

My wife finally understood that I needed some time on my own . . .

I left her the big car and the driver so that she would be able to get around with the kids. I drove the smaller car to our chalet on the north coast, a three-hour drive alone with my thoughts and the voice of Umm Kulthum streaming from the cassette deck. At the gate, the security man checked my papers. In winter the resort management stepped up their security to prevent burglaries. A cool, refreshing breeze blew in from the sea. The place was completely empty and had the air of a fairy-tale town whose inhabitants had fled. All the chalets were locked and the streets deserted except for the lampposts. I drove past the main square and then turned up the street leading to our chalet. A new Japanese car suddenly appeared, driven by a man in his fifties and with a beautiful woman somewhat younger in the passenger seat. As they overtook me, I looked over at them . . . they must be lovers, come to the resort to get away from prying eyes. That had to be it. For such blushing languor and loving serenity are not typical of married life. The door of the chalet squeaked as I opened it. I followed my wife's instructions to the letter. I started by opening the windows, plugging in the fridge and removing the covers from the furniture. Then I took a hot shower and went into the bedroom to unpack and hang up my clothes. I prepared my seat in the sitting room next to the balcony. I telephoned to order food from the only place open in winter, and perhaps owing to the sea air wolfed down the food and nodded off. By the time I woke up, night had already fallen. I looked out from the balcony at the empty resort. It was dark

except for the strip of lampposts. I felt a little strange and then a worry came to my mind:

I was now completely alone and hundreds of kilometers from Cairo. What if something were to happen? If I had a heart attack, for example, or if armed robbers set upon me, would I be able to cope with any of those situations we read about in the newspapers?

My death would make a sensational headline: “Well-Known Novelist Murdered in Mysterious Circumstances!” I made an effort to pull myself together. Three kilometers away there was a new, well-equipped hospital I could get to if I suddenly fell ill, and there was no chance of a burglary with the security having been heightened at all the entry gates and even by the sea. The guards, all local Arabs familiar with the coastal region, patrolled twenty-four hours a day. But what if the guards got themselves together and started burgling? I decided that only happens in cheap detective novels. I took another shower. That was how I usually got rid of unwanted thoughts or feelings. Whenever I stood under the tap and felt the hot water pouring over me, I could calm myself down and clear my mind. Thus refreshed, I made myself a cup of coffee and set to work.

I connected my laptop to the printer and loaded a whole ream of paper. I had already proofread the novel a few times, but I resolved to go through it a final time. It would take me three hours, and I would end up not changing a single word, perhaps a comma or a period here and there. I closed the file on the laptop and went out onto the balcony, lit a cigarette and stared out at the empty street. I knew it would be hard to bring myself to print out the novel, that I would put off that singular moment as long as I could, but then, with a click, my novel would be born; it would come out into the light, suddenly transformed from the hypothetical text composed in my imagination into a finished, tangible thing with a real and independent existence. The moment of clicking on the print button always gave rise to strange and powerful ambivalence—a combination of self-satisfaction, gloom and anxiety. Self-satisfaction for having finished writing the book. Gloom because taking my leave of the characters has the same effect on me as when a group of friends have to depart. And anxiety, perhaps because I am on the verge of delivering up into other people’s hands something that I treasure. It will be the

same with my daughter—for as happy as I shall be at her wedding, the thought that I am no longer her everything, as I deliver her into another man's hands, will rip me apart.

I got up to make another cup of coffee, but no sooner had I stepped into the kitchen than, lo, another surprise. I could hear footsteps. I could not believe my ears. I ignored the sound and busied myself with the coffee, but the sound was getting clearer and louder. I cocked my head to focus my hearing, and I was sure of it. I was not dreaming. They were the footsteps of more than one person. I was glued to the spot. No one knew I was here, so who could these people be, and what might they want? The footsteps came closer and closer, and then the doorbell rang. They were outside, standing in front of the door. There was nothing to do but deal with the situation. I quietly opened the kitchen drawers one after the other until I found a long sharp knife and then laid it on the shelf opposite the door, within easy reach. I turned on the outside lamp and looked through the peephole. I could see a man and a woman, but I could not make out their features in the weak light. I opened the door slowly, and before they could utter a word, I said, "Everything okay?"

The woman answered in a cheerful voice, "Good evening, sir."

I kept looking at them. The man then spoke in the tone of someone addressing an old friend, "We are very sorry to bother you. But we have come to see you on a serious matter."

"I don't know you."

"Actually, you know us very well."

She smiled as she said this. I noted the confidence in her voice and responded, "Excuse me. I think there is some mistake."

"There is no mistake," she said, laughing. "You know us well."

The situation became even more curious. The man smiled and said, "Don't tell me you don't remember seeing us before?"

I started to feel afraid. I was having an odd sense of *déjà vu*. The man and woman did in fact look familiar, as if I had seen and spoken to them before, as if my previous meeting with them had lain buried in my memory and then suddenly resurfaced. In a loud voice, I said, "I don't have time for riddles. Who are you and what do you want?"

With disarming calm, the man answered, "Are you going to leave us standing at the door like this? Let us in and then we'll speak."

The strange thing is that I obliged. I stood aside and let them in as if I had suddenly lost control of my own actions. I could hear what I was saying and see what I was doing, as if I were another person. They came in slowly, walking around as if familiar with the place. They sat next to each other on the sofa, and I could finally see them in the light. The man was in his late twenties. Large but not flabby. Olive-skinned. Handsome. The woman was just over twenty, beautiful, winningly lithe of figure with fine facial features to match, glowing brown skin and beautiful green eyes. Her elegant outfit was straight out of the forties. The man was wearing a lightweight white sharkskin suit, a white shirt with a starched collar, a tightly knotted blue tie and spats. The woman was wearing a tailored blue outfit with a white collar and buttons and white hair clips and a straw hat on her plaited hair. They exuded a sort of vintage aura, as if they had just stepped out of an old photograph album or a black-and-white film. I had no idea what to think. I could not take in what was happening and thought that I must be hallucinating, no longer sure that the man and woman sitting in front of me were real.

The man opened a pack of red Lucky Strike cigarettes. He held one with two fingers and then tapped it on the back of his hand, before putting it in his mouth and lighting it with a small lighter. He took a deep drag and said, "I am Kamel Gaafar, and this is my sister, Saleha Gaafar."

