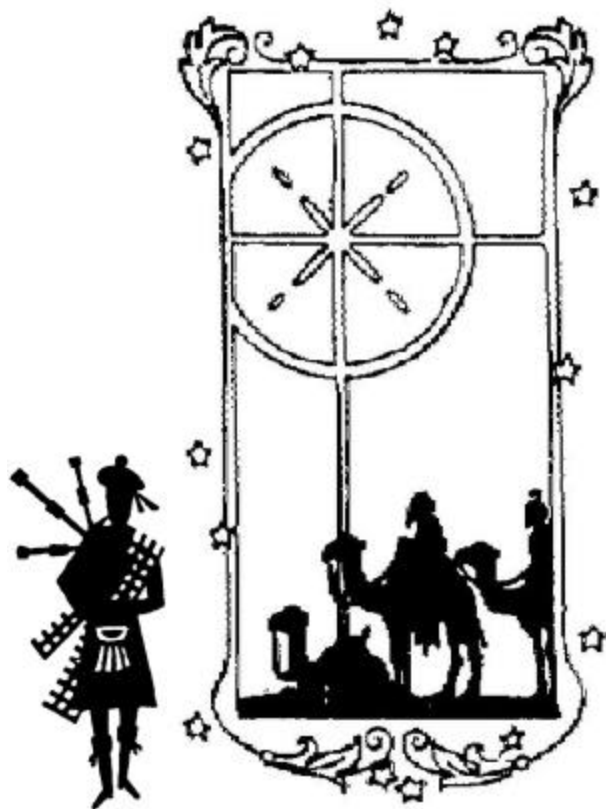


From Scotland to the Nile
(Geelan's Testimony)



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Written & Designed

By

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June 2001. I just learned I was invited to Geelan's house. I had never seen her before but in Islam we were sisters.

It was Ruba who brought the news to me; she called me on the phone:

"Eh SoSo! Would you like to meet a new sister? She said to invite you."

"But I never met her before!"

"She said: 'Bring your friends with you.' I immediately thought about you."

"Well, ok! I am always glad to meet good sisters."

"Geelan is a very nice person," Ruba added, "besides, she is really not very shy so we got to communicate very well."

Knowing the lady in question only by her husband's reputation, I felt very glad to meet a person who could refresh my heart.

And she did, Sub'anallah, by sharing her memories. When I met Geelan, she was a middle-aged woman with red cheeks and a very soothing voice. I remember having thought she was an incarnation of the traditional woman who was a mother and who had tended tenderly over many children.

I have always been amazed to see women of a certain age raising very small children so, when we arrived at her house

this very Monday, I looked for a mature daughter who was not there. Instead, I found two young girls who were too shy to remove their head coverings or speak before us. Their mother's face was very different from theirs; it reflected at the same time a difficult past made of many trials and a life devoted to love and caring for others. She was altogether energetic and very peaceful; a way of holding herself that could have been mistaken for tiredness. However, there was something gracious and confronting in her that covered completely her rough traits. And in her eyes, there was something of a flame that communicated right away that was inviting and made you feel at home.

I felt so good that day that my appetite showed ravenous as she served us a well-designed lunch. Of course, a lot of meat as it is customary among Arabs.

"What?" Ruba said once to me, "A meal without meat? It would be like not eating at all. It would be an offense to receive guests without it."

Half vegetarian, I had problems to understand this concept, but what was a meal without bread in Europe and rice in Asia?

When I remember Geelan's looks, I cannot ignore her ascendants. Her Scottish blood was obvious even in the way she accentuated her words. It was hard to perceive the guttural sounds of the Egyptian dialect, her native language, but Gaelic resonance she probably picked up from her mother.

I remember Geelan as a charming person who knew how to make her guests comfortable by minding little details few people are being aware of.

She explained, between the cake and the coffee:

"My daughter is married to a man from Iraq. All my family, including close or distant relatives are married with people from other countries."

"So, what do you say when people ask you where you are from?"

"We say we are international!"

"That's truly the spirit of Islam," I added. "No nationality, no race... Just human beings who compete to be the best people in the world!"

"O! I do not know about that," retorted Geelan a bit shyly. "My mother was Scottish. She was raised in a family of priests. The Scottish people are in majority Presbyterian, so she had a

hard time dealing with her reversion to Islam. Her father especially was not very happy about it. O, I would have a lot to tell you about her. She had such incredible stories to tell. She left us; she passed away three years ago. See, you are a writer; you could find her story very interesting."

"I would love to, I mean, write about her."

"Then, it is settled. Let's meet next week. I get bored if I do not see visitors. Bring your friends with you if you want to."

Two weeks later, we met in Ruba's house. I was delighted to hear that Geelan's daughter had already read my stories. Her teacher had referred my website to her class for a writing project. I would serve as a model for young Muslims in the manner of books. I felt transported, and very amazed. How small the world! Now we were four people who came each one from different countries: America, Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, but we had succeeded in meeting each other in one week to enjoy storytelling and literature. This had not happened to me in years!

"Writers are very interesting people," Geelan declared with a thrill of excitement. "I started writing a book myself, but I could not find anybody to create the illustrations so I left it in a

chest of drawers. My sister wrote a big book though. She wrote on The Signs of the *Qiyyama* (the End of the World), a very researched and sophisticated book. She finished writing it on her deathbed. We promised to publish it for her. It is our *siyah*. O! One of these promises in life that we cannot keep. Pray, SoSo, for us, so that we manage somehow to find her a publisher.”

I almost voiced my desire to type it and publish it on the Internet, but I kept silent. Few people were ready to give away a work that had asked a lot of research and painstakingly writing.

“You should not give your books for free,” exclaimed Geelan. “See, you could get them published and earn a lot of money. Besides, I would not read anything from the Internet. I have no confidence in publications that do not have a public recognition. See, if I saw your name in there, I would not read your stories because I would not know if you are a good Muslim or not. Now, I know you and I would feel secure while reading them.”

