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Live a life ... get another one for free – A Work in Progress

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Panel: Writing as Recovery

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Live a life ... get another one for free – A Work in Progress

By Ahmed Shafie (Egypt)

The undersecretary was a tall, slim, bald, nice looking old guy who would turn 60 and retire within six months of summoning me to his office. He received me with a grin that turned to a hesitant smile as he said: “Boy, you might have a chance.” “A chance of what, Sir?” I asked. He said sternly, “Of surviving my son”.

It was the year 2000. I was a 23-year-old kid, freshly graduated from the department of English literature at Benha University, newly appointed as a translator in the state information service (SIS) affiliated then to the ministry of information (now to the president himself, wow).

That meeting took place a few months after I joined. The undersecretary told me that I would be transferred from the translation department to work in the chairman’s office where I’d translate, write letters, answer the phone and deal with other challenges.

The chairman, who would be referred to here by his initials read as NO, or Mr. No, to give him his deserved credit, was a very professional and brilliant man. Working with him provided one with a myriad of experiences that would otherwise take years to acquire, if at all. But at the same time, Mr. No was very rude and insulted everyone. He was also a very influential person who once put at least one person in jail when he got angry with him.

“I prefer to stay in the translation department, Sir. It’s what suits me most”.

I always dreamt of joining the translation department of SIS. I was still a teenager when I heard that a relative of mine was a translator for SIS and worked only four hours a day, three days a week. I said to myself “this is precisely the job for you, Shafiensky. The rest of your life will be filled with reading, writing and hanging around the streets of Cairo.”

“I’m afraid you don’t have the luxury of choice, son. You’re the only one who fits the requirements stipulated by the chairman.”

My first novel is about a girl working in an institution that sends its staff abroad to represent their country, Egypt, and gets paid in lucrative American dollars. The institution is corrupt and nobody can travel abroad without good connections and bribery. The girl, named Soso, works with the chairman who is practically a criminal. She can’t quit. She also cannot bear the daily pressures and the oppressive atmosphere. One day, Soso decides to go to a little town in Egypt to spend a week with her sister. There, she meets a guy named Ashraf, whose nickname is *The God of Postponed Dreams*. He teaches her how to look at the world in a new way. “Soso, you need a safe haven. You need a window from which you can look upon the real world and see how little and humble it is, and how pitiful its people are. Soso, you have to live a parallel life inside your mid. Soso, forget about dreams, forget Egypt and Europe. Daydream Soso.”

All of a sudden, the girl sees the gigantic chairman of the institution and how pitiful he is. She sees that if he were not the chairman he wouldn't be anything. He turned out to be a suit and a tie full of air. Soso says that this guy might literally starve if it weren't for Egypt.

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In the first weeks of working in Mr. No's office, I used to arrive home late and live a little through my avatars. I was Ashraf, the God of Postponed Dreams, as much as I was Soso, the naïve girl who needed to know what everyone knows: the real world is not enough, we sleep every night in order to tell the real world that we can sometimes do without it, and when we sleep we step into dreamland where we encounter the better and more bearable version of ourselves and our lives.

In the mornings I would meet the chairman with a smile, part of which was aimed at him as a man I really knew how to admire, but another and more important part of it was aimed at a character that I was increasingly creating and discovering.

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And I once wrote in a poem:

Yes, the poet survived

Yes, he got out of Hell

The way I get out every night from work

Winning a new start.

5

In 2003 Mr No retired.

In 2005 I left the SIS, then Egypt, to start anew somewhere else.