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Writing Sample

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Excerpt from *Taxi*, Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation, 2011.

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Khaled ALKHAMISSI
From *Taxi* (2011)

One

'You know when you have a scruffy old shirt that's in an awful state and stinks, and it's been too small for you for ages? And you've got into fights in it as well and it's spattered with blood, and you'd bought it secondhand in the first place and the guy who had it before you was a criminal on the run who's hiding out in Sharm el-Sheikh? You have three options with that shirt: first, you can burn it to get rid of it for good, and go and buy a new one; second, you can have it altered to fit you and buy some new cloth for it, and try to remove the blood stains and the stench; or third, you can give it a good wash and have it ironed with one of those old-fashioned foot-irons and tell yourself: "That's the easiest way and there's a chance I might lose weight again." That's what's happening now with the political system after Mubarak scrambled and went off to Sharm el-Sheikh. We want to set fire to the whole of the old system because frankly the stench is unbearable now. The army seems to want to give the old shirt a good wash and iron and have us wear it again, and if that doesn't work, they're thinking of patching it up, bringing in a few new people to act as sleeves, and even if the old shirt doesn't have buttonholes, we'll just have to go with it.'

He was a man in his late fifties, so large that the buttons on his own shirt would hardly stay in their holes. They had to reach around as far as they could to hold on to the other half of the shirt. His paunch was pressed so tight against the steering wheel that it almost prevented him from turning it. With every move the taxi made, with every bump in the road, his vast belly shook and I could hear the buttons straining to pop. I looked at his shirt and saw it was filthy. 'If the system's anything like your shirt, it'll need plenty of material to smarten it up,' I told him. He laughed and the whole car shook. 'I bought this shirt before Mubarak came to power,' he replied. 'That means it's about 30,000 years old. I should have had it burned long ago, just as we should now set fire to the whole of the old system. The time's come to make a clean start. Today my son told me the demonstrations will continue right across Egypt to tell the army "You helped us and we're grateful, but now you have to understand we don't accept the wash and iron process you're trying to sell us.'"

'And which shirt do you like?' I asked him, 'the white one, the green one, the red one or the flashy one?' 'We've seen every colour and we can see what happens abroad,' he answered. 'Democracy, what a joke! Democracy in America brought Bush and in Italy it brought Berlusconi, and there are plenty of others like them. We've seen billionaires manipulating policies and people, and we've seen the worst of times with thieving presidents. No one's happy with the state of politics. Here in Egypt most people won't accept a state based on religion and at the same time they won't accept a state that's hostile to it. We want a shirt that's tailor-made for Egypt, our own shirt, I mean a shirt that smells of jasmine, made of Egyptian cotton. It would be the colour of the Nile, a shirt that makes us feel free when we wear it so we know we're working the way we should be for our country. These days everyone wants to work. They want to be productive. They want a government that knows how to make the most of that feeling every Egyptian feels deep down. Look around you. Look at people's dreams floating in the air, waiting for someone to grab them. If someone blew a trumpet today, you'd find all 90 million Egyptians standing in a queue. You wouldn't hear any nonsense then, or smell the smell of fear coming out their mouths. Then you wouldn't ask what colour the shirt was. Then our new shirt would sprout wings, or it'd be fitted with a motor that makes the person wearing it fly. A shirt that fits every one of us,

thin ones or fat ones like me.'

I asked him, 'So who do you think will win – the laundrymen or the inventors?'

'Who are those inventors?'

'The people who invent the Egyptian shirt that smells of jasmine.'

'Look, the laundrymen who used foot-irons are long gone. It's a trade that's died out, extinct. Now the army's trying to bring it back to protect the old regime, but the inventors are the future. My son tells me the jobs we have today will all disappear. The new jobs will depend on inventions and innovation, because my son's in the faculty of engineering, may your children be as lucky. He got top grades at school and managed to get into the faculty, a fine young man who spent three weeks in Tahrir Square. His mother was terrified but I told her to let him be. "It's his future," I said. And when they started killing the young people, my heart sank but I took heart and told myself to be brave, because after all that it wouldn't do to send the shirt to be ironed. Even if the laundrymen win for a short while, in the end the inventors will definitely win. Believe me, we'll win in the end, even if we have a long way to go.'

Two

I came out of the Galaxy Cinema after watching Yousry Nasrallah's excellent film *Gate of the Sun*. I'd seen the two parts back-to-back and I was positively elated by this stunning work. My heart was racing and I felt like I was levitating two inches off the ground.