“But,” I ventured, “you do not know me. How can you be sure my books are ok?”

“I just know. I just have to look at you.”

“Ok,” I said, thinking. What was in me that had set her comfortable? I could not tell.

I suddenly remembered what Geelan had said about her sister’s literary talents. She understood the art of writing. Boy! I would have given a lot to be able to read her, but once again, I felt shy and did not insist. I just ventured:

“I wish I could, one day, read this book.”

“We hope so too.”

Later, Geelan would tell me the incredible, sad and very beautiful story of her sister Camelia struck by an incurable disease who had devoted the last years of her life to the writing of a book, but not any book, the book which concerned her very deeply, a book about death and the after life. This work sounded especially appealing to me because the person who had written it knew what she was talking about; she was experiencing death and it was her constant worry. It was also a person whose piety prompted a lot of strange and divine manifestations around the last weeks of her life.

But the next words of Geelan shook me off my dreams.

“I will tell you about my family later, so you can write about it.”

I smiled, feeling very happy.

“So what do you want to begin with?” she asked.

I did not have time to answer. She began a short discussion with her small daughter, and started:

“*Bismi Allah Er-rahman Er-rahiim*. My mother always worked all her life. She was a hard worker. Scottish people tend to work hard, especially in the older days. She left school after high school to help her mother. She was very smart. She was a very lively, naughty, young person with a lot of friends. She used to be beaten by a strap because she liked to skip school with her friend to have picnics. She had two brothers: George and John, the oldest; two sisters Ethel and Cathy. She was Jean, named after her mother because people said she was like her.”

“Not so like her,” I said.

“Well, not exactly. Jean was the only one in her family to become a Muslim.”

“This must have been a shock to her parents.”

“Yes and no. At that time, Muslims in Scotland were not treated like Muslims nowadays in Europe, you know.”

“I gathered that Muslims were very well integrated into the Scottish community in the 30’s and 40’s.”

“True.”

Later, I did some research on the subject. In the 30’s, most of the Muslim new comers were doctors or students and we know well how these two activities are respected everywhere. There were also a lot of immigrants from the ancient English colonies. Before the war, the presence of Muslims in the territory was not perceived as threatening as today because the medias were not as powerful and negative, and because immigration was not common. Indeed, most Muslims started to immigrate in Scotland from 1958 on, especially Pakistanis. Nowadays, there are 10,000 Muslim families living there permanently. And I am not talking about temporary students. Actually, Islam in UK started a long time ago. We can read references to Muslim scholars in the Prologue to Chaucer’s Canterbury tales as early as 1386. After the crusades, Queen Elisabeth I would have asked help from Muslim countries. John Nelson was the first known Englishman to become a

Muslim in the 16th C. Then, in 1649 came the first English version of the Qur'an by Alexander Ross.

The first large groups of Muslims to come to UK were sailors recruited from India and cooks from Bangladesh during the 17th C. Yemenis sailors and marine traders came after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

The first mosque is recorded built in 1860, in Cardiff.

(Information source from: BBC Online: <http://www.bbbc.co.uk/>)

And there was Sir (Abdullah) Archibald Hamilton, baronet, a relation of the English Royal family who reverted to Islam in 1924. People thought that if personalities could recognize Islam as their own religion, there was not much danger in it. Besides, it could be appealing to such illustrious people as Lord Headley, Colonel Donald Rockwell (author) and John (Yehya-En-Nasr) Parkinson.

In the early 30's, at the same time Geelan's story starts, Jessie (Ameena) Davidson declared: "(Islam's) broadmindedness and elasticity, with simple principles, appeal to my reason."

Geo T. Tyler affirmed on his side that: "Islam is a clean, wholesome faith, and makes the salvation of man man's own duty."

All these reversions must have somehow legalized the presence of Muslims in UK.

So, our story begins some ten years before World War II in the Scottish tenements, a few years after these remarkable conversions.



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This evening, the Glaswegians lived by the horns as usual. The heavily industrialized town was preparing for tea as the third horn blew off its workers from the factories.

Jean hurried towards the building where she lived with one of her relatives.

She passed before the bakery of the Mc Millans then retrieved her steps. Along the narrow and paved streets, she danced at the sound of a melodeon or a mandolin and the melancholic songs that filled the streets all day long. People threw a penny by the window from time to time because nobody refused his charity to the singer; he made daily life livelier for everybody.

Jean thought about those people who ever offered the beggars a bowl of soup or a *clootie dumpling*. She could not imagine living without them waving from the porches.

She thought about how safe it felt to live in this place where everybody knew and cared for each other. There was a sense of community where everybody felt responsible for everybody.

Inside the shop, she asked for sweets for her family she expected to meet during the weekend.



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“A *liquorice tawse* for a ha’penny,” she ordered, “plus a stick and two ring rocks, with a ring for your finger after you’d eaten the rock, and also some alphabet sweeties.”

“Here ya ar’. Thank you Miss Jean. And how’s the fam’ly?”

“My aunt says we are ‘house proud’, which means we’ll be spending the evening scrubbing floors.” She laughed then added. “Maybe tonight she’ll let me go to the cinema.”

“Up our close,” interrupted another customer, “no outings for anybody on Fridays. Ya should see, my dear, brasses of front doors shine like water. Steps scrubbed and whitened with pipe clay and free of scuff marks imply same inside.” And she nodded with her head vigorously, her lips tight but smiling a little out of pride.

“Sam’here,” added Mme Mc Millan, “our wean is only two and he father already mad’her a small brass stool with a slot in’it which says ‘Our wee girl is not fool, she puts her pennies in a stool’, that is when she doe’ her duty at hom’. It’s two shillings a week for dusting around and she keep’em safe fae got to educate the lad early!”



