

## Cairo as catastrophe.

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Villages are filthy, or so say the Cairenes. They offer you their opinion with uneasy, sly grins, as if they are discussing a paedophile neighbour. Compared to the city, though, it is immediately apparent how much cleaner the village streets, shops and houses are in Egypt. Most Cairenes never see this with their own eyes because they never leave their neighbourhoods. Besides, what they really mean when they say "filthy" or *wasakh*, is backward, inferior. The city, civilization's nursery in the Islamic culture of the past thirteen centuries, is the ideal. No one denies that the same city also harbours everything that is unpleasant, bad or prohibited. However, the fact that all of this is possible makes a city great. A great city may indeed be least controversially defined by the feeling of superiority her inhabitants share – perhaps the only thing they have in common.

It is an attitude that is difficult to maintain for Cairenes at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Egypt's role on the world stage has diminished; its economy, reliant on tourism and collecting tolls on ships passing through the Suez Canal, has suffered greatly from the international crisis. Egypt's people, meanwhile, are placed before the obtrusive choice between religious fundamentalism and a tributary state. A recent television advert lays bare the despair this causes in Cairo, where one quarter of the Egyptian population and most internet users live. It is a cartoon film, featuring a mouse and a bear. The mouse joins a certain internet service provider and what happens next is that the bear shrinks and the proportions between the two animals are completely reversed. Apparently, letting the mouse grow did not appeal to the advertising agency; it would suggest a promise that cannot be fulfilled. But diminishing someone else... now that is something that could work in reality too. One part of the mouse does grow, though. It is in its pants and he pushes it towards the camera, while he dances. There you have it: all of Cairo, in 20 seconds.

My first impressions of Cairo are dark, grey, ashen, like the condensed exhaust fumes running in long vertical stripes down the concrete walls of large tower blocks, also home to loose pipes, cables for satellite dishes and air conditioners, washing lines, cables that keep the rooftop billboards in their place and the remains of sunscreens, a reminder of the time that people could afford them. These are the same city jungle creepers that have taken over the facades of the Ottoman and Italian villas and the Jugendstil or Renaissance-style buildings that remain standing. There are people who regard this as "the beauty of decay". Pretty blasé view if you ask me. It is neglect and impotence, it is economic and political rot and Cairo is a city full of people who feel ensnared, run aground.

Even in the smallest shops they do not greet each other. Like the characters in the stories by Naguib Mahfouz, they are oblivious of each other. Perhaps this is because no-one wants to give offence, perhaps it is fatigue or simply because it is impossible to wander open-mindedly among 20 million other people. Incidentally, Mahfouz himself was no exception, says the janitor of the block of flats next to the expensive but rather run-down building where the writer lived. 'You would see him pass through, every day, for years. But never a word.'

It happens that I live in a place, similarly run-down though slightly more expensive. But it sits on the same street in Agouza, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century neighbourhood, "where people still know each other." In the morning, I always pass a few men who are forever washing the same car, just a bunch of poor blokes who are paid to hold an overnight parking spot in front of an office entrance, so the owner can park his car there the next day. I have never seen these men make any jokes among themselves. For so long the car owner has been treating them as if they were thin air that maybe they feel the same way about each other. Cairo is a class-based society that justifies and encourages deep loathing for everyone who has a less than impeccable pedigree, or who is solitary or female.

At the grocer's a well-dressed woman reaches for a pack of biscuits. My eyes tell me that there is another woman present, wearing cheaper clothes, and closer to the counter – but maybe that is just my subjective observation. The upper class arm crashes into the lower class nose and the only thing that happens is that I feel a phantom pain in my own nose. When the gasman comes to check the meter, the only thing he utters is “gas”, followed by “eleven”, without actually acknowledging you. A newspaper reported on a suburban weekend fair: “...police officers told *Daily News* that in spite of the crowd there were no reports of sexual harassment.” Well hooray! No clothes were torn off. I have just been kidnapped and pawed by a taxi driver and earlier today I was suddenly embraced by an old wiry guard in a museum, behind a stuffed camel. But that is a long way away from sexual harassment. If nothing worse happened during the weekend fair, then that is quite exceptional.

The boorishness and aggression are tied in with culture and history, a bad economy and a dangerous government – and, inevitably, the size of the city. There is not enough to go around. ‘Egypt is rich, you know,’ someone said the other day, ‘but there are many more of us today, so everyone gets half of what they were used to.’ But not everyone can accept living on half an income or half the attention without endangering one's very existence. So people talk as if through loudhailers, bicycle bells must sound like alarm bells and I have seen girls shooting pellets the size of tennis balls through a classroom.