I stopped a taxi in Manial Street and before sitting down I asked the driver to take me downtown. 'Get in,' he answered faintly.

I got in, shut the door, looked in front of me and saw the cave scene from *Gate of the Sun* on the windscreen of the taxi, the only space that wasn't taken up, and my heart filled with the beautiful music of my friend Tamer Karawan. Then, after a while, I realised that the car wasn't moving and the road in front of us was empty.

I looked at the driver and found him in a deep slumber. I didn't know what to do. Should I get out and leave him to sleep? I hesitated a while and in the end I touched his shoulder. He shuddered in alarm, then robotically put his hand on the gear lever and set the car in motion. 'Where do you want to go?' he asked. 'Downtown,' I said. He apologised for his lapse but within a few seconds the car was veering off towards the left.

I looked at the driver and found his whole body was also veering to the left – he was fast asleep again!

I shouted in alarm and grabbed the wheel. The driver woke up, saved the situation and again apologised. I asked him to stop so that I could get out. He swore blind that he wouldn't fall asleep again and that he would deliver me downtown safe and sound.

My elation from Yousry's film had vanished and my heart had stopped fluttering. Instead a sense of anxiety and foreboding had gripped me, and indeed, before a minute had passed, I found the car veering to the left again and the driver's body was leaning right towards me until his shoulder touched mine.

I shouted out again and he brought the wheel back to straight, assuring me hurriedly that he wasn't asleep. Then he started talking to keep himself awake. 'You see, I've been driving this taxi for three days now without a break. I haven't moved from it once', he said.

'Three days? How do you manage that?'

'Today's the 27th,' he said. 'I've got three days left before I have to pay the instalment on the car. The instalment's 1,200 pounds a month. Three days ago I gave my wife a solemn oath that I wouldn't come home without paying the whole instalment. I only had 200 pounds towards it then and I haven't left the car since the time I got in, except to piss, excuse my language. I eat in the car and drink in the car but I don't sleep. I have to get the money and I have to pay it by the end of the month.'

'But what use is it if you get the money for the instalment and die?' I asked. 'Because you could have an accident and end up dead, and take me with you too.'

'The rogue has nine lives, and our lives are in God's hands,' he answered. 'And yours truly is a real rogue. I'm nearly there, just some three days to go and I'll have made the money for the instalment.'

'OK, so why don't you take a nap for two or three hours? It won't make any difference. Make it three days and three hours, man.'

'I swore a solemn oath, and you don't understand, sir. We live from day to day, and meal to meal. I mean, if I went home I'd find a hundred and one disasters. I'd find the children hadn't eaten and their mother at her wit's end. No, sir, no way! I won't get out of this taxi till I reach Ibrahim Issa and pay him the instalment and it's all wrapped up. After that I'll go home.'

Deeply troubled, I left him. After I got out of the taxi, I stood and looked at the car as it drove off into the distance, expecting at any moment that the driver would fall asleep and disaster would strike. But the car did not swerve as it drove off and disappeared completely from my field of vision.

Three

'If I told you what happened now you wouldn't believe me,' said the driver. 'I've been driving a cab for twenty years and I've seen all sorts, but what just happened now was one of the most amusing things that has ever happened to me.'

'Go on then, tell me,' I asked.

'A woman in a face veil stopped me in Shubra and asked me to drive her to Mohandiseen. She got in the backseat and she had a bag with her. As soon as we were out on the Sixth of October Bridge, I saw her looking right and left, and then she took the veil off her face. I was watching in the mirror, because, look, I have a small mirror under the big mirror so that I can see what's happening in the back. You have to be on your guard. As the saying goes, better safe than sorry. Anyway, then I found her wearing a headscarf instead. I was surprised but I didn't say anything. A little later she took off her headscarf and she had her hair up in curlers. Then she started undoing the curlers and putting them in her bag. Then she took out a round brush and started combing her hair.

'I looked in the mirror in front of me, and she yelled: "Look in front of you!" "What are you doing?" I asked her. "None of your business. You drive and keep your mouth shut," she shouted back at me.

'Between you and me, I thought of stopping the car and making her get out, but then I thought: "What's it to me?" So I held out to see what else she would take off. Next thing, I found her taking off her skirt. Nice, I thought, we'll have a free view. I looked again and found her putting on a short skirt and thick black tights that didn't show anything. She folded up the long skirt and put it in the bag. Then she started taking off her blouse. My eyes were transfixed on the mirror and when the car in front of me suddenly braked I almost ran into it. She shouted at me like a madwoman: "Hey, old man, shame on you, keep your eyes on the road!"