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Jean smiled approvingly and went out, walking slowly back home. She listened to the twinkling chimes of the *Westminister* clock because she could not see it across the handsome and large street façades that stood facing each other.

She thought about the neat landings and stairs of her flat tenement and about the coal fire in the stove, which would

have to be black-leaded with a paste mixed upon an old saucer, and then buffed up and finally shone to a gleaming finish with a piece of velvet. The steel trimmings would have to be shined up with a pack of emery cloth they kept in a small alcove. Jean met Ms. Ilroy on the stairs. When she saw her, she beamed at the young girl, exclaiming whole-heartedly while showing her neighbor's stairs:

"O, see her! Her step is as black as the ace of spade. Yen giein'us a showin'up, Karen?" she yelled. Karen's voiced came back muffled from inside her house.

"Jean dear! I helped myself in ya kitchen. Ya aunt let the key in the mailbox fa me. I reckon I served maself on a cup'a'sugar and chicory. Cannot chat. Got to flit ma son today, me dear. Charlie!" she screamed from the window as she moved things inside her house, the door wide open, "c'm'ere!" Jean pushed her door open. An enormous black kettle was kept simmering over the fire for hot water. The house felt always inhabited even when nobody was in because no one would think of stealing anything, and private life did not exist. There was a polished linoleum extravagantly patterned on the floor and a small hearth rug in front of the fireplace, a

Axminster rug like most people had at this epoch. Jean did not waste any time. She picked up an old top, walked towards the sideboard of the chimney and began buffing its doilies and ornaments.

She was admiring the objects of the house that her relatives had offered or made for them when she suddenly heard a voice:

"Is that ye, Jean?" erupted the voice behind the front door.

"Hi, my aunt," replied Jean.

Her aunt walked in hobbling under the heavy baskets of dry clothes hanging from her arms.

"What's ye do'in her', me lad? Ye didnae I baked we toffee apple for wee pal and me house is fit tae be seen, not like that crabbit tenant across the street. Ye can go out tonight, me dear. I'll be causy'her' on me own!"

"Thank ye, my aunt," Jean exclaimed happily, nuzzling her nose into her aunt's hair and kissing her on the cheeks.

"Cathy said she'd pay ye a visit this ev'ning!"

Jean went to her room to change her garments. The older woman was still talking from the pantry but Jean could not hear anything; the stream trains were passing, carrying their loads of steel for the new ships and the fabrication of

armaments that had not ended since World War I. Already rumors of another war filtered among people. Scotland was prepared for it.

Cathy came early that day. They quickly got ready to go and Jean wrapped the dumplings in a handkerchief. The high ceilings of the tenement still resounded from their laughs when two handsome men appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Cathy did not see them at first contrary to her companion, so she burst compliments at her girlfriend who now flushed slightly out of embarrassment.

“O, you are so pretty, Jean! I wish I had your long jet hair and your skin pale like milk. I wish I were as fancy too!” The men now stared at Jean appraisingly.

“C’mon Cathy, stop it!” she said. ‘I wish they would pass along quietly,’ Jean thought quickly. She raised her eyes up in the men’s direction and she met his eyes. He was the handsomest lad she had seen for a long time. He had freckles all over the face with red hair but in such a nice way it enhanced his natural charm rather than diminishing it. Her green eyes fell on his large eyes like black pebbles washed by the shore. He smiled and declared authoritatively:

“C’mon, Cathy! Lay off my wife!”

This is how they met.

In a fraction of a second, Jean’s narrow window over the world opened wildly to new ways of thinking and new landscapes. His eyes told of foreign lands and trials. In the smile the young man cast at her, there was the profile of much worries for the future and much blessings too.

From this second on, Jean and Ahmad stole a few minutes together every day without actually going out on a date. As they fell more and more in love with each other, he declared his intentions to marry her, and proposed several times.

“No, no, I can’t,” she always said. “What would my parents say? You being a foreigner and all! Besides you are Muslim. What do we know about Islam? They would not understand! Myself, I am quite scared. I do not know how people would treat me if they knew I’d married an Arab and besides a Muslim! I do not know how I would handle it.”

And one day, he asked her:

“But do you like me, Jean?”

“Yes, I do. I do very much indeed.”

This same afternoon, Jean decided to take small buses to go to Camble Town where her parents lived. She would try to introduce the subject. But she did not really believe she would succeed.



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It was customary to visit families during the weekends, so Ahmad decided to fly and reach the town before Jean got there. He hurried his way while Jean was picking her things, unaware of the maneuver he would use in order to gain her.

This same day, Ahmad met Jean's father.

He met him when the man was carrying coal up the top flat of his tenement. The young soul did not meet the coalman right away, but observed him from a distance. The man's work was a very hard one and it asked a very sturdy lad. He came with a horse and a cart. He wore a leather shield on his back for protection, trapped to him. Over the coal bag, he carried a smaller one over shoulder for his money. The bag looked round in front of him because of the volume of coal he carried. He backed himself onto the lorry and got a hold of the bag. Another man was with him, probably his son, thought Ahmad. The man jumped up onto the lorry and lifted the bag onto his father's back. Then he run in the lobby and shouted:

"Coal! Coal!" at the bottom of the stairs, loud, very loud. As the people came out on their threshold and had their bunker lid open, he hissed up a hundredweight of Chesney's coal, real quality, to their door. Ahmed looked at the man and thought that such a man would listen to reason. So he went to their house and presented himself.

