

Mansoura Ez Eldin, *Beyond Paradise*

Chapter 4

Trans. Sophia Vasalou

Salma sits on the balcony of her father's house reading *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Every time she starts on a new page, she goes back to the last one to make sure she's really read it. Her clouded mind mixes up people, mixes up events.

Her aunt Nazla greets the various guests who have been arriving since morning for the first commemoration of Rashid's passing. Every time a new one arrives, she casts a sharp glance in Salma's direction, as if to stir her from her seat to welcome the guest alongside her, but her niece stares back at her without registering any reaction.

Her mind wanders aimlessly through the novel lying open in her hands without fully taking in what she's reading. Nazla worries people might think Salma has lost it; for how could she be sitting there with hair dishevelled, all colourfully dressed, reading away without the least bit of evidence of being properly in mourning? Nazla calmly leads the guests to the interior where they can sit in the living room far away from the strange-mannered woman that Salma has become.

A little brown bird flies down to the black railing that runs atop the balcony wall. Salma follows it with her eyes with full attention as it hops about. She counts its steps but she can't keep up the counting, she keeps thinking she's missed a beat and she has to start from scratch. Then her arm flails in the air, the little bird takes fright, and flies away.

Suddenly she becomes aware of the sound of a black Mercedes coming to a halt in

front of the house raising a cloud of dust. Out steps Margot Michelle in a black dress that reveals a handsome and well-groomed pair of legs. Her face is a riot of make-up that is entirely out of keeping with the time of day and the occasion of her visit, which is the first anniversary of Rashid's death.

She comes up the stairs with calm and confident steps, followed by her father, who looks many years older than his real age owing to the rough state of his knees, which have greatly affected his mobility. Salma watches them as they make their way toward her. Her eyes latch on to the sparkling necklace on Margot's neck. She tries to tear her eyes away from it but she cannot do so. Margot approaches, and greets her coolly with a shake of her hand. Salma doesn't look at her face because her gaze is still nailed to the necklace. It's not a gaze of admiration or interest, just a vacant gaze with no particular feelings attached to it, like the look of someone in the grip of some kind of possession.

“Where's *tante* Soraya?”

She's said this in an expressionless voice, and without waiting around for an answer which she would not be hearing from Salma, she's stepped inside trailed by her father with his crooked, aged gait.

Salma cracks her fingers, resuming her post. She throws the novel dully onto the table before her, as she struggles to drive out the memory of an ancient laugh that resembles the sound of gurgling water:

Little Margot bursts into peals of laughter, her laugh clots and clusters itself over and over as if she was gargling hot water, before the voice rises in pitch with a shrill ring and the sharp-edged laughter comes to a halt.

Her eyes are black, their colour is the colour of wine, she has coal-black hair. She wears a red dress with a large black print of Mickey Mouse flourishing a maestro's baton across the chest. The dress finishes at her knees with a hem covered by tiny Mickey Mouses that ring the girl's legs round and round.

Margot laughs as she walks along the Nile with Hiyam, Gameela, Salma, Khaled and Hisham, trying to evade the needle grass and the foxtail which scrape her legs on the way to the cornfield. Everyone goes out of their way to give her special treatment, and

her boldness is astounding. Though she's so young, she calls uncle Mustafa, whom all the other kids regard with a sense of terror, just by his first name. And that's the same uncle a mere angry look from whom to any of the children is enough to make their heart quake within their chest.

Margot laughs and keeps repeating French words nobody else understands. She looks at the Nile, its purple hyacinth and the boughs of the willow trees leaning over the water, and she says it's just like Venice.

She has never laid eyes on Venice and despite that she always insists she knows everything. She's better than the rest. She's cleverer than anyone else. She's the one that studies at the Sacre-Coeur.

She spends the whole time assiduously promoting herself, advertising her superiority over everyone around her, most of whom have never set foot outside this faraway place.

Hiyam follows her around like a shadow, she trails her like a dog anywhere she goes in the village, with Soraya's encouragement; for the girl needs to be treated with special attention, out of respect for the uncle who's a friend of her father's, and out of respect for the glow that surrounds her because she dresses different, and speaks different, and everything about her is different from anything they're used to.

