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Life and Death in Bab-el-Louq

HUSSEIN GIVES POETRY READINGS in his apartment near Tahrir Square, but I have never attended one. I have never officially met Hussein, but Delia pointed him out to me in the semi-darkness of a stairwell where he floated down the steps like a ghost in his white gallabea. Hussein lives in the same building as Delia and according to her, his gatherings are not really poetry readings at all since Hussein is a hash dealer and not a poet. They are simply excuses to bring in business when he needs extra money. "Insiders know the secret meaning of Hussein's poetry," says Delia, with the smug satisfaction of an insider. I believe Delia, because she has known Hussein for fifteen years, back when he was still a doctor of some renown. Now his hair has grown down to his waist and he wears white gallabeas and canvas slippers.

"Hussein," Delia tells us, "has invited us to his poetry reading tonight." Delia and I and our friend Peter are drinking coffee at Café Horaya in Bab-el-Louq. "Horaya" means liberty in Arabic. A cup of coffee here costs thirty cents.

"Not me," says Peter. "I'm not going."

Peter is selective about where he goes and whom he sees, and he usually chooses to go nowhere and see no one. Because he is a correspondent for an American film trade magazine, he has to visit the occasional soundstage or interview the latest bellydancer turned film star once in a while. He likes to keep his paid work to a minimum, even if it means starving to death so he can spend as much time as possible in his room at the Hotel Amin, writing mystery novels on a manual typewriter. He learned to use a computer last year, when his American magazine threatened to fire him unless he filed his stories by e-mail like the other writers.

“Tell him,” Delia instructs me, “how much fun Hussein’s poetry readings are.”

“I’ve never been to one.”

When Delia glares at me, I add “But I can’t wait. I want to learn the secret meaning of Hussein’s poetry.” I do, it’s true.

I should stay home tonight and work, but lately I can’t write. I force myself to sit at my desk but I get so weak and tired staring at my keyboard that I have to lay down on the floor. I often fall asleep. Coffee is useless. Delia is my only cure.

With Delia, I can stay out until dawn. Delia is a writer too but her real forte is diversion, and diversion, it seems, is what I need to stay awake. Delia is like a human Benzedrine. With Delia, I can walk all the way from Zamalek to Garden City. At home, I am too tired to make my bed. Delia thinks I can’t write because I lack genuine inspiration and she is determined to help me find it.

Peter has met Hussein, sometime in the distant past. He makes a noise in the back of his throat that suggests his opinion of Hussein’s poetry. Peter has committed the entire works of John Donne to memory.

Delia finishes her thimble-sized cup of coffee. “We don’t have to stay all night. We’ll come back to Bab-el-Louq and have koshari.” My favorite koshari restaurant in Cairo is in Bab-el-Louq. Delia waves to a waiter and orders Peter a Zebib. Zebib is Peter’s drink and it’s supposed to seal the deal. The koshari is for me. She knows I love koshari. “All right, Peter?”

“I’m not going to go.”

The shoeshine man appears at our table. You can’t sit at Café Horaya for more than five minutes before a shoeshine man carrying a wooden box full of polish and brushes tries to solicit business. Even if you’re wearing patent leather open-toed sandals, he will stand next to you, staring hopefully at your feet until you wave him away. Peter is wearing docksiders so old the leather looks like dried rope. He pulls his feet protectively under his chair. Delia removes her Italian leather boots with big arm gestures and smiles at the shoeshine man. Her lipstick is bright red.

Peter looks at me. “I don’t like to go out.”

This is true; Peter has lived in Cairo since 1973 and he has

never been to the Cairo Museum. He has never been to an American Embassy party. He is proud of this. "That's okay," I tell him. "You don't have to go."

Delia frowns at me and smiles at Peter. "How's the new book coming?"

Peter has written two mystery novels, and he's starting a third. The first two are set in the Willamette National Forest, near his hometown of Roseburg, Oregon. That's all we know. He won't talk about them.

Peter shrugs. "Slowly. You know."