Meanwhile, Jean was on her way to Camble Town herself. She thought about a way to bring about the news to her parents. Cathy's husband was a priest, so this was a very conservative family with very strict principles. One day, they both went dancing with Cathy's fiancé. They had agreed to come back home at 7:00pm but they got back at 8:00pm, an hour later than promised. They had banged on the front door of their home and pleaded, nothing had worked; their parents had left them sleep outside the whole night! Jean was afraid of what her father might do to her if she confessed she was in love with a barbarian. Finally, she arrived. Hearing voices in her parents' house, she pushed the door opened to see Ahmad there. She burst, in shock:

“What are you here for?”

“I proposed to your mom and dad.”

Her future spouse looked so foreign and strange near the tea set with pansies on it, the gas lightning and the paraffin lamp which only dad could touch, she almost cried. She did not know if it was for joy or for fear of breaking in two. What

destiny could await her now? She did not feel in control anymore.



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Dad was started trimming the wick of the lamp and later was filling it. His hand was sure and his attitude gave the impression that Ahmad was already part of the family. Jean was startled. She sat quietly. Mom was baking *bannocks* (oatcakes) on the grill, on the girdle. And she said here and then, repeatedly, as she used to:

“O God, don’t make it rain!” because when the rain came down, it brought bits of soot and it dropped in the pancakes. All looked so familiar! It smelled of oats and barley fields and Jean, water gathering at the brim of her eyes, looked at the kitchen as if for the last time; it was a kitchen bright and cheerful with its polished brass glinting. The fireside chair designated as fathers’ stood at its usual place, unmoved next to a small chair for mother near the flames of the fire flickering on the wall. Tonight, she would not enjoy the family scrubbing that built a sense of belonging between them, maybe tonight she would have a house of her own to scrub in her head.

Jean’s mother looked as excited and scared as the young lady. She was afraid to lose her daughter to a foreigner, but at the same time he looked very nice and he was well on his way to be a doctor, and a doctor in the family meant a lot for them people, people with a good common sense.

“Do you like up our family close?” asked Jean finally in order to break the heavy silence that had fallen upon them all, a silence of deep thought and deep thinking. She did not want to reflect on the situation anymore. Her destiny was sealed now. He smiled, and declared:

“This changes me from my drably colored and threadbare student housing. This house is life itself!”

Jean’s eyes dripped wet now but she smiled gently, realizing that her destiny had suddenly turned its heels on the direction of her fiancé. She knew what lay ahead would be improving, however, she would enjoy it because Ahmad was kind and simple, Ahmad made her heart quiver.

She felt all of a sudden helpless and happy she did not have to choose between her destinies.

“Make yourself at home, me lad,” said suddenly her father, “and mom, hold the kettle at your side to make you *hot toddy* with whisky and sugar and lemon.”

“Oh, no!” ejaculated Ahmad, already facing difficulties, “I’ll be just cozy as I am.”

“Nonsense,” replied the father. Jean burst out laughing. As everybody was looking at her in astonishment, she declared:

“O dad, Muslims don’t drink alcohol.”

“O dear!” exclaimed her mother, her right finger over her lips, “that’s a pity, ain’t it, father?”

So they got married and when they came back, Jean's mother gave them an old steak pie in the kitchen. Neighbors donated them a few extra eggs, a plate of scones for the wedding breakfast and a pair of towels. Furthermore, her parents prepared a meal for the family and friends as was customary, and that was it. Then Ahmad began his internship in the hospital. World War II made their life in the tenements a little bit harsher.

Jamal was born in Glasgow, four years before Camelia, herself followed by Selua.

"Jean did not worry anymore about Islam," declared Geelan, "her man was a good man and he loved her. She saw him making *wudoo* (ritual ablution before each prayer) and she thought it was a very clean religion."

Camelia was born in time of war. Ahmad collected the dead and Jean studied in order to become a war nurse. There was much to be done and Ahmad did not spend as much time with his family as he should. Soon, Jean was pregnant again.

The day she was ready to deliver, she was alone with her younger son Jamal, five.

Somebody opened the door and a head popped inside their house:

"Som'body hom'?"

"Hi, Jemima, c'm'in," replied Jean who rested on the edge of the bed.

"O, it looks cozy *chez vous*! My sister can also make floor length drapes with matching pelmet and all, like ya do, Jean."

"Thanks, Jemima. Och, I'm no feelin' good."

"Ye'll be as right as a nail, me dear. Ha! Having a wean up here! We all do it, puff. But ye on ye own? With a husband as doctor? Tis a pity... yes, tis a pity."

"He is on his way home, Jemima, he does what he can my poor love."

Her neighbor shrugged, then added:

"As it goes, giv'e ya washin'. I'll do ya wash'in."

"I appreciate Jemima. Thanks."

"Da ya hav' a big tartan, ya know a green shawl ya can tie around ya, me dear, I mean, fo the bab?"

“No, not this time, Jemima,” and she held her womb with two hands while saying this, a few muffled cries escaping from within her lips.

“Her’ is one. I used it for me littl’ ones. They are all grown up now. See, ya wrap the bab in it and wrap the other end’round and the bab is clos’ against ya. Tis safe enough as long as tis tucked proper in.”

“Thank you kindly, Jemima, thank you so very kindly. That’s my husband coming down the stairs I think.”

“I’ll run along then now, me dear. I’ll be off.” She glanced back again with disapproving eyes and left, a big bag of clothe under her arms.

As soon as she left, Jean collapsed onto her bed, having the baby by herself.

“Jamal!” she ordered her son, “Go boil some water for ya mom!” She painfully smiled reassuringly while hushing the frightened boy away.

A few minutes later, the baby’s head was crowning and she pushed it hard while Jamal, on the other side of the bedroom door began screaming loudly out of pain.

At this instant, Ahmad entered his home, tired by all the horrors of the war and ready to rest. Instead, he found Jamal burned; the hot water had fallen all over him. Across the room, Jean carried a bloody bundle with her newborn in it. At the sight of her poor infant, she fainted on the spot, leaving Ahmad in total confusion for a few minutes.