'I saw she was putting on a tight blouse, and pretty too. Honestly, I didn't reply back. She put the other blouse in the bag and started getting out some make-up stuff and putting on lipstick and rouge on her cheeks. Then she took out an eyelash brush and started working on her eyelashes. In short, by the time I was coming off the bridge into Dokki she was a completely different woman. Another human being, I tell you, you couldn't say that this was the woman in the veil who stopped me in Shubra.

'She finished off by taking off the slippers she was wearing, taking out a pair of high-heel shoes and putting them on. I told her: "Look, miss, every one of us has their quirks but for God's sake tell me, what's your story?"

'The girl looked at me and said, "I'm getting out at Mohieddin Aboulez."'

'I kept my silence and didn't repeat the question.

'After a while she started telling me her story: "I work as a waitress in a restaurant there, respectable work, I'm a respectable woman and I do honest work. In this job I have to look good.

"At home and in the whole quarter I can't come or go without wearing that veil. One of my friends got me a fake contract to work in a hospital in Ataba and my family think I work there. Frankly, I earn a thousand times as much working here. In a single day I can get in tips what I would earn in one month's salary in the mouldy old hospital.

"My friend at the hospital gets 100 pounds a month from me to cover up, an opportunistic girl who only looks out for herself. Every day I drop in on her place and get changed. But today it wouldn't have worked to go to her place so I had to take a taxi to change in. Any other questions, Mr Prosecutor?"

'Lady, I'm no prosecutor, and if I saw one, I'd fall flat on my face. But they say that he who cooks up poison tastes it. You changed in my taxi and I wanted to know why. "Once

one knows the reason, the wonder ceases," I said, and thanked her for telling me the story. Now honestly, isn't that a strange story, sir?'

Four

My God, how old is this driver? And how old is this car? I couldn't believe my eyes when I sat down next to him. The wrinkles in his face were as many as the stars in the sky, and every wrinkle pressed gently against the next, to make the kind of Egyptian face sculpted by Mahmoud Mukhtar. His hands gripped the steering wheel, and as he stretched out or retracted his arms, I noticed the prominent veins, like watercourses nourishing the dry land with Nile water. He trembled slightly but the steering wheel did not move to left or right. The car kept moving dead ahead, and from his eyes, beneath his giant eyelids, there emanated a state of inner peace, pervading me and the world with a sense of reassurance.

Just by sitting at his side, through the force field he emitted, I felt that life was good. For some reason I remembered my favourite Belgian poet, Jacques Brel, and how wrong he was when he suggested that any form of death was preferable to growing old. If Brel had sat next to this man, he would have rubbed that poem out.

"You must have been driving a long time," I said.

"I've been driving a taxi since 1948," the driver replied.

I hadn't imagined that he had been in the trade for close to 60 years. I didn't dare to ask how old he was but I found myself asking about the outcome. "And what, I wonder, is the essence of your experience, that you can tell to someone like me so that I can learn from it?" I said.

"A black ant on a black rock on a pitch-dark night, provided for by God," he answered.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'll tell you a story happened to me this month so that you understand what I mean."

"Please do."

"I fell seriously ill for 10 days and I couldn't move from bed. Of course I'm pretty poor and live from hand to mouth. After a week there wasn't a penny in the house. I knew, but my wife was trying to hide it from me. So I say to her: "What are we going to do, missus?" "Everything's just fine, Abu Hussein," she answers, though she'd been begging food from all the neighbours. Of course my children have enough worries of their own, one having married off half his kids and not knowing how to marry off the others, another having a sick grandchild and running around the hospitals with him, I mean there's no point asking them for anything. It should be me helping them. After 10 days I said to the old woman: "I've got to go out to work." She insisted I stay and kept yelling that if I went out it would be the death of me. To tell the truth, I wasn't up to going out but I told myself I had to. I told her a white lie and said I would sit at the coffeeshop for an hour, for a change of air because I was going to suffocate. I went out and started the car and said: "Oh God, oh Provider." I drove along until I reached the Orman Gardens and came across a Peugeot 504 broken down and its driver waving at me. I stopped and he came up to me and said he had an Arab man going to the airport and could I take him because his car had broken down? Do you notice the wisdom of God? He had a Peugeot 504 in prime condition and it broke down! I told him I'd take him.