Salma didn't warm to her much at first, and she couldn't understand why her maternal grandmother handled her like a fragile, precious piece of china, whereas she'd treat the girls that belonged to the family like they were creatures of a lesser God, like "calamities," as she'd refer to them.

Young Salma would look at the cross etched roughly into the right hand of the ever-laughing Margot and would say nothing. She would hang back watching her every movement and observe with astonishment the welcome her grandmother Rahma would give her when she came to their house to say hello to *tante* Soraya, as she called her.

She'd be astonished because "the pious mother," as people called her, was the very same woman who'd slapped her cheeks and shrieked into Jaber's face when he hired Rizq to work the furnace at the brick factory, replacing the first furnace worker who'd

quit after seeing Saber's ghost standing over the factory's towering chimney.

“Is the world so small that you couldn't find anyone else but that Christian to work for you?” She screamed at him. And she didn't listen when he tried to explain:

“That's the best furnace worker in the whole of Wagh Qibli, ma'am – every single brick factory in the region has been fighting to get him.”

She issued her verdict without so much as a glance at him:

“God will never give your factory His blessing so long as that Christian is in it!”

This woman, who'd say to Rizq and his wife Aeda, “Wonderful to see you, my darlings,” while stealing virulent looks at the green cross etched into both their hands, was the same person who'd greet Margot Michelle with kisses and hugs and shut her eyes against her cross. It's only Margot that's the daughter of the wealthy engineer who's a friend of Soraya's family and a prospective business partner for her son Jaber in his future dealings.

For her part, Margot refuses to play with Rizq and Aeda's kids, Marise and Girgis, during her summer visits to the village. She sidelines them completely and gets all in a huff when they approach her, and she only moves around surrounded by her personal entourage, which consists of Hiyam, Khaled, and the rest of the kids in the family, including Salma and Gameela, who never utters a word.

Margot's presence disconcerts Marise, she feels the distance widen between her and the other children accompanying the girl that laughs like gurgling water. She watches them wide-eyed as they pass by the old potato storehouse which Jaber gave her family to live in, she wishes she could join their endless expeditions and games, but if Salma approaches her asking her to join them, she hardly makes a reply and she frowns in refusal, concentrating her attention on whatever she's doing, whether she's sweeping the front of the storehouse or picking castor oil plant flowers and leaves to play with.

Like Mustafa's wife, Nahad, Margot keeps complaining about the mosquitoes which bring out her delicate skin in a rash. She constantly compares the village, with its total lack of comforts and conveniences, to Cairo, the big city. Her reproofs against the village consist in:

(1) The rampant spread of mosquitoes during summer.

(2) The lack of supermarkets, sports clubs, or places for entertainment – and this is what annoys her the most.

(3) The fact that people don't call things by their proper names. They say “the sea” when they mean the Nile or the river, and they say “Egypt” when they really mean “Cairo.”

She would often repeat the last observation in front of Salma, so that Rashid's daughter came to formulate her personal definition of civilised society as consisting in “the fact that people call things by their proper names,” and she still adhered to this definition faithfully years later even after she'd gained a broader experience of the world.

She'd get annoyed at her mother if she asked her, “Will you be going to the sea today?” and she would snap back, “It's called the Nile.” Soraya would carry on impatiently: “The point is, will you be going or won't you?”

She'd feel ashamed of her mother for being so uncivilised, and she'd resolve herself that when she grew up she'd be different. Salma might not know it or want to admit it, but Margot had a strong influence on her.

Despite Margot's reproofs against the village, she eagerly keeps coming back every summer to spend a considerable part of her holidays there, because she relishes the many enjoyments it affords her, like the excursions on the Nile and in the boat of Awf's sons with Hisham and Khaled, and the green corn they would roast in the field in a religious ritual that enraptured the girl with the perpetual laughter, a rapture like the one she felt at the special treatment enveloping her from every side.

Margot arrives every summer with her father and his business partner Mustafa, staying at the Assistant's house, as they call it, with Salma's maternal grandmother and her unmarried aunt Anwar. Two days later at most, her father departs together with Mustafa, leaving his daughter with the family for an entire month.

