



*Menorahs
and
Minarets*

A Novel

KAMAL
RUHAYYIM

Translated by Sarah Enany

Kamal Ruhayyim, born in Egypt in 1947, has a PhD in law from Cairo University. He is the author of a collection of short stories and five novels. *Menorahs and Minarets* is the final part of his twentieth-century Egyptian trilogy, that includes *Diary of a Jewish Muslim* (AUC Press, 2014) and *Days in the Diaspora* (AUC Press, 2012). He has lived in both Cairo and Paris.

Sarah Enany has a PhD in drama and is a lecturer in the English Department of Cairo University. Her translation credits include works by Yusuf Idris, Mohamed Salmawy, Jerzy Grotowski, and Kamal Ruhayyim's *Diary of a Jewish Muslim* and *Days in the Diaspora*.

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To the people who fill my heart with joy: my daughter
Yasmine, and my grandchildren Kanzy and Selim

1

THE CAB DRIVER TOOK ME FROM the airport to the neighborhood of Daher, only charging me twice the fare.

I protested, "The meter says twenty! That's the government fare."

He stuck his head out of the window belligerently, preparing for a fight. "Look, mister, our fare is forty, and you should make it fifty, if you want to be a gentleman."

"But—"

"But what? Come on, now! And if you pay in dollars, all the better." I was loath to do it and hesitated, but he gestured impatiently. "Hurry up, sir, there's a good fellow. I'm a busy man!"

"All right." I rummaged in my pocket and forked over a handful of francs.

"What's this, buddy?" He stared at them. "I want my fare in dollars!"

I explained to him that francs were hard currency, just like dollars. He finally nodded, not entirely convinced. "That's for you to know and me to find out!" And he drove off, the exhaust of his retreating vehicle blasting me in the face.

The edges of the sidewalk were worn away. Some of it had disintegrated into potholes. The building gate seemed all askew, as though about to fall; the building itself seemed like an ailing man. The paint was worn away in several places; there was a

crack in its wall starting from the top and creeping, crooked. The windows and balcony doors bore barely a trace of their previous paint. My pain increased when I found the ground floor apartment gone. Mr. Qasim and his wife, Hajja Samah, had always stood at the window looking out: he with his frown and white hair sticking out messily in all directions, and she, a smile gracing her friendly face, talking continuously, getting only a nod or a few words from her husband in return. She always had something for us children: some caramels, a packet of biscuits, or perhaps a candy wrapped in cellophane.

The memories came flooding back. At first, when she motioned me over, I would hesitate, overcome with shyness. With time, however, I grew familiar with her, and took to slowing down as I passed her house, hoping she might call me over. She usually noticed and, not content with merely motioning, would call me loudly by name, my candy at the ready! She'd give me some and would ask about the health of my grandmother and grandfather, while her husband inspected me and then asked her who I was. When she answered, he would look at me. I often felt a smile might form on his lips, but it never did, and his lips settled back into a frown once more. Each time he asked the same question and received the same answer. Before I left, she always asked me nicely to buy her a book of matches or a packet of tea from the grocery store, or perhaps some mastic or a quarter-pound of cumin from the nearby spice store. I would go like the wind, bringing her back the order and her change. Little by little, the old man made friends with me; he took to patting me on the head and doing as his wife did, putting a hand in his pocket and taking out a piece of candy for me, or asking me with great interest how my grandparents were.

Now, they were gone. Gone, and the apartment with them. It had become something else, a business perhaps, or some sort of warehouse. The window they used to look out of had been bricked up. Instead, a door opened from the apartment directly onto the sidewalk; people came and went through it

bearing parcels and boxes. The proprietors, curse them, had cut down the tree that had stood in the entrance to make room for their delivery trucks, which were proudly blazoned on the side: Mule & Son, Building Materials and Hardware.