The social class environment dictates that those who are doing well need to let everyone know. So you can hear a casual phrase like ‘Well, I was driving my Mercedes past Talat Harb and for a minute it looked like rain...’ Cairenes will tell you which brand car they drive, they show ostentatious piety (half the men have a calloused spot on their foreheads to demonstrate their praying zeal) and they will let you smell the fact that they have just had a really heavy meal. In public, without embarrassment.

I am not sure what annoys me more: this ostentation or the sermon that the loudspeaker shrieks across my neighbourhood every Friday afternoon. Close your eyes and suddenly you know what it sounds like: the tail end of a live radio report of a horse race. Aggressive drivers turn traffic into living hell. Some people are getting richer and there are so many cars now in Cairo that they drive around at an average of 10 kilometres per hour. In 2013 this will slow to 5, researchers say. So whenever possible, drivers try to catch up on lost time and there is not a single pedestrian who can stop them. Sometimes you hear a bump. Look around and you will find someone get up, remove dust from clothes and then jump onto the pavement.

Cairo shares a lot of characteristics with those other megalopolises on the African continent: poverty, a dreadfully inadequate infrastructure, people improvising to get some space, some water...and beautifully, it somehow all fits and everyone manages to live together – in those other cities. Not in Cairo. One evening, I got into a taxi. The driver had attached a box of tissues upside-down to the car roof, where you would normally find the light. ‘That's nice,’ I said. He smiled and said: ‘Yes. It's pleasant now, isn't it? A little cooler. I like working in the evenings. It's hot in the daytime, I am nervous, everyone is nervous. I was born here but I would want to leave if I could find work somewhere else. Too many people here. I want to enjoy my work, deal honestly with everyone, I want to have friendliness around me. But you must always fight, always be faster than the other person and always pay *baksheesh* if you want to carry on working.’ Often I have the feeling that taxi drivers think of me as a psychologist: a neutral outsider, partly visible, sitting in the backseat, and listening rather than talking in Arabic. Just one word about the weather or the traffic and out it comes: fear for the future, fear of fundamentalists, or the neighbours, corruption, poverty or loss of freedom.

Freedom is losing space on all sides. On the one hand, there is the fundamentalism, which started gathering strength some 20 years ago and continues to grow. There are endless discussions on popular commercial television stations financed by Saudi Arabia about the Islamic length of trousers and beards and the best camouflage for a woman. Many imams would not know what else to discuss with the faithful. Members of the Coptic community report that they are responding in a similar extremist manner, hiding behind simple and immovable notions of what is good and bad. On the other hand, opposed to the Muslim

Brotherhood, is the government, a dark and omnipresent force, like the big black police trucks you see everywhere. Government censorship of the press has become more frequent and intrusive, the authorities use brute force against demonstrators and have put 500 bloggers behind bars. Passing through Champollion Street one day I saw a policeman running. He was middle-aged and rather heavy-set, so I was wondering how long he could keep the pace up. He entered a doorway while motioning another policeman. Moments later they dragged someone out of the doorway. And then? Human rights organisations say some 80,000 people are being held without trial and few if anyone knows where they are and for how long they are imprisoned. Most of these inmates are poor and politically inactive. The principle the government seems to hold is that keeping the pressure on is a good thing.

And in that pressure cooker, the country's largest newspaper Al Ahram writes this on the day president Mubarak turns 81: 'We love his glorious history, patience with us and our problems, toughness in facing external national security threats and how to evenly deal with problems without exaggeration or underestimation.' This is just one sentence from a long article. Ordinary Cairenes do need to catch their breath after reading stuff like this. But then, few people gain any confidence from contemplating life after Mubarak.

There are places where Cairenes can come up for air, provided they live not too far away or can afford a bus ticket. Statistics say that there is twenty times less green space available than in your average European city but in the more affluent neighbourhoods there are many public parks and gardens. Some city dwellers think that this is a carry-over from the time the Soviet Union was influential in Egyptian city planning but the parks and gardens were already there as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the city rulers planned open spaces for popular leisure. They have become large transit points for traffic. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Azbekiah Park and the Zoo were designed following examples from Europe and indeed, as soon as you enter these and other parks you are immediately struck by the slightly kitschy romanticism of those days: imitation caves, small paths that zig-zag in all directions, fish tanks and imitation Japanese gardens with lilac flowers and pink statues of Buddha. These are sanctuaries. On Saturdays, they turn yellow and purple as young people dressed in the latest style shirts and headscarves enter and behave in ways that would get them beaten up in any other part of town. Families show up for a pick nick, mothers come to play with their toddlers and a lady and a gentleman are having an earnest conversation. Nobody is looking at anybody else, and here I find that quite charming.