“O, my God! *Ya Allah!*” he exclaimed, feeling guilty and overwhelmed, “*Ya Allah!* What have I done!” He called for an ambulance and took care of his wife, repeating as if to convince her:

“I should get you to my family. They would take good care of you. Soon I will be graduating. I cannot leave you on your own again, not knowing what could happen to you. We will leave as soon as we can.”

In the evening, Jemima reappeared to inquire about Jean’s health and to see the baby.

“Ya didnae had this bayb on ‘ya own, dea’?” Jean explained everything that had happened and her fears about leaving the country.

“What about my parents, Jemima? I am so afraid, I almost cannot bear it.”

“OO, calm calm my dea’, God has ways ya dona know about! Ya just tired now. Ush now sleep, dea’. A woman got to do what a woman do.”

As Jemima was lighting their forty-Watt lamp, the height of technology at this time, she could hear the unoiled pulleys squeaking outside until late at night. Jemima had hung her washing and it was drying up and hauled up close to the ceiling by a system of ropes.



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When the war ended, Ahmad made preparations to travel back to Egypt, his native country.

As the family was embarking, Jean’s mother tried for the last time to restrain her from leaving.

“Stay with us, Jean! Why did ya have to marry a foreigner and abandon us? I love ya so much, my little love, I feel I could die of grief just to think of you never comin’ back again.”

“I do my duty, mother. Every woman has to follow her husband, doesn’t she? What would ya think of me, here, without him? Besides I am in love with him, mom. He is a good man, ya know; he will take good care ov’ me. O, mummy,” Jean exclaimed in anguish, “please, don’t cry!”

Her mother’s last words were:

“I just hope he will deserve to hav’ ma little Jean, my treasure.”

As the boat departed slowly from the shore and lay off the last rope, Jean saw her mother collapsing at her feet. She lay there immobile as if the big ship going to sea had pulled her heart away, leaving her bosom lifeless.

Jean panicked. From the distance, it was hard to see what had really happened. But soon, her father stood up from the crowd

that had gathered around the body and waved a fist towards her:

“Not only ya betrayed ya’ family, but yav’ killed ya’ mother. Ungrateful child of us! We will not forgive ya, and not to ya either,” he added turning his fist towards Ahmad who had clenched his wife tightly to him against his chest.

As the heart of a mother had followed silently the heart of her child, the pain of a father started obsessing Jean. She fell in prostration on the deck. Her eyes were bulging and she felt short of breath. She searched desperately into the broad eyes of her children and stayed there, lifeless. Ahmad tried to raise her up back on her feet but she did not have the strength.

“Who would have known? Who would have imagined?” she kept on repeating, in shock.

But the ship carried her away anyway.

There was nothing anyone could do about it.



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Ahmad was pulling her by the hand, impatient to meet his family again after all these years of absence, but casting worried eyes all around.

They had left the trams and gharries of Cairo behind, the translucent minarets against the blue sky. Only the wide brown river of the Nile seemed to have followed them at the brim of the palm-fringed canals and the line of tall rustling sugarcane.

Jean stammered on the road of the village, looking as if fallen from another world into the pits of the desert. Her red shoes hurt the monotony of Upper Egypt also called the White

Kingdom. And her big hat ornamented with orange birds doddered under each step on the dusty and tormented street.



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Here, everything was still in a state of war: the revolts for independence reached as far as the *fellaheen* (peasants) habitats.

The children followed behind all dressed up fancy, already followed by the poor village children wearing garments that looked more like patches of cloths.

“Here is me hom’!” exclaimed Ahmad.



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Already, tens of people dressed in long black or white dresses flowed from the mud houses, making the dust of the road rise and cover everything with a thin white powdering substance.

They were coming back from work.

Jean remembered the sickening atmosphere of Cairo. Her chest contracted involuntarily. She seemed to live again her first passage from civilization to Antiquity, from the gallant distance between people to the crowded streets where they had to elbow their way among people who seemed to run in the street in nightgowns.

She remembered with a certain disgust the market overflowing with pedestrians, animals and carts, the streams of vapor rising from thousands of cooking fires, the pungent smell of food, sweat, incense, burning charcoal and exotic spices. She recalled the inevitable *souks* (markets) bursting with colors and in the middle of the streets, wide golden strips of jewelry, cauldrons and clothing hanging low, and in the middle of them people seeming like butterflies caught in swinging nets.



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In comparison, Ahmad's little village seemed like a shabby temple emerged from the pharaonic times. Here, it did not seem that during the seven thousand years of recorded history Persians, Greeks, Romans or even Turks had passed and left any imprints. Only the Arab influence was obvious with its taste for desert life.



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Mud bricks piled up in the form of pyramids clearly reminded her the Egyptian complete dependence on the Nile. As she saw her husband enveloped and carried away between robes and the embrace of the close family, she felt her heart suddenly contracting. She felt ridiculous in her European attire. Even if a few days earlier she had passed for one of the most beautiful

and elegant Scottish ladies of her time, here she looked like an imported doll in the country of donkeys.

She clasped her children around her as the crowd was pushing them into a somber room. The contrasts between brightness of the light outside and the darkness of the insides caused her a momentary blindness. She could only hear the voices all around her crying and whispering words of love and words of distress. They were all voices of strangers. From time to time, they laughed without stopping and talked all together at the same time or they would cry aloud without restriction. In the midst of them, she at last recognized her name and Ahmad's voice talking to her:

"Do not be afraid! They are very happy to see you but we have much to talk about... the war... problems in the family. Besides, they do not know what to think about you since you are a Christian but they regard you as somebody of the family. Come close to me, Jean, and the children as well. They want to see you. Tis me mother, tis me sister."

But soon the wave of Arabic dialects resumed its chanting and Jean was led by the hands towards the other direction of the

house as her husband was joining the segregated side of the men's quarters.