I caught sight of a veritable buffalo of a man sitting cross-legged on Amm Idris' old bench. God help us, he had a face like a hippopotamus and a huge body encased in a long, traditional gallabiya, whose seams were splitting at the neck and shoulders. One of his legs was folded into the recesses of the gallabiya while the other dangled free, eye-catching in its very hugeness. A pair of exhausted slippers languished beneath him, one lying some distance from him, as if it had collapsed trying to escape, while the other hid beneath the bench. This, I guessed, was the new doorman.

He did not leap to my defense as I argued with the cab driver, nor yet did he notice my approach; he was too busy sleeping, his turban falling into his face ahead of him every time he nodded off. His eyes were closed, his mouth open, and if he was aware of the fly that had settled on his nose, or its sister that buzzed around the cup of tea next to him, there was no sign of it.

There was no longer a juice store facing the building. When I turned to look, it was gone too, and in its place was a store for cassettes and VHS tapes, a trio of young men loitering around in front of it. In short, it was time to say 'rest in peace' to the street I knew—no, rather, time to say, 'Be gone, evil spirits,' for it was as though demons, not humans, had taken possession of it!

I took my bags—one in my hand and one over my shoulder, to say nothing of the massive burden I lugged behind me with my other hand—but scarcely had I reached the doorway of the building when the doorman's voice yelled after me, "Hey, mister! Where do you think you're going?" He didn't even give me a chance to answer, but snapped obnoxiously after me, "Hey, you there, mister—yes, you, just barging in like that!"

Turning, I found he had taken off his turban and laid it in his lap. It was a huge turban of the sort they wear in deepest Upper Egypt; if unfurled, it would have been the size of a boat sail. He stared at me, feet feeling about on the floor for his slippers; when the search proved fruitless, he leaned back at the shoulders.

I said a silent 'rest in peace' for old Idris, the Nubian doorman who had always filled our building with life and movement. Bustling in and out, up and down, he had had a smile that never left his lips, his broom leaning against the wall of the building's tiny service courtyard, at the ready to catch any speck of dust foolhardy enough to float in on the wind. And here sat this great buffalo, staring at me, drinking his tea, waiting for me to approach.

I came up to him. Lord, the stench of the man! And me unable to protect my nostrils, for my hands were full of luggage. "Are you the new doorman?"

"Who're you calling 'new,' mister? I've been working here for seven years! Who are you, that's the question, and where are you off to?"

A simple question, with a lifetime for an answer! I said simply, "I'm going up to Umm Hassan's."

"Umm Hassan, who lives on the third floor?"

I nodded.

"She's away. Been visiting relatives in Abbasiya for two days now. The apartment's closed up."

"I've got the key. I'm the original tenant, you see."

"The original tenant!" His eyes widened and he leaned toward me, staring. "You wouldn't be one of the first residents, would you?"

"Yes."

"The ones who're away in foreign parts?"

"Yes."

"The family of . . ."

"Yes, the family of . . ."

His eyes gleamed. "You can't be Galal!" He jammed his feet into his slippers, which he had located at long last, and reached for my bags, taking them from me. "Why, they say that no one's seen hide nor hair of you for ten years or more!"

Forbearing to comment, I asked instead after old Amm Idris. "Dead, may he rest in peace."

"What about Sitt Shouq, his wife?"

"God only knows."

He began to hawk deep in his throat, preparing to spit. I took a step back, just in case, swearing hearty oaths for him to hand back the suitcase he had taken out of my hand and go back to his bench, as I knew my own way. "But why not let old Bashandi, here," he said, referring to himself, "carry your bags upstairs?"

I didn't reply. For answer, I pushed a ten-franc note into his hand. He examined it in excitement. "What's this? Dollars, then, or what?"

"Something like that."

I left him busy stuffing the banknote into the folds of his turban, and said a silent prayer for the soul of old Idris, who had only ever known the twenty-five piaster note and that President Nasser was the Leader of the Arab Nation.

2

I PASSED THROUGH THE BUILDING gate with Nadia on my mind: Nadia, the daughter of the family who lived upstairs.