Delia coughs, a coy, unnecessary little cough. "You know, Peter, if you won't let anyone read your novels, they'll never get published."

"I don't care whether my books get published or not. That's not why I write them."

Peter won't discuss his books but he loves to talk about his magazine stories. Last week he interviewed a famous belly dancer who is known for beating up waiters at glittery night-clubs when the service is slow. The bellydancer is also known for beating her husbands and perhaps for this reason has been married six times. The six marriages show strong faith, according to Peter. She is, he reported in the story, a good Muslim.

"Can you tell us anything about the new book," Delia asks softly.

"It's set in the Willamette National Forest." Peter's father was a Willamette National Forest ranger. His parents are both dead and he has not spoken to his only brother in 43 years. His brother contacted the American Embassy in Cairo five years ago when Peter's father died but Peter declined to respond.

"Don't you ever want to write about Cairo?" I ask.

"No, I don't."

"What about Viet Nam," Delia asks. "You were in Viet Nam, weren't you?"

Peter doesn't answer. Delia looks at me and raises her eyebrows. There is a rumor around town that Peter is a spy. But that rumor applies to almost every American man living in Cairo. Not to any women, just men.

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"I was in the Army," Peter says finally. He has said this before, but Delia calculates that if he joined the Army in 1968, as he once said he did, he very likely went to Viet Nam. Delia has advanced several theories: Peter might have been a spy for the Viet Cong, or a double agent, or a deserter. Or he might be American Intelligence, fooling everyone with his disdain for high life, and affinity for hard local liquor.

"I envy you," I tell him. "You finished two books and I can't seem to finish a sentence."

"Why not?" Peter looks genuinely interested.

"I don't know why. I really don't."

I am living on a grant while I complete a collection of short stories about Cairo that I began when I was living in the States. Now I am living in Cairo and I feel unconnected to my characters. I have lost touch with any sense of place.

"Did you lose your grant?"

Delia waves a hand across the table. "She lost her inspiration. That's worse than losing money. But she'll get it back. We'll help her, won't we Peter?"

Peter looks at me. "Do you want it back?"

"I do."

"She'd better." Delia looks at me. "She's broke." Delia turns to Peter. "You could sell the movie rights to your books. You could make millions."

"Movies." Peter gives her a look.

"You could write a travel guide," I point out. "Cairo on a Shoestring." I know this is something Peter would never do, but I want to take the focus off me. "Then you could buy a CD player." He loves opera.

"I make enough money." Peter has a small, satisfied smile. He is probably thinking of his very old, dusty cassette player that breaks often but that he has learned to fix with a paper clip.

"You don't need more money," says Delia quickly, "but if you did, you could go back to CBS." Peter used to work for CBS News.

Peter nods.

"Did you do radio," Delia asks, "or TV?" Before Peter can

answer, the waiter arrives and hands her a glass of Zebib at the same time that the shoeshine man gives Delia her boots. She takes a sip of the drink before she hands it to Peter. "When was the last time you ate something," she asks, pulling her boots back on.

Peter is thin and gaunt and his grey hair hangs straight down to his ears. In the back, it reaches his collar. He cuts it himself with nail scissors that I gave him. I gave him the nail scissors after I saw him cut his hair once with a straight edged razor, holding the strands between two fingers.

"Actually," says Peter, "I haven't had breakfast yet." Peter lives on a diet of Saltine crackers and Tang. When he got so sick last year that he gave up Zebib for six months, I told him he needed vitamins, healthier food.

"But why?" he asked, bewildered, "I drink Tang."

Peter puts three one pound notes on the table. Delia knows what this means but she pretends it's a misunderstanding.

"The Zebib is on me." She pushes the money back at him. Peter understands the deal.

"I'm not going to go, Delia."

Delia lets the money stay on the table, twists her hair around her finger and frowns. Delia needs an entourage.

"We could bring back food for you," I tell Peter. Delia came up with the idea of lining our coat pockets with wax paper. When we go to parties, we bring back cold meat, cheeses and hard boiled eggs for Peter. Protein.