In the house known as the Assistant's house, surrounded by her mother's family, Salma experiences a sense of inferiority that instantly disappears the moment she finds

herself within her father's family. Among her paternal uncles, she's her father's pampered daughter or Rashid's little princess, the daughter that gets him into quarrels with Jaber, who says that's not the way to bring up a girl – “if you happen to break one of her ribs, she'll grow another twenty-four in their place”, as the saying has it.

In the house of her maternal grandparents, she becomes plain old “Soraya's girl” – that daughter, Soraya, who, should she and her sister Anwar demand their right in their father's inheritance, would tear the family apart and turn the plot of land they own into tatters.

Even Soraya's mother looks upon her daughter's children as interlopers in her family. Soraya is aware of this, even though she has never openly admitted it. She is torn between the love she has for her family, and her husband's hatred of that family. She has learnt not to let her anger show. It was only a handful of occasions, of which Salma retains only the mistiest remembrance, that alerted her to the sense of disappointment her mother secretly harboured.

Salma was still rapt in her thoughts when Margot and her father walked out of the house nearly an hour later.

This time Margot cast her a look containing traces of pity as she walked past. She went slowly down the stairs holding her father's arm to help him make his way down. She took her seat before the wheel, waited until her father had gotten in beside her, and then drove off.

This speedy take-off, which brought Salma back to her senses, struck her as the dividing line between two different worlds and lives. A first life in which the world was just as she had known it as a child, a safe place in which everyone treated her with special attention and fretted over her, a world which contained her father, Gameela and Hiyam with her old personality. And a new life in which she had lost everything she had once desired.

Margot and her father Michelle had been the last guests to leave, and now that they'd gone, Salma would again have to face her mother and aunt. Over the last days, they had been too busy preparing for the commemoration and then receiving the guests to pay her any attention. Now they would resume their favourite place on the veranda and Nazla, egged on by Soraya, would start asking Salma again about what had happened between her and her husband Ziya, and why she hadn't followed him to Manchester as she'd told everyone she would when he suddenly took off a few months ago no sooner had she been released from the clinic where she'd been admitted immediately after her father's death to be treated for nervous breakdown.

Salma rose quickly from her seat and headed for Khaled's old room. She sat down at the desk and bent over her papers to start writing:

I often feel that I'm unnatural...that I've gone mad, in some sense or other, but with the kind of madness that's hard to pin down or notice as an outside observer.

I'm the only one aware of this tame madness that grows slowly and relentlessly within me. It's like a secret cancer that eats me up from inside. Or rather, it's not my madness that's the cancer feeding off me, it is I myself that is the cancer boring deep inside. I have become a virulent cancerous cell in a feeble body that is my own.

My outward strength and that sense of self-confidence are nothing but a rigid mask that conceals the monstrous madness that threatens me. There are mornings that make me feel as though I was standing outside the world, or in the simplest case, that I was living on its outer boundary - mornings that tell me, without ever uttering a single word, that I lack identity, lack memory, lack the power to do the simplest things.

There are times when I stand in front of the bathroom mirror, moments after getting out of bed, and I can no longer remember my name. I'm not talking about total forgetting, but about that sense of having been torn away by the roots which, for a few moments, makes me incapable of remembering distinctly everything that concerns me, so that I see my face and it means nothing to me. I struggle to define my place in this world, in this body that is occupied by my spirit.

I regularly have this experience. And then I become incapable of doing something as simple

as turning on the tap. I stare at my toothbrush in amazement, trying to remember how to use it. That sense of being torn away from myself lasts for a few seconds before I recover my sense of normality. But it's enough to leave me terrified, for it makes me realise that I'm unsafe, that I could cease to exist at any moment.

Mornings like that leave my responses sluggish for the rest of the day. I feel astonished when I hear my mother or my aunt Nazla uttering my name with confident matter-of-factness, or when Hiyam picks up the thread of a conversation we'd started the day before. But I've never told anyone, not even my therapist, about the sense of complete dissociation I sometimes experience from the world around me.

I walk through tightly pressed streets and my eyes see nothing. I don't see the country around me that has suddenly grown old, because the only thing that occupies my thoughts is the madness growing within me and I'm all alone with it.

