneak off for a swim, because my mother kept watch over our suits and going in the nude was unheard of!

Twenty-four hours later we were allowed to do anything we wanted: stay in the water till our lips were blue, our skin goose-pimpled and shaking with cold. It was bliss after the desert.

There was always a friendly cabin waiting for us to change. We wore one-piece bathing costumes with the straps holding the bra tightly hooked. The men had to wear a belt on their swimming trunks and were expelled if they undid the belt. There were vice-squad shawish, policemen, who walked around with hawkish eyes to make sure everyone was decent and remained that way. There should have been an underwater surveillance because there were men who swam below the surface and pinched your bottom. These never got caught; they did their thing and escaped very quickly. It was impossible to describe their face: they came from behind! The girls were advised not to venture far off alone.

My father, Elie, dark red hair, freckles and milky skin, suffered terribly on these seaside holidays. Even by sitting under the umbrella he quickly turned crimson, his skin bursting out in blisters. It burned so much that my mother spent the first evenings spreading fresh yoghurt on his back and arms to cool them off. He played hide and seek with the sun, shunning the beach whenever he could. He was also very much afraid of swimming and when we took a boat he held on to the side with all his might getting the *shoushourella*, diarrhoea from fear. As beach pleasures were not for him, he went down town to play *trictrac*, the Egyptian backgammon. It was a relief when night fell.

After the burns started to heal, the evenings were dedicated to outdoor strolling along the costal promenade, the "*Cornishe*", eating ice cream, grilled almonds and *leb*, watermelon salted roasted pips, pieces of fresh coconut and drowning countless fruit juices. Also you were tempted into buying fancy jewellery or typical pearled bandanas you would never wear in Cairo. Wooden handmade clogs were no sooner bought then stolen if you went swimming and left them unattended on the beach. That was very annoying and enraged me. I went round the beach to see if I could spot them on someone else. I never found any of my stolen *aba-ib*, clogs.

As soon as we had showered we wore our pretty summer dresses and got ready for our stroll. My father and grandfather wore their light short-sleeved shirts. Young Arab boys and girls ran after us, their arms outstretched holding fresh jasmine necklaces: "*Foll, foll*" they cried out. My father, generous and good-natured, never hesitated to offer each of his "women" this delightful scented necklace, which was worn all through the evening. There could be no promenade along the Cornishe without that traditional companion. Walking along, the delicate perfume of the fragile flower made us light-headed. We felt we were floating in the breeze. There was a strange contentment that accompanied this ritual.

My father invited us to an open-air restaurant along the seashore. Before the meal, he had a refreshing beer and we either had a *gazouza*, a lemon soda, or a *Vivi-cola*, deep crimson soda that coloured our lips. A table full of *mezze*, assorted appetisers, was spread out. No one had an early night, it seemed that holidays were a constant whirl of pleasures.

The apartment was very satisfying. A large shaded balcony was our usual dining room. Life was easy-going, centred on meeting friends, swimming, strolling, observing the holiday crowd and being part of it. For some reason it all seemed futile to my mother. She started picking nits in Farag's hair. The meat was not cooked right, the rice did not have the crusty layer everyone liked or this or that.

One day as we were ready to eat, we heard a great hubbub coming from the kitchen, my mother's voice furious over something. She came over to the terrace where the table was set and said in that high-pitched voice we recognised when she was mad : "I have fired Farag; he's doing everything he can to spoil this vacation! He must pack his bag and you will take him to the station, buy his ticket and see that he is on the first train, this very day!"

Elie, my father, knew better than try and reason with her when she went on her high horses. My nonno shook his head but surprisingly did not say a word. My sister Nanette and I looked at each other in dismay: everything had been idyllic so far. My mother stood there pursing her lips, probably sorry at her outburst but she was too stubborn to admit it. There was this obstinate streak in her family. Farag appeared on the terrace his pitiful bundle under his arm ready to leave.

My father who never allowed himself to be dragged into a quarrel and who usually hid behind his newspaper, decided to take matters into his hands. He left his chair, went up to Farag and patted his shoulder. Talking to him as gently as to a child, he guided him back to the kitchen. We never found out what the whispered words were. A few minutes later Elie said: "Everything is settled. Farag is staying and that's that!" Taken aback, we stood there gaping. My mother started to protest but stopped short at my father's unusual: "Esther, ça suffit!" (That's enough!)