"You can't be!"

He laughed and spoke slowly, "I know that this is a difficult turn of events for you to absorb, but it is true. I am Kamel Abdel Aziz Gaafar and this is my sister, Saleha."

I stared at his face and, suddenly angry, I snapped, "Listen. I am not going to let you waste my time."

"Please stay calm until I have explained everything to you."

"I don't want an explanation, thank you very much. I have work to do."

The woman smiled and said, "But we are part of your work," and the man added, "Actually, we are your work."

I could not answer. A shiver went through me. I could feel my heart racing. I was sweating and thought I was going to lose consciousness. Almost sympathetically, the man gave a friendly smile

and continued, “Sir, please believe me. I am Kamel Gaafar, and this is my sister, Saleha. God alone knows how much we like you. My sister and I are products of your imagination and have come to life. You dreamed us up for your novel. Your imagination led you to write down the details of our lives, and at a certain point as you outlined our characters, we came into being. We have moved from the realm of imagination into that of reality.”

I could not answer. I carried on looking at them. The woman laughed and said, “I can guess just how much this surprise has affected you, but this is the truth. We have come from the realm of your imagination to meet you.”

I remained silent, and the man carried on speaking amicably, “We have to thank you. It’s our good luck to be your characters. I can only admire your dedication to your art. You spend years writing a novel, and it is so rare to find novelists who put so much effort into it.”

“Thank you.”

I uttered those words sotto voce while absorbed with the thought that I was getting used to the strangeness of the situation. I looked at each of them in turn. Saleha smiled and spoke in her mellow voice, “Please don’t look at me as if I were one of the wonders of the world. You’re a great writer, and you know that there are many inexplicable extrasensory phenomena. You sweated blood and tears to create living characters. And now we are actually alive and in front of you. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

In a loud voice, I said, “Let’s assume that you are speaking the truth, and even that you are Kamel and Saleha Gaafar; what do you want from me?”

Kamel smiled broadly, tapped the ash from his cigarette into the ashtray and said, “Ah. You see, sir. We have come here in all seriousness to stop you from printing out the novel.”

“By what right?”

“The novel is really rather good, but it is lacking a few things.”

“Such as . . . ?”

As if by some prearranged plan, Saleha smiled and chimed in, “Some of our thoughts and feelings are absent from the novel.”

“I have expressed the thoughts and feelings of my characters quite well enough.”

“You have expressed them from your point of view.”

“Naturally. I’m the author.”

“Why don’t you let us speak for ourselves?”

“No one has the right to interfere with my work.”

Kamel remained silent for a few moments, as if he was looking for the right words, and then said gently, “Sir, please trust us. We know just how much effort you have made, but you can’t describe our thoughts and feelings by proxy.”

“That’s what all authors do.”

“But our case is different. We have come to life. It is our right to be able to speak for ourselves. We have got some important elements that need to be added to the novel.”

I rose from my seat and shouted forcefully, “Listen. It’s my novel. I wrote it from my imagination and experience. I will not allow anyone to add a single word that I haven’t written.”

Saleha also stood up and moved closer to me. I recognized that she was wearing “Nuit de Paris” perfume. She said, “I don’t understand why you are getting so upset, sir. We only want what is best for you. If the novel is published before we have a chance to add our thoughts and feelings, it will be a great loss.”

There was nothing left to say. I made up my mind, walked over and opened the door and told them, “If you don’t mind . . .”

“Are you asking us to leave?” cried Saleha, giving me a look of rebuke. Her green eyes were strangely affecting. “We haven’t done anything to deserve such heartless treatment.”

“Please leave the house immediately.”

Kamel got up first, followed by Saleha, who said, “You insist on humiliating us. All right. We’ll leave. But I want one thing from you.”

She opened her travel bag, took out a CD in a transparent cover and said, “This is a version of the novel in which we have recorded everything that happened in our lives.”

“For heaven’s sake, I am the one who wrote the novel!”

“You might have written it, but we are the ones who lived it.”

There was no point discussing the matter any more. I was almost at the end of my tether and on the point of doing something stupid. Saleha was standing there, smiling, her hand stretched out with the CD, but when she realized that I was not going to take it, she

carefully set it down on the small table. They left, shutting the door gently behind them. I had no idea what to do. I lit a cigarette. Good Lord, what is going on, and who were these people? Were they con artists or simply mad? What were they up to, and how could they know the names of the characters in my unpublished novel, which no living creature apart from me had read? Could fictional characters really come to life? There is a whole science called parapsychology that seeks to explain otherwise inexplicable paranormal phenomena. The worry I'd had earlier resurfaced. I might be ill. Was I mentally disturbed and suffering from hallucinations? If I had been a drug user, I could have solved the matter with one drag of hashish. I had tried it once, but it left me feeling so dim-witted that I have avoided it ever since, and I have no idea how some authors manage to write at all while under the influence.

In my case, writing demands total concentration. I returned to my senses and realized that the two visitors must have been real and that, overwhelmed by the shock of it all, I had treated them badly. I should not have told them to leave. I should have made them stay until I had got to the bottom of things. I should have overcome my sense of amazement and listened to them. I opened the door and ran down the steps. Maybe I could catch up with them. I would apologize and bring them back to the chalet. I had to find out what was going on. They could not have gone far. I strode down the garden path, but when I reached the street, I became completely befuddled. Had they gone left or right? If I went the wrong way, I would lose them forever. I noticed one of the security guards, in his distinctive blue uniform, sitting on a wicker chair on the opposite pavement. I rushed over to him, and he stood up. I asked whether the man and woman who had just left my chalet had gone toward the sea or the desert road. To my utter astonishment, the guard said that he had not seen anyone.

I described them to him, but he reiterated that he had been sitting there for hours and had seen no one go in or come out of the chalet. I stopped trying to contradict him and started looking around, but I was only clutching at straws. I hurried off toward the sea, and then I returned and rushed off in the opposite direction, hoping that I would catch sight of them. But they had completely disappeared. I knew that my efforts were futile. I went back to the house, panting,

and slowly walked up the steps, overcome by an unexpected anxiety. I must be sick. I was suffering from hallucinations. People were appearing before me whom no one else could see. I could feel the sweat dripping down my forehead and almost hear my heart beating. It occurred to me that there was only one way to find out whether this was merely a vision or reality. I unlocked the door and flicked the switch on the wall, flooding the sitting room with light. I blinked hard and looked at the table. The CD was there. Exactly where Saleha had left it. I relaxed. With trembling fingers, I removed it from its cover and slid it into the laptop. It took a moment for the laptop to recognize it, and then I started to read.