"Meat," Peter's eyes gleam. "Beef would do, but I prefer lamb."

"Lamb," Delia sighs. "Come on, Peter. Come with us." She looks at her watch. "He probably started an hour ago. If we leave now, we'll be right on time."

But Peter is already getting up, pulling on a mustard yellow corduroy jacket. He wears faded jeans, and a grey V-neck wool sweater with a pale blue button-down shirt underneath. His cuffs are frayed but his collar is impeccably starched.

"Goodbye," he says, and even though he is still standing next to us, Peter's voice sounds like it is coming through a tunnel.

Delia and I watch him walk outside. "He looks like a ghost,"

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Delia sighs. "But that voice. Doesn't it sound so radio? I bet he did radio news. I'll bet he was stationed at a signal post in Viet Nam."

"What kind of news would he report from a signal post?"

Delia rolls her eyes. "Signal posts were a meeting point for Central Intelligence."

"Then that's the last place they'd plant a reporter."

But Delia isn't even listening. She is staring at the albino who just walked into Café Horaya. Delia is obsessed with the albino and we are both amazed at how often we see him in different parts of the city. He is an Arab in his 30s, no different from any other albino, but here against the dark-gold tones of Arab skin, he looks like a creamsicle. It is not just his coloring that sets him apart. He walks with a hard step to one side, almost a limp, head turned to one shoulder. His step is erratic, not fluid like other Egyptians. He walks like someone who has lived in New York. He always walks alone.

Delia waits until the albino sits down at a table and opens a copy of Al-Ahram that hides his face from us, then she gets up to pay the bill.

Technically you can use the phone at Café Horaya for free, but the manager will shout in angry Arabic if you don't leave a tip. I watch Delia hand over coins pinched between her black fishnet gloved fingers. They must be big coins because he actually smiles. It is a rotary phone and she has to be careful not to catch the fragile, spiderweb of her glove in the dial. She returns to the table and pulls the gloves off fiercely. "Can you believe it," she hisses.

Hussein is not even home.

That night I dream of Hussein's poetry reading. In my dream, Hussein stands before us in his white gallabea and Peter's worn out docksiders. He reads poetry, words that flow like a fountain, words I understand even though he speaks them in Arabic, and I am hardly fluent. Some of the words don't sound Arabic, and I remember them later when I wake up, and write them down. In the dream itself, I see that it is not Hussein reading at all. It is Peter, wearing a white gallabea, reading from his new novel. Later, I look up the two words I remember from the dream:

“Umqua” and “Panotikum.” They are the names of Native American tribes who lived in the Willamette National Forest.

I don't see Peter or Delia for a long time. Delia has business in Sudan, in Holland, in Borneo. She has taken an interest in three men at the same time: a pilot, an exporter, a film student with a trust fund. Delia often disappears and comes back with ivory bracelets, Danish cigars, gold leaf bodypaint. This time she comes back with a black eye and says she will never date a poverty stricken film student again. “Not if you paid me,” she says darkly.

“I thought you said he had a trust fund.”

“He lied.”

I learn that the injury was not the result of intentional violence but occurred after she left the film student in an Amsterdam hotel room, and hitched a ride at 2 a.m. on the back of a motorcycle driven by a drunken Buddhist. The Buddhist was passing her a bottle of rum which hit her in the eye when he made a short stop.

“I didn't know Buddhists drank.”

“This one shouldn't.”

Delia lays flat on the floor while I apply first ice, then red meat to the part of her face that is black and blue. If I alternate these applications at very exact intervals, Delia says the swelling will recede faster.

“Ice,” she shouts, and I pull the meat off her face and press down a handful of ice cubes wrapped in a thin towel. Delia is a vegetarian and she didn't have any meat handy; I had to buy the steak from the butcher downstairs. He sliced it from a slab that had been hanging outside all day in the sun.

“Meat,” Delia cries, knocking the ice cubes out of their towel onto the floor.