We were all relieved, probably my mother more than anyone else. A few days later she bought Farag a new *galabbeya*, the traditional Egyptian long gown. Not only this but she gave him a raise as well. Life went back to normal.

We gradually became the colour of overcooked gingerbread except for my father who remained chalky. My hair turning auburn and the freckles invading my face meant that our holidays were through. It was time to leave all the new friends, exchange addresses and promises to meet again.

The return trip from Alexandria to Cairo was uneventful. My father drove on stubbornly. The villagers saw us coming and passing straight on, their hands falling to their sides disappointed, their fruits unsold.

The following winter my father sold his car. Eight times out of ten, he banged into the garage entrance, once on the left, once on the right. Furthermore, he was fed up with my mother pulling at the wheel and shouting: "Careful, careful!" Could it be that he dreaded another trip through the desert route?

There was still a whole month to go before school began. We could count on the delights of the private swimming and tennis club in *Gezireh*. This isle could be reached either on foot by crossing the *Kasr el Nil Bridge* or le Pont des Anglais with its lions looking down from their pedestal at both ends. There was also the possibility of hiring a *hantour*, the Cairo two-horse carriage, which stood just outside our home waiting for a client. If you took the *Kasr el Nil Bridge*, you had to leave the swimming club before the bridge pivoted and opened to allow the Feluccas to pass through. If you missed that, you had to stand in the burning sun, melting, till the manoeuvre was over.

The next summer holiday to Alexandria was a train trip. True to himself, my father woke us up two hours ahead of schedule. We took a taxi to the station to be on time, but when we reached it, it was deserted. The *shayal*, porter, pounced on

our suitcases and stood by them to make sure he had his fee. We had to sit and wait for the train.

When at last it arrived, there was a great scuffle. The doors and windows were stormed. We managed to get in and then received the luggage through the windows. There were no reserved seats or any air-conditioning. By the time we reached Alexandria we were chewing dust and feeling miserable.

A few years later, new modern cool trains were introduced. You could book your seats but that did not stop my father from cheating with the clock. By then we knew what he was up to and he was caught out.

Booking a seat did not necessarily mean that you found it free. Either you gave the controller a large *baksheesh*, tip, or you stood in the corridor. People did not understand the notion of air-conditioning and they opened the windows to get "fresh air." In fact they got hot sand air and complained that the new-fangled system did not work.

The car trip was now part of our family anthology. Whereas we enjoyed pointing out the details, miming the act of jumping into the car while it was moving, my father on the other hand, though he smiled wanly, never really missed that voyage to Alexandria.

He had been so scared of being stuck in the middle of nowhere that he almost had the *shoushourella*!

About the author

My name is Sultana Vidal, but I am known as Suzy. My pen name as an author is Sultana Latifa. My parents were Esther Souery and Elie Vidal. They gave me a younger sister, Sarah, everyone calls Nanette. She was born in November 42 during the Battle of El Alamein that was to decide of our fate.

As a result of my lack of obedience and discipline, I was sent to kindergarten at The Alvernia Convent School for girls in Zamalek. Later, my sister after spending a day there refused to go back. She followed the Lycée Français du Caire far from my lonely struggle against the overpowering English system of weights and measures. My secondary education at St. Clare's College for girls in Heliopolis opened the doors of AUC : The American University Cairo.

In 1956 the nationalisation of the Suez Canal disrupted our lives and we were "gently" invited to leave of our own free will. My mother and sister left and I stayed on with my father to obtain my degree on June 27, 1957 on my 21st birthday.

Ever since that forceful exile I have wanted to write our story. The Jasmine Necklace is a tribute to both my family and our community. It brings back the tastes, scents and sounds of our life in what we thought was our country. Our traditions were rich and colourful. We spoke several languages without problem. We mingled with Christians and Muslims in peace. It was my desire and duty to mark our passage in Egypt with my Jasmine Necklace: *afin que nul n'oublie!*