The story started when a man called Karl Benz met a woman called Bertha.

In the only extant photograph of him, Karl Benz appears distracted, his mind so preoccupied by something other than the details of daily life that he has forgotten to do up the buttons of his jacket as he stands for the camera. His face appears to show a deep-grained sadness, a look of despondency left by a hard childhood. His father, a railroad engineer, had died in a terrible accident when Karl was just two, and his mother fought hard to provide him a good education. Still, he had had to start working at a young age in order to help support his siblings. The photograph shows his intelligence and determination, but it also portrays him as somewhat distant, as if he is looking at something on the far horizon that only he can see. Bertha's photograph, on the other hand, reflects a special type of beauty, one not sensual but brimming with maternal tenderness. Still, the captivating graciousness and angelic modesty of her features cannot hide a steely determination of her own and a readiness to sacrifice herself for duty.





It was July 20, 1872. In the German city of Mannheim, the church was full to the rafters with men and women in their Sunday best, so many people having been invited that some had to stand during the ceremony. Despite rebukes and reprimands, the children kept babbling and fidgeting. The smell of the freshly painted church walls permeating the hot air did nothing to relieve the stifling heat as the women muttered and rapidly fanned themselves with their patterned silk fans. Suddenly, cries of joy went up, along with scattered clapping, as Karl Benz appeared in his elegant white suit, arm in arm with his bride, Bertha, who glittered in a beautiful gown of green French lace encrusted with small clusters of diamanté, the gown glistening and the deep round neckline showing off her exquisite skin. It was pulled in tightly to highlight her fabulous waist and below that puffed out in a bell shape like a ballet dancer's costume. The couple walked slowly up the aisle to the altar and then repeated the marriage vows uttered first by the corpulent priest, who, due to the heat, took a sip after every sentence from a glass of cold water placed near him and wiped the sweat from his brow with a large white handkerchief.

Karl held Bertha's hand and spoke his vow in a staccato and rasping voice, as if he was reticent about the words. When it was Bertha's turn, her face reddened slightly, her breath becoming irregular, and the words came out in the disjointed fashion of a schoolgirl reading out a difficult text for a demanding teacher: "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I take thee, Karl Benz, to be my lawfully wedded husband. To have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part."

A dinner for the family and some close friends followed the ceremony. Just before midnight, Karl opened the door to their new house, and Bertha paused before walking across the threshold. She thought about how one part of her life was coming to an end and a

new one was beginning, and she whispered a prayer to God to bless their life together.

The bedroom was upstairs. Bertha had only ever permitted Karl to give her a few furtive kisses. Her vigilant Protestant conscience only allowed her to give her body to him after a licit marriage in the house of God. Thus, their first act of physical union took on a unique and celebratory dimension, every last detail of it to remain imprinted in her memory forever. Bertha, her whole life long, never forgot those first spontaneous, confused, eager, feverish yet delightful moments—their attempts at conversation on a scattering of subjects, the speechlessness which struck them both, how Karl edged toward her and started kissing her gently, his warm breath smelling of cigar and alcohol and the feel of his prickly mustache and the fresh aroma of his white silk pajamas mixed with that of his body. She would always remember how she almost passed out from shyness as she whispered to him to turn out the light, the string of kisses that made her body gradually relax until she felt she was swimming in a wide-open void and then the way their bodies clave to each other in a strange yet familiar way, causing her at first a little pain, which soon gave way to the wonderful feeling that they were now truly joined together for life.

Bertha would always recall those days with a smile of satisfaction and tenderness. Those first days of marriage were a period of utter contentment. She did everything she could to make her husband happy, in the hope that they would create an upright Christian family that would be like a fruiting tree in the Lord's garden. Unfortunately, though, clouds started gathering and obscured the sun. Bertha quickly found out that her husband was more eccentric than any other man she had known or heard about. He was different from her father and brothers and the husbands of her friends. He sometimes appeared so unpredictable that he could almost be two different people in one body.

The gentle, mild-tempered and affectionate Karl whom she loved and married could be suddenly beset by demons and turn into another person, absentminded, irritable, nervous, ready to quarrel over the slightest matter. He could be curt in a way that she had never expected. He could become unfathomable, shrouding everything he

did with such secrecy that she started to wonder whether she really knew anything about him.

She knew that he was an engineer at a workshop and that he had set something up with a partner in order to earn a living. One day he came asking her to lend him a sum of money to buy out the partner. She did not hesitate for a moment but handed over the amount from her own savings, with Karl kissing her hands in gratitude. He said excitedly that he would never forget her kindness, but within a few days he had gone back to his odd ways. He told her that he had rented the cellar of the Millers' house in the next street as a workshop. There, he said rather brusquely, he would be able to finish what he had started in the workshop. Then he avoided answering any of her questions, smiled cryptically and left the house.

Karl started spending long hours at the cellar, refusing to allow Bertha to see it, and when she asked him who was cleaning the place for him, he pretended not to hear. As the days passed, his behavior became more erratic. He would settle himself down in the far corner of the sitting room, smoking a cigar and saying nothing, completely aloof from everything around him, when suddenly he'd jump to his feet and rush out of the house as if he had just remembered some urgent chore. He would be gone for hours on end and, when he returned, would carry on as if nothing was awry.

One night when they were in bed, their bodies joined in the passion of lovemaking, Bertha opened her eyes and, in the glimmer of light coming through the window, she saw his face. Karl, in their most intimate moments, looked distant and distracted. He was with her in body but his mind was elsewhere.

That night Bertha realized that she had lost him forever. She agonized over having a husband who seemed to be thinking of something else when making love to his wife. Then it came to her in a blinding flash: Karl must be in love with another woman. This was the only way to explain things, but who was the other woman? Was she more beautiful than Bertha? How and when did they fall in love? Why did he not marry her instead of deceiving Bertha? Could she be sure that he had used her money to start a business of his own, as he claimed, or might he be spending her money on that other woman? Could she even be sure that he was using the cellar as a workshop?