“Where did you meet the Buddhist?”

“I don't know. On the street. Don't let that ice melt.”

“Why did you leave the film student in the middle of the night?”

“I was so bored I almost threw up. Ice, quick!”

The ice is melting fast. Fritz calls while I am picking up ice cubes from the water on the floor. Fritz is Peter's other friend,

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besides Delia and me. Fritz is an Austrian journalist who writes about hiking for an extreme sports magazine. Why the magazine would require a correspondent in Cairo, I could never understand but it did explain why Fritz had so much time on his hands, why he was a regular at so many bars. After his first camel safari story and a few odd desert treks, he had little to do

When I answer Delia's phone, Fritz tells me to come right away because Peter is very sick. He is at the Hotel Amin with Peter now.

"I have déjà vu," says Delia, when I tell her.

Two years ago, Fritz called and said exactly the same thing. Then, Delia and I were en route to a Nile dinner cruise but we were late. The cruiser was gliding down the river when we arrived at the bank. Delia bribed a fisherman to row us out to meet it, and half way there, she got the call from Fritz on her cell phone. The fisherman rowed us back to shore.

Then, Peter had lived in the Hotel Parisienne downtown. The rooms, with stately wrought iron beds and intricately carved armoires, cost only three dollars a night. For years Peter lived there in peace, until the affordable rate began to attract belly dancers, who brought their young children and their male nocturnal visitors. Meals were cooked on open stoves in the unventilated hall, masculine brawls broke out, and babies left unattended screamed all night.

The Parisienne's manager quickly learned to profit from his new market. He sold bottles of Zebib and Stella beer at mark up prices in the lobby, and tripled the room rate. Peter could not afford to eat. When Delia and I got to him, he was yellow and shaking so badly he couldn't speak. He refused, as always, to see a doctor and we brought him soup and vitamins and blankets. When he was well enough, he found cheaper quarters at the Amin.

This time, Delia wants to bring in Hussein. "He's a doctor, but Peter won't know he's a doctor, so he won't argue."

"Won't he figure it out when Hussein examines him?"

Delia has tied a bandana over her swollen eye, which the cab-driver who is driving us to the Hotel Amin admires. The bandana

is red. It gives her a jaunty pirate look. "We could hold him down. You, me, Fritz. We could do it. Then we could find his manuscripts. We can sell them for millions. Peter can live like a king."

"I don't think Peter is interested in living like a king," I tell her.

The Hotel Amin has a narrow reception area, a small lounge with a black and white television set, and a bar that serves coffee for a few hours in the morning, if then. We get into the birdcage elevator that trembles as it pulls us up to the eighth floor. Peter's corner room is across from the bathroom that everyone on the eighth floor shares. The bathroom is small and yellow with a stained, square bathtub.

Fritz stands by Peter's bed. Peter's eyes are closed and his breathing is heavy. The Hotel Amin supplies sheets but not blankets. The sheets are the color of Thousand Island dressing and they are pulled up to Peter's chin. The room has been renovated into a generic, modern hotel room, and it looks uninhabited because Peter has so few possessions. Everything he owns fits in one shallow, green suitcase which he locks whenever he goes out. Now it is wide open, and his few, familiar clothes spill out.

I stand next to Fritz and look at Peter. While I am looking at him, the light seems to drain from the room until everything around Peter is dark and all I can see is the pale glow of his thin face. Fritz and I stand next to his bed and wait for something to happen next. Delia leans against Peter's desk, a small metal table that holds his manual typewriter, circa 1948, and a box of Saltine crackers. Except for the traffic in Falaky Square the room is silent. I hear a rustling sound that I think is a mouse, but it is Delia. She is eating Peter's crackers.