Many weeks after her arrival to Egypt, Jean was riding her bike, returning home from the military hospital. If she had gone through a rough period following the first culture shock, she had adapted to her new life and liked it now. She passed along the canals surrounded by all shades of green from the emerald cloverleaves to the many high eucalyptus trees.

Men tucked up their *galabiyas* between their legs as they worked in the fields cutting the rippled sugarcane.

Others took care of the irrigation.

It smelled of dung and dust, a very natural combination that sprang into the air as the girls fueled their ovens with straw and mud.

"sa'eeda," she said.

"Sa'eeda," they replied as she continued past them. The little Arabic she knew she had learned from her servant.



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She stopped a moment to pick a sprig along the road. The powdery yellow balls guzzled the strange fragile smell that characterized them. Next to her, the children were bathing in the canal, hurling themselves from a overhanging tree branch and creating great pools of foaming water around them. Jean looked at them with sadness. She knew that life expectancy in rural Egypt did not reach over forty and that infantile mortality was high. No wonder, she thought, the canals were opened

sewers and a great deal of diseases was carried along the banks of the artificial streams.

Ahmad was now a well-respected doctor. Despite his reputation, people still did not listen to him and let their children play in the water. What did she expect? After all, the story of Egypt was the story of the Nile. Its banks were home to sixty million people who depended entirely on the water. Jean was suddenly startled by the view of a chameleon that slowly stalked the branches of a shrub next to her with swiveling eyes. It reminded her of life going on permanently in spite of the death of the children or the war. Egypt had become a country controlled by the British, whose King Farouk was of Turkish descent that was superficially European but intrinsically Islamic. It was a strange combination really to burst.

The animal also reminded her that she was also trying to melt in this culture, trying to belong. Egypt had had two thousand years of foreign occupation, so Jean was regarded herself as a foreigner, not as belonging here even if her love for Egypt was strong and genuine. Officials had already asked her to leave the country since they could not insure her safety. She had

answered firmly that her husband was Egyptian; therefore, her family was Egyptian. She didn't see the point of returning to Scotland where her family made her partly responsible for the death of her mother and where she would not find friends anymore. She did not belong to herself anymore; she belonged to her new family.

Now that she could communicate in Arabic with her neighbors, she could understand them better and help them to get some relief from their poverty. Everything talked about the difficulties people were having here. She could see it from the gaunt visages of old men, the skinny *gamoosah* (water buffalo) tethered under the trees, the face of the babies riddled by flies, the tattered clothing of the *fellaheen*.

Women often came to visit her to give her presents for the delivery of their newborns. Their meager offerings always talked about the hazards of their lives and the efforts they put into dissimulating the extent of their poverty.

Jean walked the remainder of the road. She passed by a neighbor who had delivered recently with the help of her husband. The woman had come to visit. She was bringing them a gift in the manner of thanks. Jean looked at her with pity; she

knew the poor peasant would not have long to love the son coming from her womb. This particular woman had delivered many babies but they had all died around their fourth birthdays. People said that she got the eye. Jean could not help trembling at her sight and hurried her way inside home. On the stairway, she saw her younger son making his way to the bakery where he intended to buy some candies.

“*Salam* mother.”

“*Wa alaikum assalam* my son. Come back quickly. I'll miss you.”

She looked at him with tenderness as he ran along. He had the big blue eyes and reddish hair of her loving husband and was exactly four years old. Jean could not repress a second shiver as she stared at the back of the *fellaheen*. The woman had looked at her son with envy, she was sure of it, but people said she was a good woman. ‘She just could not help admiring the beauty and happiness in my son Ali,’ reasoned Jean. She slowly walked up the stairs, still uncertain. ‘It is a sin to think bad of my neighbors’, she thought shamefully, and she shook away her fears.

Ali returned home from the store, almost staggering and looking thoughtful. He picked up the Qur'an and he said to his mother:

"Mom! I am going far away, and do not worry about me, I will be ok."

Jean clutched him against her chest and felt his brow; he was burning with fever. Streams of water began to pour from Jean's eyes. She carried him into her arms and cried the name of her husband several times.

The same day, Ali died. Some people said from the meningitis, other said from the bad eye. Who knew? 'Maybe it was just his destiny', thought Jean but at the same time she could not help an irrational feeling of anger against her husband for helping the woman.

A few months later, Ahmad had his first heart attack. People said that he had been eaten up by the pain and by a chronic depression following the death of his son Ali. If Ahmad carried a broken heart, he was also working too much and spent twenty-four hours on call for his patients.

He fell on his knees.

Geelan explains:

"Mom never saw anybody buried in the Islamic way. What are they doing with Ali's body? How did they dress him? She did not understand the Muslim way. She cried herself in the balcony. She was very scared and shocked. She cried a lot and people told her it was *haram*."

If Jean thought odd that her son was wrapped around with two white shrouds, the color of the Nile birds, the color of the castles and the desert sand, she understood why women had to stay at home during the burial. The custom was not different from the Scottish custom. Most of all, the burial reminded her cruelly that she was almost all alone in a strange land where she was the only Christian; it also reminded her that it was impossible for her to retrieve her son's life from the ground; he had ceased to belong to her.

Time passed.

They had another daughter, Geelan, three to four years after Ali's departure. Unfortunately, Geelan never replaced the lost son. Ahmad's health continued deteriorating. He had one fixed idea before leaving this earth; he had to go for *Hajj* to fulfill his obligations as a Muslim.



MECCA: ? 2000-2001 www.arttoday.com

One day, Ahmad felt his chest becoming very small and painful in a way stronger than usual. Blood came out of his

mouth. The nurse who worked with him came running towards him.

“I will give you your injection now, doctor,” she said breathlessly.

He seized her hand briskly, plunging his eyes into hers.