The Miller family, known for their greed, might well turn a blind eye on adulterous activities in their cellar provided they received a decent rent.

Bertha was wracked by such doubts when one night she woke up to find Karl was not lying there next to her. She sprang out of bed and found him in his study, smoking and writing something on a sheet of paper, but the moment he saw her, he tried to cover it up. She asked him about it, but he tucked it away, saying, "I've got some work to finish tonight."

She stood there looking at him. Did he have so little shame as to leave his marital bed to write a letter to his girlfriend? She thought of lunging forward and grabbing the paper from his hand, come what may. But she hesitated and then just went back to the bedroom.

She lay awake wondering why she had not confronted him and why she had not snatched the letter away, the proof of his guilt.

Deep down, she was afraid of confronting the truth. Anxiety over her adulterous husband had been gnawing away mercilessly at her soul, and there was only the most remote possibility of his innocence. What if she were to confront him and he confessed to adultery? What would she do then? Should she tell her family, walk out on him? She had to think it through properly first. She decided to play for time while preparing to have it out with him, remembering that once you start out on the road downhill, there is no stopping.

One morning after breakfast, as he was about to leave for work, she was standing by the door to see him off and was surprised to hear him say, avoiding her gaze, "I won't be home tonight."

"For what reason?"

"I've got some work that I can't put off, so I am going to work through the night in the cellar."

Now, for the first time, Bertha could not control herself. She exploded, and her voice could be heard throughout the house, "Just stop it, Karl. I can't continue putting up with your lies. What work would make you spend the night out of the house? What do you take me for? I am neither a child nor a fool. I know what has been going on. You're cheating on me, Karl. But why live a life of lies with me? Leave me and go to her, if you're in love."

She said all of this, standing with her hands on her hips, her hair

disheveled, a look of fury on her face and her greenish eyes exuding bitterness and anger. She was raging, ready to fight it out, but then she burst into tears. Karl looked at her calmly, in a state of incomprehension. He knitted his brows and said nothing but tried to embrace her. She pushed him away forcefully, sobbing, and she shouted, "Get away from me!"

Then, suddenly, he grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the door as she cried out, "What are you doing?"

"Come with me."

He grasped her hand more tightly and pulled her outside.

The autumn sky was dull, overcast and threatening rain. Karl strode forth while Bertha tried to wriggle out of his grasp, almost falling a few times; they were such an odd sight that some passersby started giving them sidelong glances. When they reached the Millers' house, he led her down to the cellar and unlocked the door with his right hand while keeping hold of her with his left. The door screeched open in response to his kick. He pulled her inside, finally letting go of her hand to turn on the lamp.

Rubbing her now freed wrist, she looked around. The space was full of strange objects, machines great and small, bicycles of various sizes lying on the floor, a large blackboard covered with scores of equations, technical drawings hanging on the walls, a wooden workbench with engine parts on it with countless nails and screws in containers nearby. Karl sat her down on the only chair, and he leaned against the old wall covered in flakes of paint as he started to explain. As she listened to him, she started to put the whole picture together, and her sullenness turned into astonishment. When he'd finished explaining, she asked him a few questions, to which he gave straightforward and complete answers. Finally, there was nothing left to say, and a pregnant silence fell over them. Karl knelt down beside her, kissed her hands and knees and said, "Bertha, I love you. I will never love another woman. I am so sorry that my work has kept me away from you, but I have been working for years to achieve the dream I have been living for. I am trying, one day, to invent a horseless carriage. A carriage driven by a motor."

She flung her arms around him, pressing her nose into his hair, and whispered, "I love you too."

That night she gave herself to him as never before. Unfurling like a rose refreshed by the dew, she threw herself at him as if he had just returned from a long voyage, kissing him all over, cradling him like a child, as if her long mistrust of his faithfulness had turned, in an instant, into feelings of guilt, unleashing a torrent of affection. Thereafter, Bertha understood how to love her husband for what he was and not to wish to change him. She no longer cared if his mind wandered elsewhere when he was with her or if he spent the whole day outside the house. Now that it was clear he was not an adulterer but a devoted, industrious and upright Christian, nothing worried her any more. She could want no better. If he had things to do that took up most of his time, so be it. At least he would not be drinking, gambling or wandering, as many other husbands did. Bertha was happy and bore him four children. They took up most of her energy, and he carried on spending most of his time in the workshop, obsessed with his work.

One evening, as she was busy making dinner, the back door flew open, and Karl stood there with oil-spattered hands. “Bertha,” he cried, “drop everything and come with me!”

She had no idea why, but the overwhelming joy on his face was contagious, and so she dried her hands, undid her pinafore and went off with him. The moment she entered the workshop, she beheld something very strange indeed: a giant bicycle the likes of which she had never seen before, with three large wheels, two at the back and

one in front, and a seat wide enough for two people. Behind the seat was a metal cylinder from which hung a black leather drive belt.

Karl looked at her, gave a shout and clapped his hands. He threw his arms around her and lifted her up as he showered her with kisses. "Bertha!" he cried. "This is the greatest day in my life. I have made the first motor carriage in history." He went over to the carriage, took hold of the leather strip and explained, "Look. It doesn't need a horse to pull it. It is propelled by an engine!"

As the significance of what he was saying dawned on her, she exclaimed, "Oh that's wonderful. Thank God."

"Tomorrow," Karl said dreamily, "I'm going to register the patent in my name. I'll find investors for a factory. It'll be called the Benz carriage, and we'll sell thousands of them and earn millions."

A thought came to Bertha's mind, and she asked gently, "But, Karl, do you really think that people would buy this carriage?"

"Certainly. They won't need horses anymore. They'll drive my carriage. The Benz carriage."

"Karl, I don't know if it's that simple. It's hard to get people to change their ways, and I don't think that they'll spend their money on something they don't know anything about."

Then, as Karl looked at her pensively, she got up slowly and walked toward him with a look of determination. She took his head in her hands, planted a kiss on his forehead and whispered, "Karl, I am just as happy as you about your invention. I'm proud of you. But our work isn't over. It has just begun."