I still remembered that day. She had been coming home from school, and I had been barreling down the stairs. It was here we had met, in the entranceway that separated the outer door from the start of the stairwell.

In those days, I had been quite the young imp: I'd never climb downstairs like a normal person when I could take the steps three at a time. That day, though, I'd lost control: my arm swinging desperately for some purchase to save myself a nasty fall, I shoved her down hard with my shoulder on my final leap, just as she set foot inside the door.

She had dropped all her things, supporting herself, small and soft, against me with a little gasp, and we had knelt together on the floor, breathing hard, picking up the things that had fallen. Her lashes had drooped to half-mast over her eyes, concealing her shy glances, and I had moved closer, giving in to her completely. She had left her hand lying pliant in mine; when she rose, I remained standing there staring after her as she ascended the stairs, until she disappeared in the curve of the stairwell.

Here was the door to Abul Saad Effendi's apartment. How many times had I come knocking on his door when I was having trouble with my history lessons? He would always greet me with a smile, and I would follow him into the sitting room. His eyes would look brightly upon me from above his

glasses, perched low on his nose, while I pointed out the part I found hard to understand.

I could still remember him on one occasion, leaning back with a smile. “Really, Gel-gel! Who could confuse Ahmose I with anyone else, my dear boy? Ahmose, of all people! Really, you can get mixed up about anyone’s name, but not this fellow. He’s one of the most important kings of Ancient Egypt. Why, it was he who conquered the Hyksos who had invaded our land.”

Noticing that he hadn’t offered me anything, he paused as was his wont, and called to the maid, “Saadiya! Fetch us two bottles of Spatis from the fridge, straight away!”

Then he turned back to me. “There are two men, my boy, who are unique: Ahmose, and President Nasser.” Whereupon he forgot what I had come for completely, and started to wax lyrical about Nasser. I eventually brought him back to the subject at hand. “Oh!” he said. “Oh, that’s right. Lord, we’ve digressed. Right, back to our old Uncle Ahmose, then. Look here . . . ”

Three more steps, and I would be at Umm Hassan’s old apartment.

The lights in there were on; from behind the door came the sound of shrieking children, and I could see the shadows of things being thrown and caught through the frosted glass of the small panes set into the old-fashioned door. “Ah, Hassan,” thought I. “Even now you may be inside, sitting on some chair or other, having tea or busying yourself with a cigarette, letting things degenerate into chaos all around! You old devil, you got the apartment all to yourself, didn’t you, after the Papa died and the Mama got sick of you, and so she moved upstairs to live in our apartment.”

I caught myself: “‘The Papa’ and ‘the Mama’ isn’t the way people refer to their parents here! That’s what you say in Paris in the company of your mother’s Jewish relations.”

Hassan and I were brothers, having been nursed by his dear mother; it was true that he was the companion of my

childhood and my youth. How our young feet did wear away the steps of this old staircase, going up and down in each other's company, or racing to see which of us would get to the rooftop ahead of his brother!

But I would rather not meet him right now—for this is a moment in time unlike all others, and I want it to be mine alone, all to myself.

“Just one more step, and another, and then, Galal, you'll be at your apartment.”

The first breath was drawn here. The first exhalation. The first smile. The first laugh. The first everything

A seedling, not a few months old, wrapped in swaddling clothes, helpless, incapable of doing a thing for itself, there I lay in my mother's lap, clinging to her presence and the tones of her voice, losing myself completely in her, all, all in her embrace, finding my ease in her heartbeat as though it beat for me and not for her.

Different hands picked me up: my grandfather Zaki's, tenderness overcoming wonder as I wrapped my tiny hand around his finger, my grandmother Yvonne, my uncle Shamoun, my aunt Bella, and our neighbor, Hassan's mother, called Umm Hassan, who offered me her breast to nurse at to make up for my mother's, whose milk had dried up.

Here I was born and grew up, played and loved, left and returned. . . .