“My dear sister! And if I should die now, what about my final duty as a Muslims? I want to go for *Hajj*. Do you understand me?”

He squeezed her hand tighter. She did not know what to say. She felt great respect for him and would do anything to help him in his dreams.

“Sister! Would you come with me? I need a nurse to help during the voyage. I cannot ask my wife. She has the children to take care of. She does not have a strong formation as a nurse and, more importantly, she is not Muslim yet. I will also take my son Jamal. Would you come with me?”

She looked puzzled and worried.

“But, doctor, what would people say? I am a maiden. I have never been married before. Nobody would want me if they knew I would travel with a man who is not my *mahram*

(guardian). Besides, it is not allowed in Islam for a woman to go alone for *Hajj* without a member of her close family!"

"Then you will marry me, sister. Would you?"

She opened and closed her mouth several times in dismay. She finally declared:

"Surely I could never be your wife, doctor."

"Sister! *Ya Ourty*. Maybe, *Bukra fil mish-mish*. Maybe tomorrow never comes for me."

"*Maalesh!* Never mind!" she ejaculated in frenzy.

"What about my soul, sister? I must purify it. I do not wish to die in a state of sin. Who would be able to come with me except you? We have been working together for so long; we know each other!"

He tried to stand up but his legs did not support him anymore. He grabbed the basin she was holding under his mouth to let the blood run in thin threads out of his wasted body.

"See, sister. I could never touch you. It would not be a real marriage since we could never consummate it. Please, do it as charity, for my sake."

"Insha Allah," she finally said, tears in her eyes, "I wish Allah would grant you health. You have saved so many lives already, it would be a crime to refuse you."

"Thank you, sister. May Allah rewards you for your kindness and sacrifice. *Jazak Allah Khairan*."

So they married secretly. 'Jean would not understand,' he thought 'because, in her religion, couples cannot divorce and are forever tied to one and only one spouse. I am not committing a sin since it is not necessary for a Muslim man to ask the permission of his wife to marry a second time even if it is liked and encouraged by the religion. Allah forgives me, I have no choice'

Mecca was on the other side of the red Sea, not far from the Egyptian border. However, the pilgrimage had been very improving for Ahmad though pacifying. Ahmad had felt the need to be nearer to his God especially after the guilt he felt after the departure of Ali.

They finally came back.

Jamal left his father home before going on an errand for him.

“Look for my calendar, my son,” Ahmad had asked on their arrival, “I need to see how my business has been taken care of during my absence. Meanwhile, I will take a nap.”

Jamal ran to his father’s office and began seeking for his agenda. He was seventeen.

In the midst of the papers, he found a sheet signed by the local *imam* and two witnesses; it was the marriage certificate between his father and the nurse. He grabbed the paper and ran to his mother to let her know the truth.

When Ahmad woke up, his first worry was for his son. He saw Jean restlessly pacing the hall, her eyes so red and swelled she almost could not open them.

“Jean! What is it? Where is Jamal?”

She glared at him and turned her back on him. He followed her, his heart bursting with apprehension. Finally, he caught up with her:

“What is it, my love?”

“How dare you? I have left everything behind me for you. I have lost my family, my friends, my country. And you thank me by abandoning me, me and your children?”

A look of dismay crossed his face.

“What did I do wrong, Jean my love? Please tell me!”

“Didn’t you have enough with one wife? What did you need another for?”

It suddenly hit him hard. A look of despair suddenly settled in his eyes.

“I swear I married only to stop the tongues, to protect my reputation and hers. I had to go for *Hajj*, Jean, I had to.”

She went to the kitchen, brought a tray with her and left him his dinner in the parlor, ready to consider the man of her life as dead.

Ahmad muttered his last words to her:

“I love, Jean, I love you and the children.”

Jean and her first daughter Camelia vowed never to speak to him again. Ahmad’s world became a nightmare. His attacks were more frequent and more raging than ever. He had only the strength to stay alive, a life that had become unbearable to him. A year after these events took place, Camelia’s birthday came up. They used to celebrate birthdays to comply with Jean’s beliefs, a concession made to her as her children were raised Muslims.

Camelia was fourteen. She had not talked to her father for about a year. She could not bring herself to forgive him even if she knew it was better for her to do so in the eyes of Allah. Societies of this time forgave little and hold strong to their values. Compassion was not their strongest feature contrary to traditional Islamic teachings.

Ahmad died while she was opening her gifts. When camellia heard the news, she cast herself on her father's deathbed, crying desperately:

“O dad! Why did you have to do it? Why did you abandon us? I would have forgiven you the second wife, but not the secrecy. I will bear the rest of my life the wound of my own pride. I wish Allah would let me talk to you before you died. May Allah forgives you, father, and does not look at you with grudge. *Ameen.*”

Jean was the one who suffered the most. She felt lost and at the mercy of everybody. It is in that state that she reached the burial ground, having refused to stay home.



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She observed the whole ceremony from a distance and looked at it with understanding.

She was beginning to tell people that she was Muslim even if it was not official yet.

She admired the religion despite what her British colleagues at the military hospital had told her:

“What? You love those people after all the pain your husband made you go through? Are you crazy?”

“I feel it is the truth,” she assured them, “and it has nothing to do with my marriage.”

A man came to propose to her the same day.

“See, sister, I could protect your children and provide enough for your financial needs. Even if Islam stipulates to wait three months of mourning, it is now that you need the most help. Your family says it is ok, please, consider. You are alone in this country. What a woman of your beauty and youth can do alone in this country except attracting envy and criticism? This is not a society of pious people. This is a society of ordinary and uneducated people.”