The next day Bertha set to work on her plan.

She invited Mannheim's most famous photographer, Tom Miesenberger, to the workshop. He was a tall, slim man in his seventies with completely white hair. His clothes were as shabby and creased as if he had slept in them. As usual, he was drunk on arrival and insisted upon receiving payment in advance. Then he spent the whole day taking pictures of the carriage from various angles. When he had developed the images, Bertha chose the most dazzling one for distribution in the local newspaper, accompanied by a paid advertisement, which appeared in the Sunday edition with the following text:

"The engineer Karl Benz is pleased to announce to the people of the city of Mannheim that, after long years of strenuous effort, he

has invented the Benz carriage, the first motor wagon in history. This carriage requires no horse to draw it but is driven by a small gasoline-powered engine. This astonishing new means of transport promises a great improvement to our way of life. Karl Benz will offer a demonstration of his motor wagon this Sunday, May 15, in front of his residence, at exactly one o'clock. All are invited to attend."

The advertisement caused a great stir in Mannheim and the neighboring localities, with controversy raging around the new invention: most people were simply dumbfounded and wondered how a carriage could move without being drawn by a horse. Some scientifically minded enthusiasts thought such a thing was theoretically possible while others publicly mocked Karl and his claim of a horseless carriage. His fiercest and most outspoken opponents, however, were the conservative Christians, who insisted that "the notion of a horseless carriage is impossible. The Lord did not create the universe in vain, and horses he created for us specifically to draw our carriages. This eternal truth cannot be altered by Karl Benz or anyone else."

The fundamentalists went all over Mannheim furiously uttering their imprecations: "You who believe in Jesus! This new carriage is not an invention but a trick sent by Satan, who will not rest until he has tempted the faithful and shaken their belief in God. Karl Benz is neither a man of learning nor an inventor. He is a swindler who, along with his wife, summons evil spirits. But Satan's snares are weaker than a spider's thread, as the Lord Himself has confirmed, and you will see for yourselves how these tricksters will meet a terrible end, in time the same punishment of all those who sell their souls to Satan."

The hubbub about the Benz carriage only grew until the naysayers and the yea-sayers, together with the merely dubious, were all swept along in a storm that engulfed all other topics of conversation in Mannheim.

By the appointed hour, Karl and Bertha had prepared everything meticulously. Karl had cleaned and polished the carriage until it gleamed all over, and the two then brought the carriage out of the workshop and set it in front of their residence. The whole street filled with onlookers, thronging the roads leading to the Benz residence until there was so much pushing and shoving that the police had to come and restore order. At one o'clock exactly, Karl Benz appeared

accompanied by his wife. He was wearing a light-gray suit with a white shirt and a deep-red bow tie. Bertha was wearing an elegant sky-blue dress, bought especially for the occasion, and a matching blue hat with white ribbons.

The whispers started to turn into a clamor as the couple edged their way through the assembled throng toward the covered vehicle. Then with one flick of his hand, Karl pulled off the tarpaulin. Some shouts and nervous laughs rang out from the spectators. Karl stood looking at the crowd, as if he were about to speak. When the crowd had quieted down, Karl spoke out in a shaky voice:

“Ladies and gentlemen! I would like to thank you for coming here today, and I should like to confirm that you are about to witness the beginning of a new era, a moment that will change the world. One day you will tell your grandchildren that you saw the first Benz motor wagon. Here is a carriage that has no need of a horse and is propelled entirely by means of a rear-mounted engine. It is also easy to handle, as you shall now see for yourselves.”

Karl placed his right foot on the step attached to the undercarriage and climbed into the driver’s seat. There was almost total silence as people jostled forward to see exactly what would happen. They held their breath and stared at Karl, who struggled to keep smiling as he held on to the steering handle with his right hand and grasped the black leather drive belt with his left hand. He gave the latter a violent pull, and the carriage gave out a loud, angry roar, puffing out thick smoke and then lurching forward. The crowd shrieked in unison as if they were aboard a wildly swaying ship sinking into the ocean, and as if, until that moment, they had been absolutely convinced that what was happening in front of their eyes was real. The carriage set off down the street, the crowd running after it, shouting and clapping and cheering, with Karl in perfect control of the machine, steering it easily and capably like a masterful rider bending his steed to his will. As the carriage sped forward, Karl steered it onto the main road, the people still running along behind it. Karl was doing so well that a triumphant smile appeared on Bertha’s face as she watched.

Karl managed to follow the road until he came to a large tree, where he pulled on the metal brake arm. He gave it a few sharp pulls, but unfortunately, it did not respond. Karl was struggling to control

the steering handle, but the vehicle, now moving at full throttle, as if in defiance, started to meander wildly before mounting the sidewalk, where it crashed into a tree and overturned. Thus ended the excursion, with the carriage upturned and its wheels hissing and turning as the motor whined and blew out thick smoke. The carriage looked like a giant nightmarish insect lying on its side, unable to right itself. And Karl was stuck underneath it, choking from the smoke and coughing loudly. He finally managed to wriggle free, his face, hands and elegant suit all covered in oil. There was complete and utter silence. The stupefied onlookers needed a few moments to absorb what had just happened, but their feelings, momentarily suppressed, all burst out at once, and they started shouting, jumping and laughing like madmen. Karl left the carriage where it lay and, with his head downcast, walked back to his house with Bertha following him as he endured the mockery raining down on him from all sides like poisoned darts.

“Oy, Mr. Benz! At least a horse doesn’t overturn our carriages!”

“You want us to give up our horses and ride a carriage of death?”

“Thanks for the comedy show, Mr. Benz. You should do it in a circus!”

“That’s your due for challenging God’s laws.”

“Tell your spirits to make you one that doesn’t flip over next time!”