"The passenger got in with me and he turned out to be from Oman, from Sultan Qaboos's place. He asked me how much I would charge and I told him whatever you pay. He doublechecked that whatever he paid I would take, and I told him okay.

“On the way I found out that he was going to the freight depot because he had some goods to clear. I told him that my grandson worked there and could help him with the customs clearance. He said okay, and in fact I went and found my grandson there and on duty. Take note here that of course I might not have found him. We cleared the things he wanted to clear and I took him back to Dokki.

“Again he asked me: “What will you charge, old man?”

“I said we’d agreed on whatever he would pay, and he went and gave me 50 pounds, which I took and thanked him and started the car. He asked me: “Satisfied?” and I answered that I was.

“Then he told me: “Look, old man, the customs duty should have been 1,400 pounds and I paid 600 pounds. That makes a difference of 800 pounds that I’ve saved myself and that means it’s your due, plus 200 pounds as the taxi fare. Here’s 1,000 pounds and the 50 you have is a gift from me.”

“See, that means one fare brought me 1,000 pounds. I could work a month and not earn that. See, God brought me out of the house and made the Peugeot 504 break down and set up all the elements for Him to provide me with this income. Because it’s not your earnings and the money’s not yours. It’s all God’s. That’s the only thing I have learnt in my life.”

I got out of the taxi regretfully, for I had hoped to sit with him for hours and hours more. But unfortunately I too had an appointment, part of the same constant struggle to make a living.

Five

I often take taxis with drivers who don't know the way very well and don't know the names of the streets. But this driver had the honour of not knowing any street at all, except of course the street he lived in. His absolute ignorance of Cairo astounded me, as though he were a blind man walking for the first time in a grand palace.

"What's up, man?" I said. "Aren't you a driver or what?"

"No, really sir, I'm not a driver," he said.

"So what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a smuggler."

"A smuggler!"

"What's wrong with that?" said the driver. "That was the last will and testament of my late mother. 'Son,' she told me, 'the way of the wicked is the way you can make a living in this country.' And anyway, I don't smuggle anything wrong and I don't do the country any harm. On the contrary, I do it good, I mean, it's something for one to be proud of."

"Are you having me on?" I asked.

"By the Holy Koran I am a smuggler. What happened is that my father died and I came to bury him, and this is his taxi that I'm working on until I work out what I'm going to do in life."

"And what do you smuggle, for God's sake?" I asked.

"I'm still a young boy and I've been working for a few years with a business woman in Salloum. With God's help we smuggle smokes from Egypt to Libya, I mean we buy honest to God in Egypt and sell honest to God in Libya. Didn't I tell you we benefit the country? You could call me a patriotic lad."

"What do you mean, smokes? Drugs, you mean?"

"Drugs? Do you honestly think you'd find someone in the drugs trade driving a taxi and working himself to exhaustion, and I'd tell you I'm a smuggler, just like that? Do you think I'm stupid or do you think I'm stupid? Smokes means cigarettes, packets of imported cigarettes."

"How does that work? What do you do?"

"It's a very simple business. There are several business women in Salloum who employ men under them and we're their apprentices. Our business is we buy the passports if we're clever for 10 or 12 pounds, 15 at the most."

"What do you mean, you buy passports?"

"Because everyone has the right to buy six cartons of cigarettes from the duty-free shop. We make a deal with everyone coming out of Libya to buy the six cartons of cigarettes on his passport. The six cartons cost about 175 pounds, plus the 10 pounds for the guy with the passport, that makes 185. In one day we buy about 200 passports and then we smuggle the cigarettes into Libya. Because the Musaid customs post is easy, I mean people coming in cars

get searched but if they find someone going across on foot then he can cross with no problem. We put the cartons of cigarettes in cloth bags and put them on our shoulders. After we smuggle them into Libya we sell them there for about 42 to 45 dinars, and the dinar then was worth four pounds 75, so one passport would bring in about 20 pounds profit. On the whole amount we'd come out with 4,000 pounds a day. That's the business, sir, an honest business."

"But I don't understand, aren't these cigarettes available in Libya?"

"These are particular imported brands from the duty-free shop and the Libyans love them. Should we tell them not to like them? I mean, it's all useful work."

"Do you smuggle only cigarettes?"