When Peter is no better the next day, and too weak to argue, Fritz insists on calling a doctor, who arranges to meet us outside Peter's room at three. We all arrive on time, but the door is locked and the Hotel Amin staff won't let us in. We stand outside Peter's door; Fritz, Dr. Naguid and Delia and me. The man in the room across the hall is a student at the American University of Cairo. He has red hair and glasses and he opens the door and stares at us. We can see the extent of his room: a bed,

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covered with a red and blue quilt, a hot plate on the floor next to the only outlet. A tray with a teapot and a can of English Breakfast tea. He sees us staring and slams the door shut.

“British,” Delia mutters.

Dr. Naguid is a very small, very quiet man. He has a mustache and he is missing an important front tooth. Fritz has been describing Peter’s condition to him in painstaking detail. Dr. Naguid might and might not be listening; his languid gaze runs up and down the hall, and stops on Delia’s head. Delia is wearing her fruit basket hat today. It is made of metallic gold in the shape of a basket. The basket contains wooden fruit that was faded and chipped before Delia spruced it up with nail polish. She didn’t choose fruit-appropriate colors, and the turquoise glitter grapes and neon plum banana make her entire head look garish and surreal.

Fritz is talking to Dr. Naguid about Peter’s fatigue and Tang and yellow skin when Delia interrupts him. She steps right in front of Dr. Naguid.

“Zebib,” she says. Fritz has not yet mentioned Peter’s drinking. “Thirty years of Zebib.”

Dr. Naguid shrugs just one shoulder. “Well,” he says, “that’s that, then.” He notices Delia’s black eye. “What has happened to you?”

Delia waves her hand. “Plenty.”

For the next few days, Delia does nothing but try to get Peter sent back home. After many hours of frantic phone calls in which Delia begs the American Embassy and Peter’s magazine to have him medevac’d to the States, she finally understands: Peter can’t be sent home because Peter already is home. Delia meets me for tea at Shepherd’s and orders a scotch.

“He wanted so much to go back. Now he never will.”

“Go back where?”

“To Roseburg. To his real home.” Delia’s face begins to crumple as if she might cry. She never actually cries but her face threatens to, which has a way of threatening whoever she’s looking at. It works well with airline staff at ticket counters who have the power to upgrade her, and shopkeepers with whom she is locked in a battle over the lowest price.

Today Delia's hat completely undermines the impending tragedy on her face. She is wearing her death hat, a black velvet cushion with little gold Coptic crosses sewn on. Delia has glued tiny plastic skeletons to the crosses. She got the skeletons at a Dia de los Muertos celebration in Veracruz back when she was on amiable terms with a coffee plantation owner from Coatepec.

"His happiest days were in the Willamette National Forest." Delia lets her voice waver a little.

"Peter likes it here."

"Cairo is like purgatory for Peter."

"Then he likes purgatory."

Delia takes her scotch and swirls it around.

"The forest is Peter's dream. I will always think of Peter in the forest."

"I can't even imagine Peter in a forest." But I can. Not the Willamette National Forest, but a mythical and grotesque forest of supernaturally tall pines swathed with strangling vines, of smoking rivers, and demons who turn disemboweled spirits into stunted tree trunks. In Peter's forest, sharp-eyed birds screaming high pitched, angry prayers could swoop down and pluck your eyes out. The vicissitudes of purgatory and beyond; that was Peter's dream. He chose Cairo as his last stop in the real world, a city of dreams that was as close as he could get to his own dreamlife without leaving the earth.

The lights have been lowered in the Shepherd's bar, and the tiny skeletons on Delia's hat glow an eerie green. She shakes her head.

"We could have saved him."

"Who says he wants to be saved?"

"He has to want something."

Cacophony. A thundering, hallucinatory elegy to the end of the world, or to the end of his world. "Maybe he's already got what he wants?"

Delia finishes her scotch. "I wonder who he really is?"

When I finally see Peter, he is still in bed and he is breathing heavily, but he looks comfortable.

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"I've been poisoned," he tells me happily. "They put something in my beer."

I look around the room. I don't see any beer.

"They brought me several bottles of Stella, but I only had one." Peter points to an invisible beer across the room. He smacks his lips. "It was bitter. I don't recommend it."

"I won't have any, then."