The following days saw the couple subjected to more grief and gloating. Benz’s carriage became a laughingstock in Mannheim, and no sooner had the newspapers expressed encouragement for the invention than their tune changed to trenchant sniping. Karl felt unable to go out in public. Worst of all were the drunken layabouts who would fill up on wine in the tavern and then, having nothing else to do so early, go to Karl Benz’s house to gawk at the carriage. Some plucked up the cheek to knock on his door and pretend to want to see the horseless carriage as a serious customer thinking of buying one might do. Karl realized that they were probably nothing of the kind, but on the slightest chance that they were, he would lead them to the workshop anyway, and no sooner would he start describing it to them than they would start bombarding him with stupid questions and comments. Only when dead certain that they were making fun of him would he walk to a chair in the corner, where he would sit quietly until they had had their fun and left. Karl bore all of these tra-

vails, and Bertha did her best to ease his anguish either with sincere words of consolation or else by ignoring the subject and carrying on as usual. But his disappointment was like a heavy black cloud casting a shadow over the couple wherever they went.

One hot August day, Bertha suggested that they take their supper in the garden. She had prepared Karl's favorite dish of roast chicken, and they drank a bottle of chilled, refreshing rosé. She tried to make the dinner enjoyable, or at the very least ordinary, by speaking about anything other than the carriage and the failed demonstration. Everything was going well until a man in his late forties in a white shirt and blue trousers suddenly appeared at the garden gate. They wished him a good evening, whereupon he said in a loud voice, "Excuse me, sir. Are you Karl Benz, who invented the horseless carriage? If it's no trouble, I'd like to see it."

Karl said nothing for a moment and in a deep voice replied, "I'm very sorry, but there's nothing to see."

"What do you mean? I'd like to see the carriage you invented."

Karl looked down for a moment and then raised his head toward the man before quietly repeating his response, "There's nothing to see."

The man kept looking at him and then with a bow politely said, "All right, Mr. Benz. I'm so sorry to have disturbed you. Have a nice evening."

That night, the couple lay stretched out near each other in bed, in the dark, saying nothing. Bertha put her arm around him, and as if on command, he shifted his body a little and laid his head on her chest. She asked him gently, "Why wouldn't you show the carriage to that man?"

He said nothing for a few seconds, then sighed and in a weak voice, as if speaking to himself, replied, "I'm just tired of being taken for a fool, Bertha. I just can't stand any more of those skeptical glances, the preposterous questions and the gloating laughter."

"They are the fools. They have no idea of the value of your invention."

"Stop it, Bertha, my darling, I have failed. That's the truth of the matter, and I have to face up to it. I have been building a castle in Spain, chasing a chimera."

He said nothing for a little and then continued in a whisper, "Ber-

tha, please swear as God is your witness that you won't talk to me about the carriage ever again."

His head was still on Bertha's bosom. They fell back into silence, and she felt his body start to tremble. Her Karl was weeping. She thought her heart would break, and she held him firmly. They stayed like that, clinging to each other, until she heard his breathing become regular, and she could tell that he had fallen asleep. Gently, she placed his head back on the pillow.

She stayed sitting up in bed, wide-awake and musing away in the darkness. By the time the first glimmer of light came through the open window, she had made up her mind. She tiptoed to the wardrobe and took some clothes out in the dark, went downstairs and got dressed in the sitting room. She then woke up her two sons, Richard and Eugen, who were fourteen and fifteen years old, respectively. She asked them to get washed and dressed as quickly as they could. When they asked her where they were going, she thundered back, "I'll tell you later."

She carefully opened the front door to avoid its squeaking and then stopped as if she had just remembered something. Leaving the children standing there, she went to the kitchen and on a large piece of paper in large letters she wrote, "Karl. Don't worry about us. We've gone to visit my mother. Back tomorrow."

She pinned the note where he would see it when he woke up. Then she went out and locked the front door. Holding her children by the hand, she walked them to the workshop, where the three of them pushed the carriage onto the street. Then she helped them in, sitting between them on the seat. She grabbed the leather drive belt with both hands and jerked it as hard as she could. At that moment, the motor growled and gave off a puff of smoke, and the carriage lurched forward.

The morning call to prayer sounded, and Ruqayya opened her eyes and whispered the profession of faith. Then she slid out of bed and shut the bedroom door quietly behind her in order not to wake up her husband, Abd el-Aziz Gaafar. She went to the bathroom and lit the boiler, then walked to the kitchen. She prepared a tray with breakfast for the guests and made sandwiches for the children to take to school. By the time she went back to the bathroom, the water was hot, so she laid out her clothes for the day and took her morning shower as she had done every morning since getting married.

At that time, she was living in Upper Egypt with her mother-in-law (may God have mercy on her soul), who used to observe whether she took a shower in order to know if she had had sex with Abd el-Aziz the night before. From then on, a morning shower was Ruqayya's way of covering up her private life. Over time she just got used to starting her day with the feeling of being refreshed. After showering, she would carefully dry herself and put on a clean, ironed galabiyya, go upstairs carrying the breakfast tray covered with a napkin and put it down outside the guest room on the roof, which was reserved for relatives who had come to Cairo from Upper Egypt for one reason or another—for medical treatment, to get some official papers or on business.

The guest room was spacious and had a sink, a toilet and a separate staircase. Abd el-Aziz's house was always open to relatives, and he considered putting them up just as much his duty as he did taking care of his own children. Ruqayya would then set about waking up the children. Mahmud, the difficult one, would always require a few

attempts because he would just go back to sleep each time. She was patient with him, forgiving whatever mischief he'd get up to. Some months after his birth, she had noticed that he was a bit sluggish and had taken him to a renowned doctor in Aswan who told her that the boy would have developmental problems. Thus it was no surprise that Mahmud kept having to repeat a year at school. At the age of seventeen, he was big and bulky, since he spent all his free time and energy lifting weights.

After her first attempt to wake Mahmud, Ruqayya would go and wake his older brothers, Said and Kamel. Kamel was stick thin, and the moment he felt her touch on his head, he would open his eyes, sit up and kiss her hand. Then he would wake up his brother Said. Ruqayya liked to leave Saleha until last, to let her have a little more sleep. After the children washed and dressed, they would sit around the table. Ruqayya always tried to make them a delicious breakfast: eggs, cheese, fava beans and fresh bread with tea and milk. Then she would sit cross-legged on the sofa with her left hand holding the string of ninety-nine prayer beads as her children lined up and bowed to her one after another. She would place her hands on their heads and utter a Quranic verse over them to keep them safe.

She would not let them leave the house together for fear of the evil eye. People might look at them and say, "There go the Gaafar children," and some disaster or illness might strike them. She insisted that they leave the house one by one, none setting out until the one before had reached the end of the street. Said would always wriggle out of taking his sister, Saleha, to school, whereas Kamel willingly walked with her to the Suniyya school and then took a bus to the university.