"No, sometimes we used to bring in a few videos and cassette players from Libya to Egypt from time to time. But the Salloum customs post isn't like the Musaid post. They are merciless. If they saw a bag walking along on its own, they would arrest it. But we still managed to cope, because I've been there for years. My father was a taxi driver all his life. He wanted me to drive his taxi, may he rest in peace. My mother said: "Your father held us back and always gave us a wretched life. Son, go and find yourself some modern work, work which earns you some money. Can't you see how all the people around us are doing? Travel. Go to Libya and maybe the Good Lord will give you a break. But as I was on my way to Libya I found this work smuggling cigarettes. I thought my prayers had been answered and I used to send my mother everything I saved, thank God, I made her happy for a while until the good Lord remembered her. She was a real mother, may she rest in peace."

"So are you planning to hang out in Cairo driving your father's cab?" I asked.

"No way, sir. I saw with my own eyes, and no one need tell me, how my father lived all his life. I saw with my own eyes how he died without the money to pay for a shroud, and what's coming is worse than what's past. I'll work any honest job that brings in money, even as a gangster."

Six

Ramadan, just before the cannon was fired to mark the end of the fast, and I was carrying a big picture, waiting for a taxi to appear, if necessary from the sky. It was about 10 minutes before the cannon and it's hard to find a taxi at that time. But divine intervention sent one to me like an angel on the Night of Revelation. He truly was a black angel with black wings coming from the black south, the most beautiful part of Egypt, Aswan, with a heart that was black, the colour of purity and beauty.

"The picture's very big," said the driver. "It won't fit on the back seat. Would you like me to tie it to the roof rack?"

"We don't have time for that if we're to be in time for the iftar meal," I said.

"Nothing will happen if we're a few minutes late," he said.

The black angel got out of the taxi and fixed the picture to the roof of the car and off we went, gently and without hurry. The man was in his late 50s, with gentle features and a melodious voice.

"Are you an artist?" he asked.

"No, but I was just visiting an artist friend of mine," I said.

"Portrait or landscape?"

"I really don't know exactly. That's a very specialist question. Are you an artist?" I said.

"I used to like painting a lot. Ah yes, I used to paint."

"Used to. And why did you stop?" I asked him.

"Ah, I've stopped lots of things. As you go along you leave things behind you and it's impossible to go back to them. The hands of the clock only move forward."

"So you gave up painting, and then?" I asked.

"Life's journey is long as you make your way along it. I've been around, traveled far and wide, been to Spain, Italy and France. I stayed in France a while and worked as a messenger in an Egyptian office. There on Sunday I used to go to the Louvre, because on Sundays it's free. Culture for Everyone. I used to sit all day long enjoying myself. I really loved David's painting of the Coronation of Napoleon. It has extraordinary detail and beautiful lighting effects. It's a big painting, about 10 metres by six and he painted it in 1805. But as you can see I'm done roving and here I am taking you to your destination.

"If you like painting that much, you should paint," I said.

"I like very many things. I waste all my money on my hobbies. I work on the taxi for a few hours then I stay at home the rest of the day and don't move. It's the nest where I get away from the world. I try to make it a comfortable nest. I live on the ground floor in Kattamia and I have a garden in front of the house. That garden I consider my own, and I work in it every day. I've planted honeysuckle, hyacinth beans, Dieffenbachia and Bougainvillea. I've also planted hibiscus with red flowers. That closes by day and opens at night. I'm also fond of birds. I have a big cage with about 20 birds in it. My wife just had a big argument with me

yesterday because I bought a pair of birds for 250 pounds. Those are birds that come from Brazil, really beautiful and gentle, but they won't breed in Egypt.

"How oh how could I spend all that money on a pair of birds?"

"I also have fish tanks with fantails and guppies.

"And I've made an Arabian-style sitting area on the ground, surrounded by the fish tanks and the birds, and in front of me through the window there's the garden. I feel like I'm in paradise far from the hell of Cairo."

"That sounds really beautiful," I said.

"Thanks. You know, sir, when I'm at home I feel outside place and outside time. I watch the fish and listen to the chirping of the birds and at night I can smell the honeysuckle. You should pay me a visit some time."

He talked to me about plants, art, fish, birds and beauty and he was an encyclopaedia on every subject. Where did he get all this knowledge? He complained to me of his son, that he wanted to obtain everything without any effort. He complained of his ignorance and remembered how he and his colleagues would go every evening for extra lessons in some field or other. He complained to me of how the world had made his son like this.

In that end that black angel left the taste of sugar in my mouth and the scent of honeysuckle in my soul. He made me, for the first time in ages, have my breakfast slowly, without haste, contemplating everything around me.

He made me in the end try to make my house a nest like the one he had described. But where can I find wings like his?

*Translated from the Arabic by Jonathan Wright
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