I reached out and touched the metal bars on the traditional window set into the door of the apartment. They were damp, cold, no trace of warmth coming out or in. Their corners were rusty; one of the heart-shaped tips that adorned their uprights was missing, another crookedly leaning into its fellows, and the rest had their edges eaten away. For some reason, the little window itself seemed smaller to me than I had thought it was.

There was the scratch I had made at the door hinge one morning. My mother had been running toward me as I tied my shoelaces, yelling at me and pushing me with a hand to hurry up and get to school before the bell rang, and I remember my grandfather, who had just come out of the bathroom, telling her to go easy on me. Now that was a journey that had wearied my little feet. There I was, a small form like something out of a Disney cartoon: huge schoolbag strapped on its back, traversing street after street, alley after alley, under the merciless early-morning wind that stung my nose and neck, my mouth blowing plumes of warm vapor into my palms that begged for relief.

The schoolyard; the morning lineup; the fluttering flag; the classroom they packed us into like chickens in a coop; a chalkboard black as the robe of some evil spirit. The Venerable Headmaster, in a safari suit and dismal shoes; the physical education teacher, of whose stick we were very wary; and the little boys, some yawning, some crying or dreaming of mommy back home, and playing and fighting with hands and rulers and copybooks and anything at hand.

It was as though the whole world held its breath.

The stairwell was still, not a soul ascending or descending. The walls were silent, the apartment door staring silently at me.

It was the first to recognize me, after all. It asked me to come inside and meet the others: the carpet, the armoire, the bed where I used to sleep, the table where I used to sit with a copybook or book. . . .

It looked at me, and I looked back.

It asked me questions, and I asked back.

But neither of us had any answers.

3

EVERYTHING WAS JUST AS WE had left it.

There was the sheepskin on the floor outside my grandfather's room, the sewing machine, the two patches on the left-hand side of the kilim rug. My grandmother Yvonne had taken off her shoes and felt its threadbare weft with her feet, sighing and bending to peer at it, her glasses taking up half of her face, needle and bundle of yarn in hand. Since she had grown older, she was no longer able to mend anything—she couldn't even thread a needle. I remember her holding the needle and thread out to my grandfather, who looked away; my mother took on the challenge, only to struggle unsuccessfully with the task; then along I came, to thread the needle for her in the blink of an eye. I'd expected a word of thanks or a pat on the shoulder, but she gave none; she turned her back on me, and crouched to the kilim, poring over it with the needle.

Here was the couch where my grandfather used to sit, magazine or book in hand. The frames of his spectacles were discolored from the sun's merciless rays and from the salinity of his sweat, especially at the tips of the arms and at the points of contact with his nose and eye sockets. From behind the lenses, his eyes seemed sleepy and fatigued. I would often get the sense that he was not reading: the book or magazine would remain open at the same page before his staring eyes for an hour or more, and when his eyelids relaxed and slipped

shut completely, my suspicions would be confirmed. What he had been reading would slip from his hand to rest in his lap, whereupon my grandmother would notice and urge him to leave the couch and go to bed for a nap before dinner. He would always receive her words with obvious astonishment, insisting he hadn't been asleep, then raise the book or magazine to his eyes once more.

He would spend the entire weekend at home, like most of the people in our street, reading something or other, or flipping through television channels. His pack of Belmonts was always at his side wherever he sat, with a matchbook on top, and the cigarette never left his fingers. Not even once did he notice the long, fragile cylinder of ash that grew longer and longer, falling with the first move of his hand and sprinkling his clothing with grey particles.

Rest in peace, Grandfather!

How I used to cling to him whenever I saw him going out, especially if I knew he was going to Abu Auf's café. He would put his arm over my shoulder, and we would set off, among cars that mostly bore the state-sponsored Nasr Auto Company logo, bicycles with a cast-iron frame that could carry two men and a suitcase if the need arose, and advertising and movie posters: I remember the one for the iconic Sixties movie, *al-Nasser Salah al-Din*, about Saladin repelling the Crusaders, and another for Kina Romany, touted as a power drink that gave you energy and strengthened the muscles.