Mahmud was always the last to leave. His mother would make him swear by the holy Quran that he would really go to school and not go off to play football in the street or to the cinema. He never argued with his mother. All her children had inherited the light-brown Gaafar skin tones except Mahmud. He was coal black, like a Sudanese. At school when students teased him for being a dullard and for the color of his skin, he would fight back and beat them up. On those

occasions, he hardly knew his own strength. The previous year he had been in two fights, splitting the brow of the first boy and breaking the arm of the second. This led to the headmaster's warning Mahmud's father that the next fight would mean expulsion. That was a day from hell. Abd el-Aziz gave Mahmud a good beating, shouting at him, "It's not enough for you to be too stupid to get anywhere at school, but you have to go around strutting like some tough. I swear by God Almighty that if you touch another student I'll come to school myself and show all your friends how I beat you."

She never forgave her husband for doing that. Poor Mahmud. He was simpleminded and needed to be handled gently. Every morning, before he left the house, she would kiss him, say a few providential words of prayer over him and give him the same advice, "If someone upsets you, don't start a fight! Just walk away from him and say the *fatiha* in your head."

Mahmud would agree and embrace her. Feeling the power of his muscles, she could not help but be a little proud. After her children had left, she had time to herself until nine o'clock, when she had to wake up Abd el-Aziz. During her free time, she would prepare herself a cup of mint tea and sit by the window. She would listen to the cries of the hawkers and the sounds of the cars in the street below, as well as the voices of the children and office workers. But on this particular morning, she was exhausted. She had not slept well the night before. She sat staring out the window without seeing anything. She did not even notice the taste of the tea. She realized that in two weeks' time she would have lived in Cairo for five years. Good Lord, how quickly it had passed. The day she left Daraw for Cairo had been a great event. People said that, apart from the time that the great nationalist leader Sa'ad Zaghloul famously made a visit to Upper Egypt, the train station at Daraw had never been so crowded as on the day she and her four children left for Cairo. On that day the people come to bid them farewell clustered both inside and outside the station, at the entrance, in the station hall and on the platform. All the important families of Daraw had members to bid her farewell: the Mahjubs, the Abd el-Maquds, the Oways and Shayba families, even the Balams in spite of the tense relations with the Gaafar family due to an ongoing dispute over some date palms to the east of the town—their sense of duty had

overcome past bitterness, and they sent ten men with their wives and children to take part in the farewell formalities. They were all fond of her. Her husband and first cousin was Abd el-Aziz Gaafar, one of the foremost residents of Daraw. He had inherited property and money from his father and was renowned for his decency and respectability, always doing his utmost to help out his relatives, neighbors, in fact anyone from the town. Alas, his debts had started piling up, and he had to sell off his land bit by bit. Now, over forty years old and almost penniless, he had to move to Cairo in search of whatever work he could find. There was great sympathy from the people of Daraw, since whenever they had needed money, Abd el-Aziz had given them loans from the goodness of his heart, as well as helping them in other ways. They all felt partially responsible for his bankruptcy. Ruqayya saw expressions of deep sympathy and love on the faces of those who had come to see them off. To them, she was the very model of an authentic Upper Egyptian woman, sticking by her husband come what may, supporting him with the same determination in good times and bad.

All those feelings were present on the day of their departure, like a large cloud casting its shadow on the scene. Ruqayya got out of the carriage with a big beautiful smile on her face, a smile of fortitude and complete acceptance of her fate and what more might come. The younger children, Saleha and Mahmud, were clutching the hem of her black outer coat, and the two older boys, Said and Kamel, walked along behind her. Each of them was carrying a suitcase and a basket on his head. The largest suitcase was being carried by her brother Bashir on his shoulders. The people thronged toward her, surrounding her, and she started greeting them and thanking them one by one. She shook the men's hands and embraced and kissed the women. Some of the women were crying, while others gave Mahmud and Saleha honey and sesame sweets. Mahmud ate them up straightaway, but Saleha, more clever and with better manners, waited until her mother gestured her permission. Then she took out one of the sweets and said in a clear voice, "Thank you, uncle!"

Ruqayya was making slow progress. The moment she finished shaking one hand, more hands appeared. Then they started addressing her in the traditional manner, as the mother of her eldest son, "We hope all goes well, Umm Said!"

“Have a good trip and come back safe and sound, in sha Allah!”

“Give our regards to Abd el-Aziz!”

It took Ruqayya ages to reach the platform, where the train was already waiting. She made her way with her children trailing behind her and her brother scurrying along with the suitcase on his shoulder. She pulled herself together amid the well-wishers and caught sight of some women from the Balam family. She made her way toward them and embraced them warmly, and still holding the hand of the clan leader Abd el-Al’s wife, she said loudly so all could hear, “Thank you so much for coming. It means so much to me.”

Abd el-Al’s wife was so overcome by Ruqayya’s kind words that she embraced her again, looked her in the face, and with her voice full of feeling, she said, “God knows how much I love you, Ruqayya.”

“And I love you too.”

“You Gaafars are the cream of our town.”

“No, you Balams are the ones who have done the most for us all. It was Satan, may God curse him, who came between us. May God guide us all. Kith and kin may have squabbled with each other, but blood is thicker than water.

“May God preserve and look after you, Ruqayya.”

At that moment, Bashir came over to his sister, Ruqayya, and whispered something in her ear. She nodded and carried on talking to Abd el-Al Balam’s wife. It would not have been right for her to bring the conversation to an abrupt end. She knew that her every gesture with Abd el-Al al-Balam might be misinterpreted and could reignite the family feud again.

She carried on talking to the woman for a few minutes more and then moved off to greet some other people. This time, however, Bashir, almost hauled her by her galabiyya toward the train whose angry whistle and thick smoke augured its imminent departure. The onlookers all started shouting, and Ruqayya grabbed Saleha and Mahmud, and with Said and Kamel and Bashir following behind, she started running as fast as she could.