"They're trying to kill me now." There are beads of sweat on his forehead. "Before, they just wanted to keep me out of commission. They have made me very sick." His laugh is bitter. "They think I don't suspect a thing. But I know the blue dye on the ham is cyanide."

Ham, in a one-star hotel in a Muslim country, is not an option.

"Let me get another doctor." Dr Naguid and Peter had not gotten along.

Peter's face tenses suddenly and he sits up. "You know I don't like doctors."

"Is there anything I can get for you?"

"I'd like a cassette of Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron*. I've looked everywhere but I can't find one."

"I'll find one."

Peter lays back down against his pillows. "I believe you will."

"If I brought some lamb, would you eat it?"

"No, thank you. I had a big breakfast." Someone had brought up a tray with tea and a boiled egg and bread. The tray is halfway under Peter's bed, the food untouched.

Peter closes his eyes. "I'm going to go to sleep now. Will you turn off the light?"

The usual pile of loose clothes is heaped in Peter's suitcase, and I wonder if his manuscripts are buried beneath them. I have never seen them though I imagine them, stacks of loose paper, sentences in uneven lines because Peter's manual typewriter is very old. I move closer to the suitcase, pick up a shirt and fold it. I reach under the pile of clothes but there is nothing there.

"Schoenberg," says Peter, "*Moses and Aron*."

"I know. I won't forget."

Peter looks at me. "I know. You never forget." He is smiling and his face so peaceful and happy that if I keep looking at him, I will start to cry. I turn to Peter's desk, and I press the "A" key on his manual typewriter. I stab it as hard as I can, but it is jammed. It won't move. I turn off the light.

At home, at midnight, I find I can work again. It happens suddenly. One minute I am taking my usual seat, a test, to see how many minutes it takes before I fall off of my chair onto the floor. The next thing I know words come unexpectedly, words that surprise me because they don't even sound like my words. A complete stranger's perfect sentences flow through my fingers, into the keyboard and show up on the screen. I am not even a little bit tired. I am amazed. I am on a roll.

I work straight through the night. I don't answer the phone which rings several times in the early morning, because I am sure it is Delia, wanting to talk about her latest crisis. Delia has been keeping company with a Saudi oilman, and yesterday, for no apparent reason, one of his three veiled wives attacked her with a pepper shaker in front of everyone else who was standing around the roulette table at the Marriott Palace casino. At least, that is Delia's story.

It is mid-morning when I finally do fall off my chair onto the floor, and genuine fatigue, I discover, is refreshing. I sleep for hours, until the phone rings again. This time I answer it. It is Fritz.

Delia is still wearing last night's black sequins; she came straight from a party in a suite at the Meredien Towers. Fritz wears wool socks and sandals, heavy walking shorts and a T-shirt. When I show up in jeans and an AUC sweatshirt, Delia turns her head away in disgust.

We lean against the wall outside Peter's room while Ahmed, the sole staff member on duty at the Hotel Amin, hunts for a key to Peter's room. Fritz tells us he's been there all night trying to persuade Ahmed to open Peter's door. He tried to call me, he says reproachfully, but I was out.

Fritz talks, then at intervals his voice breaks down and he is silent. Delia's face is smudged with mascara, her bruised eye bare-

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ly noticeable. Now she has three fresh, red scratch marks across one side of her face. I imagine the veiled Saudi wife, a well-mannered hand, a quick swipe.

When Fritz can't continue talking, Delia sniffs loudly to keep up the momentum. Then Fritz starts talking again. There is nothing melodic about the sound of Fritz's deadpan voice interspersed with Delia's choked sighs, but after I listen for a while, I hear the rhythmic pattern they create, like an old blues recording.

"Last night I brought him porridge," says Fritz, his voice breaking.

Delia sniffs deeply, then swivels around. "You brought him what?"

"He wouldn't eat it," says Fritz. "He wouldn't open the door."

Delia sits down on the floor slowly, folding her dress so it spreads out beneath her. She picks up a bowl of dry cornflakes on the floor and hands it to Fritz. "Is this the porridge?"