I feel as if I'm living a single day that endlessly keeps repeating itself. I'm in a constant state of déjà vu. Everything I go through, I feel as if I've already experienced before. Everything happening around me seems like an eternal replication of a single event I once experienced in childhood.

Nothing changes in my life. Nothing changes in the country I live in. It's as if we were faced with a single day in which one and only set of changeless events unfolds.

I shut my eyes and see other worlds before me. I see a world of glowing brilliance in which trees are red, plants are red, the seas and skies are varying shades of green, and blue is just a shadow the other two colours cast.

I call it a coloured paradise. I flee to it, leaving myself and my disappointments behind. I become someone else, with little to connect her to my real self.

On “beautiful” mornings, Salma would be in her best form. She would leave her small flat early to head for the newspaper where she worked, hardly noticing the traffic jams,

the ramshackle buses, the cars belonging to the Central Security Forces lining the streets to pre-empt possible demonstrations. She would remind herself that nothing could take the place of good mornings; they had the power to transform an entire life from misery to bliss.

She didn't have a specific definition of what a beautiful morning consisted in, but she could feel it from the moment she opened her eyes to find herself more alert than normal, her mind clearer, the nagging thoughts that normally preoccupied her having retreated temporarily to the back of her mind.

On those mornings, Salma would look at the world around her with new eyes. Its colours would seem to be lit up with the intensified brilliance of technicolour, as in those old films that made the world appear brighter than it was in reality. She would find it hard to tell, was it things themselves that were actually different on those beautiful mornings? Or was it her own mind that suffused them with this luminous air?

Salma hates the metro, even though it's the best way of getting around in this crowded city. When circumstances forced her to take it, she would come out feeling suffocated, and she'd only feel herself coming back to life once she was back on the ground. During those times, the world would turn into a spectacle of black and white, or one wearing only the faintest colours at best. So on beautiful mornings, she would avoid the metro, and instead would take the microbus or the minibus which dropped her off at the stop nearest to the newspaper where she worked, because she wanted to feel herself surrounded by people. That's why she'd take her small car only rarely, and she'd only resort to a cab if she had no other choice. In a cab she'd have to listen to the endless chatter of the driver.

The distance between the bus stop and her work was just five minutes to walk, but on beautiful mornings she would take a quarter of an hour over it, because she'd want to linger and let her eyes take in the world around her in the marvelling amazement of an Alice in wonderland.

The spectacle of the beggar slumped on the pavement would transform itself into a work of art worthy of contemplation, and the grimy young girl selling packets of tissue

paper at the traffic lights would turn into a being calculated to evoke not sorrow, but joy. Her sense of smell would not register the exhaust fumes, and her eyes would not notice the film of dust overlaying everything in the city around her. Her failed relationship with Ziya, too, would be as good as forgotten.

When she reached the entrance of the newspaper building, the glass door would slide open in front of her the moment she stepped toward it, and even though she was used to seeing this every day, the spontaneous opening of the door would take her by surprise every single time. She would greet the receptionist with a joyful “Good morning,” and the man would reply with trenchantly intoned words: “And may God's peace, mercy and blessings rest upon you, too.”

She was used to ignoring the animosity in the receptionist's tone and the disapproving look he would cast on her short hemlines. She would quickly make her way to the lift, enter her office with a calm step, pour herself her morning cup of coffee, and assiduously begin to go through the poems and short stories she had to prepare for publication.

She was not a journalist in the ordinary sense of the term. She had never written a single article or news report in her life, for her job was to oversee a weekly literary feature in a daily paper to which the paper's general editors assigned such scant importance that it was frequently confined to just half a page, in deference to the power of ads.

She was supposed to read through the texts and select those that were fit for publication after revising their language. These being short stories and poems, she was not entitled to interfere with them by way of adding or deleting without consulting their authors, but her favourite pastime was introducing special touches of her own into these texts, particularly the stories. It was harder to fool around with the poems without their authors noticing. Stories, on the other hand, almost seemed to collude with her against their authors, all the more given how adept long practice had made her.