Jean screamed at him and let all the anger accumulated though the previous year pour on him. She finally declared:

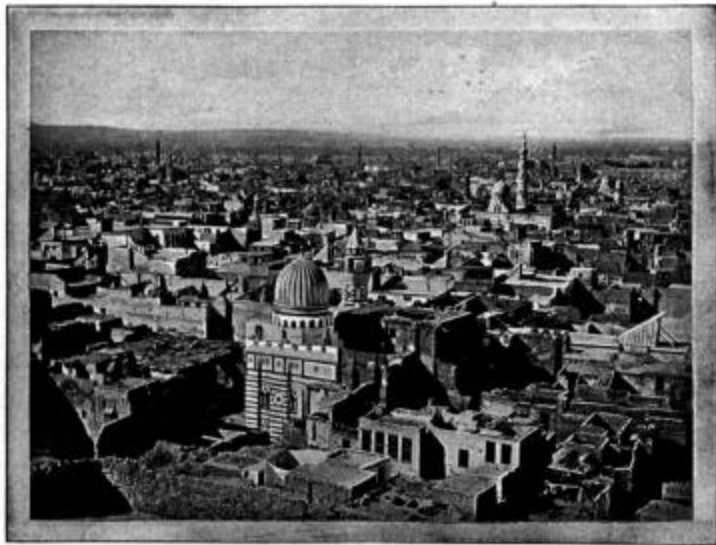
“Then I will go to Cairo where nobody knows me.”
And that was it.

As her Scottish family had accused her of precipitating her mother’s death, Ahmad’s Egyptian family began to treat her badly, accusing her of having contributed to the death of her husband.

Ahmad would have been forty-two and she twenty-eight.

Ahmad did not leave any money. He did believe in charity and the *fellaheen* were so poor, he was ashamed to ask them for money. He always said: ‘Allah will take care of my children.’ He had left only a house, the house where his family and some of his relatives lived together. Since everybody had a share of the house, to ask each relative his permission to sell the house was an impossible task. So Jean left it behind with all her memories. Jamal was entering the university for the first time, so Jean, Camelia, Selua and Geelan moved with him towards the capital.

Jean embarked in a *felluka* and glided silently towards the boarding house where she had rented their new apartment. She soon became an English teacher in a private school. Camelia meantime worked as a waitress in one of Cairo’s numerous hotels. Ahmad’s uncle was the only relative who helped them, sending them money regularly. Jean had forgotten her disgust for the town.



Cairo: ? 2000-2001 www.arttoday.com

She understood now why Ibn Khaldun, in the fortieth century could declare that Cairo was “the metropolis of the universe, the garden of the world, the anthill of the human species, the throne of royalty, a city embellished with castles and palaces, its horizon decorated with monasteries and with schools, and lighted by the moons and stars of erudition.”

Jeans’ world was turned towards schools and finding ways for her children to succeed academically.

It was their future.

She looked at the *madrasah* with longing and admired the extravagant architecture of a town between Antiquity and Modernity.

Cairo was her city of high hopes.

Camelia started to become strongly committed to Islam and influenced positively everybody around her. She began to wear a headscarf at the time few Egyptian women liked to do so.

Jean was also taken by her sermons.

Geelan explains:

“My mother then had a dream that she saw the Prophet’s finger, *sallallahualahissalam* (peace and blessing be upon him). And she saw he was talking to her. And she was trying to enter the *masjid* (mosque) and he said: ‘First say *Asshadu Allah La Illaha Illah Llah* (There is only One Divinity worthy of Worship); have a shower and take your shoes off before you enter the *masjid*.’ So that she woke up with the words *Asshadu Allah La Illaha Illah Llah* and she said, raising her finger ‘I had it all in my heart’ and then she went to announce it and make the papers.”

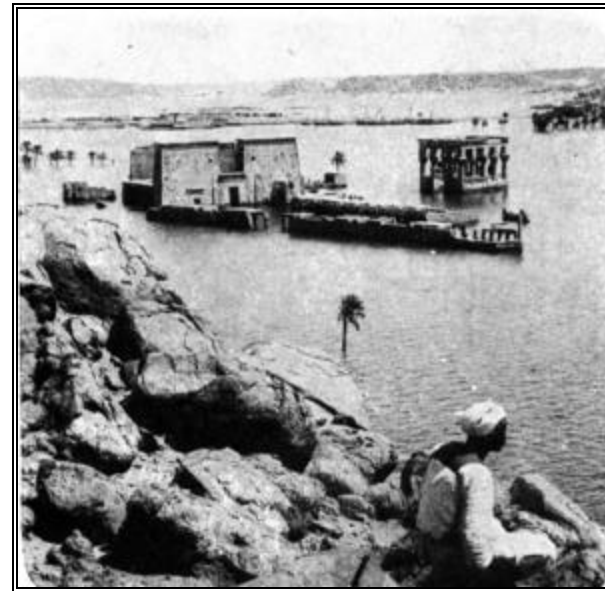
She did not want to leave the country so she probably had to prove she was a Muslim and a friend of Egypt. She did not want to let her children behind, actually the British citizen were leaving the country after the 1952 independence.

Camelia soon get married.

Jamal did his military service then decided to go to America. Since he was in charge of the family he made them come to him, to Texas.

Her last days in Cairo, Jean looked back at the place she had loved and had gone through so much. She hoped her children would find happiness where they were heading. She often sat on Cairo's bridge, looking at the alleys of big trees surrounding it. The evening sky was slowly covered line by line by apricot clouds. She liked to watch the wave of white egrets descending upon the trees in great wavering flocks, studding the branches as if they had suddenly burst into bloom. She thought about the future and she hoped to be one of these birds innocent as could be, returning everyday to this place of

safety. Se hoped she could also fly away and find a haven for her new faith, her new heart. And then, she would age in peace. She understood at last that life in made of trials to prove who are those who are the best people. No, she would not be bitter anymore; she would fight and be worthy of Paradise. Illness and sorrows would only strengthen this feeling. After all, she thought 'we are only passersby in this life'.



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