So there, Cairo has its brighter side. I will even begin to miss the sounds in my street. All day long, men pass through with their carts and shout their wares to the blocks of flats above them. *Esh* means bread and the men stretch the word to "aaa-eeeesh", singing it like the "straw-ber-rieeees" in Porgy and Bess. The sound of horseshoes announces the arrival of the greengrocer. His son walks behind the horse-drawn cart and echoes his father with a boyish intonation of "oranges" and "melons". "Bikiya" is the call of the rag-and-bone man, it sounds like a bird. Someone sells earthenware and announces himself using a tom-tom, gas salesmen hit an empty gas bottle with an iron stick and the water seller rattles two small copper dishes.

I also enjoy the less pastoral things. I feel at home buying a kohl pencil or an oven glove in the undergrounds women's compartment, one of the 'privileges' Egyptian women have, according to an official website. I feel like an outsider, but then one who sits on the front row in the theatre, when a young man jumps into this compartment by accident. As the doors close, he discovers his mistake: women everywhere! He walks to the far end of the compartment – where of course the door is also shut – the way I would walk past a Doberman. There is not a single metro ride that does not leave you in stitches or gawking in amazement. On a long bench sits a girl with a cake. She is going to eat it. You can tell from her friends that she goes to school but she herself is completely covered in a black *niquaab*. How on earth are you going to eat dressed like that? Through the slit before her eyes? Or will she remove the headscarf and have a quick bite between two stations? Carefully, she begins kneading bits of the cake to the end of the cellophane packaging. She does it slowly; maybe her station is still far. Will it happen before I get off? Yes it does. She takes the headscarf (it almost reaches her navel) between thumb and index finger and holds it far away from her body, roughly at the height of her collarbone. She clearly does not want the vanilla cream to

make spots on the garment. The other hand, holding the partly cellophane-free cake, disappears under the curtain, she bends forward and takes a bite. It reminds one of nothing else but inserting a tampon. What a mistake, the *niquaab*.

Back home I am soothed by scenes on the flat roof across the street. Those roofs are the private equivalents of the city parks. Women do not wear headscarves when they are out there, even if hundreds of neighbours can see her. It is their own home, their own intimacy. The sun goes down, I watch. I see a small girl in white pants running around with her arms turned towards the sky, like a bird. On another roof, there is a football game going on. The women are standing side by side with their arms and bosoms on a low wall; they are looking down onto the street while their ample behinds point to the sky.

The charming thing about Cairenes is perhaps that they don't get into each other's hair more often. A 1956 Master Plan for city development stated that the city should never have more than 3.5 million inhabitants. There are 20 million Cairenes today, mostly because unemployment is high in every other Egyptian city. Sixty per cent of all government expenses go to Cairo and add to that the enormous amounts of money that Gulf State citizens spend here on their summer holidays. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians move into the capital every year. Millions of inhabitants have no drinking water or sewage system.

The plans for Cairo – or indeed their execution - have not gained in realism since 1956. For instance, satellite cities have been built in recent years, without rail links and with very few roads leading to the city centre. This was by design: people would stay in the satellites. The truth is that far from enough people moved there at all. So in the older areas of the city, population density is now 50,000 per square kilometre (Amsterdam, capital of densely populated The Netherlands manages 4,000 per square kilometre). Pavements have been ripped apart and if they are intact they are covered with stuff: the shops have burst their stock onto the streets. The chaos and obstacles get on people's nerves, especially since they have no influence at all on the way the city is run. But you never hear them complain about the lack of physical space. There is a limitless preparedness to squeeze in. I know a little old woman in Bulaq who lives contentedly in a bird's cage. Teashops are cramped in a box on the pavement, no larger than the meter closet. People use car wrecks as a storage room for their tools. Policemen rent out parking space, earnest real estate agents use the closet under a flight of stairs inside a block of flats as their office; janitors live there. Only the dead do not squeeze in; they dwell in vast open spaces and have their own tombs in their own yards. It must be a very fundamental equilibrium that is maintained this way.