She'd get highly annoyed with particular linguistic constructions and would prefer to see them replaced with others. She'd fly into a rage on spotting errors of grammar or

syntax and she would correct them at once, and sometimes she'd take this as far as replacing a word the author had used with another one of her own choosing.

With luck on her side, she'd manage to plant a word of her own into more than one place in the story, and then she would spend the rest of the day brimming with happiness as she tried to think up ways of putting those words together to form meaningful sentences that had nothing to do with their original context in the story. And if luck didn't abet her, she would select two or three words at random and substitute them with other words of the same meaning.

She would experience a mysterious kind of relish as she left her mark on those texts, and even though none of the writers found her out, or at least none of them registered any complaint, she somehow wished one of them might call her up to remonstrate against her. She wished for this against all justice and reason, yet it never took place, perhaps because most writers didn't go back to a story they'd written and knew inside out once it was published to look for their precise words, or perhaps because her changes left their style more gracious and more composed.

She had no trouble meddling with other people's writing, but when she suddenly set out to write a novel all her own, she found herself in genuine straits. She'd feel her words losing their meaning, and turning into lifeless bodies stacked next to one another. At other times, what she wrote would strike her as banal and sentimental, a travesty of pure kitsch.

Salma didn't want life to imitate art, she wanted life and art to be one and the same. And that was her biggest problem. She would look at people around her as if they were literary characters, and would observe their behaviour from a position of detachment. She'd be vexed by the additional nitty-gritty details that went beyond her vision of what was beautiful and aesthetically pleasing.

When she began to write about her family, she ground to a flustered halt. She found herself incapable of laying hold of what was essential in their characters, and her sense of standing at a loss was greatest faced with her father's recalcitrant personality. Art seemed incapable of getting the threads of that recalcitrance into grip; the moment it

was on paper, all of its cogency would drain away. Life might tolerate exaggeration and excess, but art wouldn't.

Little by little, Salma forgot that the purpose of writing had originally been a therapeutic one, building on a recommendation of her therapist's, and embarked on an effort which had all the appearance of seriousness, to write a novel about her family.

Her therapist knew all about Salma's way of working, and indeed she had the distinction of being the only person to whom she'd related how she dealt with other people's texts, so she asked her to record her thoughts about her life and the life of her family. Next thing you knew, Rashid's daughter had turned this into the idea of writing a novel.

Salma hadn't read Borges' *Universal History of Infamy*, so she knew nothing about the kind of person who, incapable of writing stories of his own, found his only sport in spoiling and perverting the stories of other people. But acting on her own native impulse, she decided to change the nature of her pastime and to go from leaving her mark on the stories she published, to distorting and meddling with the life and deeds of real living people, particularly once the onset of her illness had forced her to resign her job.

What her therapist had chiefly hoped for was to get her to write about herself and her life and bring out into the open all the things that remained uncertain, especially as her patient excelled in the arts of deception and in mixing up her accounts of events, making all their sessions seem like a waste of time and all the medications and pills an exercise in futility.

When Salma announced to her that she intended to turn those scattered bits of writing into a novel, her therapist was by no means convinced that her patient was capable, in her present state, of writing a work with the complexity of a novel. And she sorely regretted having first encouraged her to take up writing when Salma's novel-writing venture turned into a new obsession that transformed her monthly visits into outbursts of frustration over the problems she was facing in her writing.

Her therapist would now have to struggle hard to drag Salma back to the main

issue and the heart of her problem, which was Ziya and the fact that he'd left her, and Gameela and her complicated relationship with her. But she'd be astounded every time to find that her patient had made additions or subtractions in the particulars which were capable of transforming both characters into entirely different persons.

It did not take long for her to realise that her patient was talking to her, not about the flesh-and-blood real-life individuals, but about the literary characters of Gameela and Ziya as they figured in her would-be novel.

Her therapist also noticed that most of what she recorded went back to the days of her childhood, and that a large part of it revolved around two persons, her father and her childhood friend Gameela. There was a deep interconnection between her view of Gameela and her view of herself. She would sometimes talk about Gameela as if they were one and the same person. Over the course of a single paragraph, she would mix up references to Gameela with references to herself more than once. At other times, her friend would appear as a traitor or a victim in a glaring contradiction which her therapist was never able to resolve.