There had been no shortage of things reminding us of our Great Leader, President Nasser: a photograph on a wall or a lamppost, a live speech floating over to us from some nearby radio, or two passers-by speaking of him, one singing his praises and the other chiming in with enthusiastic agreement.

None of this, however, caught my attention. All I cared about was the little things: a cat lying against a wall, a toy

that jumped out at me from a shop window, a boy my age walking with his mother, with whom I exchanged glances, or children playing at marbles, rolling the small green glass globes with inner stripes and swirls of black coloring. They looked like eyes.

We would arrive at the door to the café. I would stare at my grandfather, who always scanned the patrons, searching for his friend, Hajj Mahmoud the spice merchant, Umm Hassan's husband. One of them would catch sight of the other soon enough, and they would then repair to a table in the corner. I would follow them, inhaling the scent of Hajj Mahmoud's gallabiya, which bore a perfume like incense.

They would get ready and sit on two opposite chairs; before sitting, Hajj Mahmoud would take off his abaya, folding it over the back of his chosen seat. They would start with black Turkish coffee. My grandfather would hold his cup like regular folks, with both hands; as for Hajj Mahmoud, he would hold it by the handle, fingers splayed and extended. I used to stare down the wide sleeve of his peasant-style gallabiya, and look at his ring with the blue stone that encircled his finger. At the arrival of the water pipes, pleasure would spread across their faces. The smoke would fly up and around in thick clouds, and I would follow the patterns it made in the air. From time to time, my grandfather would look at me from the corner of his eye; when he noticed that the clouds of smoke had become thick around me, he would wave them away with a hand or motion to me to change my seat.

The only thing that would take my attention off them was the old man with the pointy beard and the beret. I had long seen him seated alone in the bowels of the café, drawing with a thick pen, talking to himself without pause, avoided by all and sundry. The only thing that could distract me from him was the waiter in the white apron, appearing before me with the cups of coffee, tea, and other orders, especially when he yelled

at the fellow manning the preparation station with his long, melodious calls. To my young ears back then, they sounded as though they, too, had a flavor, like the flavors of the beverages. I salivated over the sight of a man sipping a certain red liquid in a transparent glass, whereupon my grandfather unfailingly called the waiter over and ordered me a hibiscus tea as well. I would always look on in amazement when he and Hajj Mahmoud unfolded the wooden backgammon board, and the enthusiasm of play transformed them into creatures not unlike fighting cocks.

This particular café was my grandfather's favorite. He was familiar with the patrons, and he felt at ease there. He only stopped going once, when war broke out in 1967 and the shock turned everyone somber and gloomy, walking around in a daze as though the Apocalypse had arrived. His cautious nature prevailed, and he stayed home, contenting himself with listening to the news on his small radio, never once turning his feet toward the café to share the space with its patrons, following events on the large radio set there. His grief was their grief, his suffering their suffering; but he was overcome by the feeling that if he were to express how he felt among them, his words would be, as it were, tainted; that anything he might say was capable of being misinterpreted, or that some muddy-thinking or racist ignoramus might insult him by word or deed. After all, was he not a Jew, one of those for whom Palestinian lands were so unjustly taken? Even my mother and grandmother quit going out. I was the only one who was free to come and go, bringing in the news from outside.

When Hajj Mahmoud realized what was in the wind, he stood by my grandfather and comforted him. He said as he always did, "Don't let your fears get the better of you, Abu Isaac! You're one of us, those others are Zionist curs!"

Then he took my grandfather by the hand and brought him to the café, where everyone greeted them as usual,

imputing Grandfather's absence to some illness, business, or perhaps some occurrence that had claimed his time away from them, nothing more. He chatted with them gladly, thinking how silly he had been to stay away for an entire month, drowning in fears and delusions.