By contrast, social controls have become virtually inescapable in Cairo in recent years, especially as they are cast in the iron mould of religious fundamentalism. My friend Mahmoud is an accountant at an independent radio station. He lives in a new suburban tower block. Just recently he congratulated the *bawwab*, as janitors are known here, with the Prophet's birthday. It was innocent and polite and he used one of the hundreds of standard greetings the Egyptian language provides. Fundamentalists abhor this kind of attention in the same way that Protestants condemn the Roman Catholic adoration of the Virgin Mary. Mahmoud should have realised that the *bawwab* had only recently decided to grow his beard and was reading, with great diligence, brochures about the correct gestures when doing the ablutions before prayer and other religious matters. Upon finishing his studies he was to be addressed as "sheikh". Finally, his father's dream had come true. His father, a migrant from Aswan or thereabouts, had come to the capital to help his children advance in the world. It might be that the son today does not eat as well as his father did but he has gained in self respect and in fact, he is really convinced of his station, well above those lost souls living in the upstairs apartments with their coca colas and whatever else they drag inside in their shopping bags. Maybe even alcohol. Mahmoud, himself a very pious man, got an earful from the *bawwab*. He replied: 'Calm down, this is how we have said things for as long as anyone can remember.'

'And that is why we have been doomed for as long as we can remember! Don't even dare to address me in this way, ever. Better still, don't talk to me at all because it is bad for good Muslims to listen to apostates.'

‘Apostates!’ Before Mahmoud had time to recover, the *bawwab* had called someone in, because Islam does not look kindly on false allegations. So he beckoned a pizza delivery boy, who happened to pass by on his moped and also had a beard. A total stranger to both men but sure enough, he immediately took the sheikh’s side: yes, the man in his tidy shirt came pretty close to being an apostate. This ridiculous conversation places Mahmoud in danger: the proselyte will just as easily find support from the police and legal authorities, should a conflict become more serious.

My own *bawwab*, Hani, is a more relaxed type. You find him sitting on the low wall in front of the apartment block’s entry, bare foot in one hand, mobile phone in the other, fiddling with both. Someone brings him a sandwich, another finds a way to give him a tip and Hani keeps the flow going by occasionally threatening to call the vice squad, not that he likes them around much either. Still, Dina, 31, unmarried and living with her parents, cannot go out on her own at night. There were times that she did leave the house but then the baker and the dispensing chemist instantly raised their prices when her relatives came in to buy things. They protested but the retailers simply said: ‘Well alright – but then we’ll tell everyone that Dina is bad.’ So it is the neighbourhood that guards virtue and faith and your tax rate can also be jointly established by your neighbours and the secret police. Plain clothes policemen walk the street and ask how well this grocer or that teashop has been doing lately. Many customers, a new display? Have a guess, how much would he sell? So his taxes may be raised. The upshot of all this is mistrust. ‘Never answer the question where you are going,’ a neighbour impresses upon me. Cairenes have family – but no friends.

Freedom may be characteristic of cities, there is not much of it in Cairo. Is this a city then, because it has scores of cinemas and thousands of prostitutes? Or is it a collection of villages? There are neighbourhoods that maintain the *duxla baladi*, the “village wedding night”, where proof of virginity is not required by showing a blood-stained sheet but by having a few male witnesses present. Let us call that *wasakh*, filthy and backward. Many people never leave their area because crime reigns in other parts of the city, or so they say. They never know which parts are so crime-ridden. “Of course”, they love the neighbourhood where they were born and they never want to leave. When times are uncertain, this is what people do: hold on, and whatever you do, stay part of the group.

The uncertainty also feeds the nostalgia that permeates all layers of city culture, like warm nougat. King Farouk, the deep voice of Oum Kalthoum who died in 1975, furniture in Versailles-style, all this is highly popular. For thirty years now there has been an Oum Kalthoum puppet show, every first Thursday of the month, the same day she would always perform. The puppets are boring and the music is provided by worn-down cassettes but people of all generations still flock to the theatre. For them, it is sufficient to flee the here and now. New television series begin with long trailers replete with sepia images. A young artist, only in her mid-twenties and wearing a leather jacket explains her paintings like this: ‘Before, Egypt had everything. The pharaohs, Oum Kalthoum... Now, we have nothing.’ (She also writes poetry and this one is so beautiful I cannot resist: “Once I was beautiful, once I was free. Oh dear, what has become of me.”)

On the roof where the little girl was dancing with the sky, grandmother is doing her evening prayers. She does this in the fashion of all overweight people in Cairo, whether on their roofs or in the Azhar mosque: instead of kneeling until your forehead touches the ground, she sits down on a small stool or a chair and humbly inclines her head. Very tired people remain seated and only straighten their necks. It may well be that grandmother, in a plastic chair, up there on her roof among the pieces of wood and the plastic bowls that lie everywhere, does feel closer to God. When she finishes her prayer, she looks up and turns her head left and right, to the angels sitting on her shoulders. When she gets up she must push the armrests, to wriggle her behind out of the chair.