Ruqayya sipped her tea and a smile appeared on her face as she remembered how, due to the throngs of well-wishers, she missed the train that day. Whenever she recalled that to her neighbor Aisha, she would laugh heartily, joking about the stupidity of the Upper

Egyptians. Bashir had to reserve new tickets for them on the next day's train and then had to go around to all the houses in Daraw asking them not to come to the station again. All complied except for Abd el-Barr, son of her cousin Oways, who insisted on coming to see them off again. When her brother tried to dissuade him, he flushed with anger and said, "Just as she is your sister, Ruqayya is my cousin. I swear to God that even if she were to miss the train a hundred times, I would go to the station to see her off."

Abd el-Barr indeed went to the station again, and Ruqayya was grateful to him for that. They had grown up together, and there had even been talk of marriage, but fate is fickle, and she knew that his insistence on seeing her off was not entirely innocent. Abd el-Barr might still have been in love with her after all this time, but she did not even dare to think about that out of respect for her husband, Abd el-Aziz, who meant everything to her. After twenty-five years of marriage, she could still recall her wedding as if it had happened the day before. That night there had been a huge feast, and celebratory gunshots had reverberated all over Daraw. The feasting went on for a whole week, and people commented enviously that the camel carrying her to her husband's house was groaning from the weight of all the gold that her bridegroom had given her. It was a sight to remember. In Daraw she had a large house with a spacious sitting room, a garden with date palms, servants, jewelry, horses, camels, cattle and poultry, and, most important, a wonderful husband. He never behaved badly toward her or beat her. He never put her down, and she knew that he would never cheat on her. When at first she could not get pregnant, his mother (may God have mercy on her and forgive her) started urging him to take a second wife. She would say to him, within Ruqayya's earshot, "You're a man. You have to produce a son. Take another wife alongside Ruqayya. It is what God commands."

Any other man would just have taken another wife. Had he done so, no one would have blamed him. He refused, however, and announced that he would have only Ruqayya, even if she could never have children. How could she forget such magnanimity? When his mother asked Shaykh Mash'al to make an amulet to help her get pregnant, Abd el-Aziz received him coolly and said, "You can keep your amulet. I will not do anything the Prophet forbids. Whether we

have children, live or die, or manage to support ourselves—they are all matters over which we can never argue with God.”

He fell silent for a short while and then added sarcastically, “If you are such a good friend of the genies, Shaykh Mash’al, why don’t you ask them to cure the rheumatism eating away at your bones?”

After two years of trying, they were blessed by God with six children, of whom two died, leaving them with four. Then came the great ordeal of her husband’s bankruptcy. Praise be to God. The Lord chooses some men to receive his bounty and exposes others to catastrophes. Who ever thought that she would end up starting a new life in Cairo? Abd el-Aziz worked his fingers to the bone to provide them with a decent living: he rented a spacious flat in al-Sadd al-Gawany Street in the Sayyida Zeinab district. It had four rooms and a sitting room, plus a room on the roof with a separate entrance and staircase. The rent was high, and the needs of their children cost a fortune, not to mention the cost of looking after the ever-present guests, as well as the expenses of food, tobacco and clothing from time to time. God gave him strength, and somehow he managed to find enough money and to cope with his menial job—even though his whole life long he had been a property owner in Daraw. When he handed over to Ruqayya his first set of work clothes, a yellow uniform with brass buttons, to be ironed, he just said, “I work as a storeroom assistant, and this is my uniform.”

At that time she made a huge effort to hide her feelings. She prattled on about inconsequential matters and laughed as she carefully ironed his uniform. She folded it into a small case, said good-bye as he went out the front door and then burst into tears. Would Abd el-Aziz Gaafar, a man from a decent family, have to do a menial job for all eternity?

God be praised for everything. She stopped daydreaming, glanced at the clock in the sitting room and noticed that it was after nine. She rushed into the bedroom, opening the door quietly, and looked at Abd el-Aziz’s face as he slept. How she loved this man. She loved him for his strength, his determination and his pride. How could he cope with all these ordeals? Many other men would have given up the ghost, but Abd el-Aziz was a believer and accepted whatever God dealt out to him. She shook him gently to waken him, and he got out

of bed. He took a shower and made his ablutions before saying his morning prayers and getting dressed. As he was sitting down to his breakfast, she set her plan into motion. She sighed and said, "May God give you the strength to support us all, dear Abd el-Aziz. May he grant you sustenance so you can sustain us."

There was silence. Abd el-Aziz carried on carefully cracking his boiled egg, and as he laid the pieces of shell on his plate, he asked her calmly, "Is there something you want?"

Ruqayya sighed and whispered slightly apologetically, "The ration book for the cooperative shop . . ."

"At the end of the week, God willing. Anything else?"

"By God, I'm a little ashamed to mention it. You know how troublesome Said can be, but he has set his heart on buying a new shirt."

"Whatever."

He finished eating, lit a cigarette and sipped his coffee. Ruqayya seized the opportunity and moved the subject on a little. She smiled and said, "I have a request, my darling Abd el-Aziz, and please, I beg you by the Prophet, don't embarrass me for asking you."

"Well?"

"I want to sell two of my bracelets and buy a Singer sewing machine. You know I have always loved making clothes. I could buy a sewing machine and do some piecework. Even if I don't earn a fortune, at least I will be sitting respectably in my own home, and every extra piastre will help us."

Abd el-Aziz looked at her. He gave her that familiar look of someone who does not like what he has heard. He responded in a tone of sour derision, "You want me to come home from work and find you busy with customers?"

"A bit of work never hurt anyone."

"So the Gaafar house will become a seamstress's workshop for all eternity?"

She knew he would never agree, but she did not lose hope.

"All right. Let's forget the sewing machine. Now, Saleha . . ."

"What's the matter with Saleha?"

"If she were to leave school and stay at home, we'd save the school fees."

"Shame on you, woman. So I should work my fingers to the bone

to pay the school fees for Mahmud, who is stupid and keeps failing, and we should keep our brilliant and clever Saleha at home and throw away her future?”

“Her future is to get married and have children.”

“As long as she wants to keep studying, that’s what she must do.”

“I’ve got another thought.”

“You’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately, Umm Said!”

He spoke the latter words as he stood up and unhooked his tarboosh from the peg, and as he was straightening it on his head, he said, “Don’t worry, Ruqayya. We’ll see, by the grace of God. I’m certain.”