4

UMM HASSAN HAD CHANGED NOTHING in the apartment. Even my grandfather's photo still hung on the wall in its old frame, my grandmother's portrait facing it on the opposite wall. She was seated in a leather armchair, my aunt Bella standing next to her in school uniform. The laughter of my two-year-old self resounded throughout the apartment as I ran from room to room, chased by my mother or grandmother for some mischief I had committed, or perhaps as I sat on the floor in a corner of the hall, legs stretched out in front of me, playing with my treasures: an old whistle, some bottle caps and empty containers, or a broken watch my grandfather no longer needed. I had a child's small awareness that I was a Muslim living among Jews: mother, grandfather, grandmother, aunts and uncles. But they were all I had; moreover, I was my grandfather Zaki's favorite, dearer to his heart than any of his pure Jewish grandchildren.

They were all I had. My father's family, farmers and landowners all, were wary of getting too close to me; when one of them patted me on the shoulder, I would find him staring deep into my eyes, as though asking whether I really was one of them or some strange alien creature? Was I their true flesh and blood, worthy of a place among them, or a curse foisted upon them by Fate to eat their food and usurp their name? Was I a son of the countryside and the Muslim of my father's heritage, or a city boy and the Jew of my mother's influence? They were all suspicious of me: aunts, uncles, and all their children.

The only exceptions were my father's parents, my grandfather Abd al-Hamid and my grandmother Umm Mahmoud. They recognized me from their hearts, not from any birth certificates, calculations, or deductions. My grandfather recognized that I was his flesh, sent to console him for the loss of his son, killed in the Suez war. My grandmother scented in me the traces of her own son, the son she had lost. I came to them as a blessing, and Umm Mahmoud's heart broke open to admit me. However—as the proverb goes—only the evil cattle stay at the trough! My grandfather died, and my grandmother soon after, and with them the ties that bound us to my father's village in Mansouriya. All that remained was the few pennies my uncle Ibrahim would send my mother every month, to clear his debt of honor, since he had promised my grandfather before the latter died that he would continue to send us money.

In time, I fell in love with Nadia; I still remembered my mother watching us, plotting ways to prevent me getting too attached to her, so that we could join my grandparents in Paris. She succeeded, and I left Nadia behind when we left the country together. I spent years there, only to return, after so many deaths: my grandfather Zaki, my grandmother Yvonne, Khadija, the Tunisian girl I had married in France, who died suddenly on a trip we had taken to Nice. My mother, though, was still living, although a part of her had died in my heart the day she married Yaqoub Abul Saad, an Egyptian Jew who had settled in Paris.

I rose and walked over to my grandfather's armoire. There was nothing in it; it was lifeless, the air in it still and heavy. The shelves were filled with emptiness: only a bottle of medicine relieved the vacancy, wrapped in an old sock, stiff with age. On closer inspection, I espied a pair of glasses with a broken arm and a shoelace. There was also an empty razor-blade wrapper with a drawing on it of a crocodile with a broken back.

I stared at the portrait of Abu Hasira, the Jewish saint, that my grandfather had clipped from a newspaper one day, and attached with pins to the inside of the wardrobe door. One side of it had come off and was drooping, the whole yellowed and ancient. His face was darkened, not the same face we had left. I wanted to reattach it with the pin from which it had come loose, and return it to its former state, but refrained: what would be the use? The man who had sought its blessings morning and evening was no more.

A cockroach the size of a match head ceased its scurrying: it must have sensed me, and froze so as to remain inconspicuous. I made to crush it, but refrained. I closed the door of the wardrobe on it, as well.

What I had brought of my grandfather's things, I placed in the wardrobe: his old tarboosh and his grey shirt. As for the wedding ring I had taken off his finger the day he died, I could find no more loving place for it than my own finger. His Jovial watch was no longer running; I wrapped it in a handkerchief, and tucked it away in a drawer, in case I should come back to it one day.

I spent the night alone, accompanied only by the shades of those who had once lived there. We haunted one another; we spoke with one another. They came and went, as though I were living in another time: a time just created, where I was subject and object all at once.