"He told me to go away," Fritz's voice quivers. "He told me he had to go somewhere."

"The forest," says Delia softly.

"He told me," says Fritz sadly, "to leave him the hell alone."

"He was probably delirious last night," I say. "He's probably better now." I don't really believe this but I don't know what else to say.

The hall is silent. I sit down next to Delia. The floor is very clean, for a one star hotel. The linoleum is worn and scarred but someone probably mops it with harsh detergent every day. That is the irony of one star hotels in third world countries; there is more dirt but there are also more people to mop up the dirt.

Ahmed finally arrives carrying a key ring. He walks slowly, shuffling in his blue gallabea, sorting through keys as big as his hand. He knocks on Peter's door and when there is no answer, he tries one key, then another. None of them works.

Delia leans so close to me that I can smell the spice of the Saudi oilman's aftershave, sweeter than fragrances American men wear. She whispers into my ear, "We could have saved him."

When the door finally opens, light from Peter's big window

splashes into the hall and I can see that the hall floor is not very clean after all.

Fritz goes inside and Delia follows him. I'm about to get up, but I hear Fritz crying and I can't make myself move. I freeze the way I do at home, in front of my computer, or on the floor.

"Met," Ahmed is saying. "Met." Met means dead.

Later, Delia told me what I didn't see, but she told me four or five times and each version is different. Peter was smiling peacefully; he could have been sleeping. Peter's eyes were wide open; he looked like he had seen the Gorgon. Peter was trying to get out of bed when it happened, he had changed his mind, he really wanted porridge or doctors after all.

Delia and Fritz didn't stay in Peter's room very long because Ahmed is religious, and there is something sacrilegious about being in a room with a dead person, at least when you're the dead person's servant. That's why Ahmed pulled them out of the room so fast, before Delia could search for Peter's manuscripts.

The cause of death is liver disease.

There is a memorial service in Café Horaya, attended by Delia, Fritz, a woman from the Swedish embassy named Ava, and me, but there is no burial because the Antoine Georges Tawaf Funeral Home will not release Peter's body until the bill is paid. It is not really a service because all we do is drink Stella and argue over how to pay the bill. Fritz thinks we should all chip in but Delia thinks that Peter's American magazine is responsible. Ava, who only met Peter once when they went birdwatching together, has no opinion and is silent. Ava tells us that she remembers Peter so well, even though they only met once on a birdwatching excursion, because they saw an unusual bird that is very rare in Egypt. She cannot remember the name of the bird because she, unlike Peter, is just a recreational ornithologist. She wrings her hands as she explains this, as if she is revealing something embarrassing.

"Peter was not an ornithologist," Delia tells her.

"I thought he was."

"It doesn't matter. You loved him. That's what counts."

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Ava blushes. "I didn't love him."

"Then why are you here?" Delia turns her back on Ava.

Delia and Fritz argue over whether Peter was a Lutheran or a Catholic. Ava looks at me. "I did like him, though."

The Antoine Georges Tawaf Funeral Home sends the American Embassy a bill for three hundred dollars. The bill is unpaid, and the funeral home sends more bills with surprising regularity. Each bill is significantly higher than the one sent the week before. Apparently, the Antoine Georges Tawaf Funeral Home charges by the day.

Delia is indignant. "It costs more to rent a slab than an entire room at the Hotel Amin."

"The slab is air conditioned," I remind her. The Hotel Amin is not.

Peter had three dollars and sixty cents in his wallet when he died. He had no bank account. I make three international phone calls from Tahrir Square with a Menatel international calling card, to ask his editor in America if she can speed up the payment for his last stories.

Delia is sure Peter's novels can be sold for a small fortune, if we can just get them out of the safe in the embassy, where dead Americans' possessions are stored until a next of kin comes along. Peter has a brother, but no one knows the brother's name, or where he lives. Delia bites her lip. "We forgot to ask."

I buy more Menatel cards and call information in Roseburg but there is no one with Peter's name there. I call CBS in New York and the United States Army in Washington. Neither one has any record of ever having hired or enlisted Peter. I call the Office of Records. I call all three hospitals around Roseburg, Oregon. Peter has no birth records, no driver's license, no social security number. Legally, he does not exist.

This bothers me, but not Delia. "We know he existed," she says, "We fed him."

Peter remains in the funeral home.

Just when Delia's new friend Abdul, a sugar plantation billionaire, is about to step in and bury Peter, the magazine comes through with the money they owe him, and the funeral home

lets us bury him. We have another ceremony at the American Cemetery. This time, Ava does not attend even though I invite her over Delia's objections.

The cemetery is quiet in the late afternoon, with shafts of light falling through the eucalyptus trees. The breeze is cool and Delia's friend Abdul wears a long black cape that he wraps around himself, and around Delia. Delia wears her pyramid hat, even though the death hat would be more appropriate; the pyramid hat looks exactly like a pyramid and wrapped in Abdul's cape, she looks exactly like a witch. She notices this first, when she sees her shadow stretched across the gravestones, the pointed hat at one end. "But a good witch," Delia says to Fritz, trying to bring him back into our small group. Fritz and Abdul take an instant dislike to each other and Fritz stands apart, kicking small stones. He might be sulking because he lost his bet that Peter was Catholic. They determined it by flipping a coin.

Delia won, so a Lutheran minister reads passages from the Bible over Peter's grave. The burial cost included a plain pine cross on which Peter's name is spelled "Reter." The minister reads the Lord's Prayer. He says that Peter is in heaven.

There are drinks later at Café Horaya. Delia orders Zebib for everyone and the Lutheran minister, a red faced man named Torrance, drinks deeply. "Not so much," Delia warns him. "Remember why we're here."

For several weeks I avoid Bab-el-Louq. I remember Peter's face the last time I saw him, when I promised I'd bring him his Schoenberg opera and he believed me. What bothers me isn't that I failed to deliver the opera he wanted to hear on the last night of his life, as much as the extent to which I cannot reconcile his faith in me with my lack of faith in myself. My own faith in myself is sporadic, and comes in bursts. The rest of the time I spend on my floor.

It is easier to think about Peter if I rearrange the details of his death in my mind, so that it is not really death, but dissolution. I imagine him in his room, writing novels about the forest he left 30 years ago, letting trays of food go untouched, eating nothing at all until he dissolves into light.

Life and Death in Bab-el-Louq

I finally locate a double CD set of Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron*, almost four months after Peter asked for it. I have not heard *Moses and Aron* in a long time and when I listen to the opera, I no longer regret that I couldn't find it before Peter died. Perhaps *Moses and Aron* would have been a perfect underscore for his return to particle form, but he had his own thunderous, hallucinatory elegy to the end of the world. The opera would have been redundant.

Delia sees Peter's ghost. She pulls a fistful of tissues out of her pocket whenever she describes her latest sighting; at the pyramids during a full moon, on a felluca ride down the Nile at sunset with a Syrian record producer, in the synagogue in Old Cairo. These are the last places I'd expect Peter to be. He didn't haunt historical sites when he was alive. He hated the water.

"He's happy," Delia assures me. "You'll find out. He'll visit you too."

But he doesn't. I think I see him once in Delia's building. A ghost figure floats toward me down the narrow, circular stairs. But even before we meet on the fourth floor in a cloud of musk, I know it is Hussein. His white gallabea billows out around him and he has a folder pressed under one arm, full of papers. I know this because when he moves out of my way, he drops the folder and papers scatter down the steps and drift through the air into the lobby thirty feet below. We both stop and look over the wrought iron railing as Hussein's pages settle on the lobby floor. Watching the pages float like giant snowflakes, I feel a surge of lightness, the same kind of leap of faith that, however ephemeral, can keep me working at my desk all day and all night, and I know, without asking or looking at the papers below my feet, that they really are Hussein's poems.