

**The Thirty-Third
Marriage
of
Donia Nour**

By H.Z. ILMI

Copyright © 2013 by H.Z. Ilmi
All rights reserved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 Pious Sleep
- 2 Ostaz Ostaz
- 3 A Life in a Bedroom
- 4 The Ever-shifting Veil
- 5 He Punishes Whom He Pleases
- 6 The Problem with Light Speed
- 7 An Important Announcement
- 8 Coptic Rebels
- 9 Breakout
- 10 The Dark Market
- 11 The Chaperone
- 12 The Thirty-Third Marriage
- PART 2
- 13 A Naked Return
- 14 The Apostate
- 15 Zulkheir the Butcher
- 16 The South
- 17 The Baltageya
- 18 Digging
- 19 Consensual Violation
- 20 Uncairofied
- 21 The Task
- 22 Virgin
- 23 A Philosopher's Rant
- 24 An Interlude
- 25 The Arbiter of Right and Wrong
- 26 Patent #6236 (3198402)
- PART 3

27 The North
28 With a Flick of the Finger
29 The Will of God
30 The Politics of Neo-Sharia
31 Escape
32 God the Great Torturer
33 Made in Egypt
34 The Private Execution of Donia Nour
35 Quarantined
A Note on Quranic References
About the Author

1

Pious Sleep

God was driving the car.

At first there was a lingering doubt, but no. It *was* Him. He zoomed closer and closer down a winding road in a metallic green coupe. The word *MusliClean* glittered on the side of the vehicle.

The Almighty could not be seen behind the tinted glass, but he was in there. She could tell. She could feel the omnipotent force behind the steering wheel as it drew near.

God brought the car to a screeching halt, just an arm's length away from where she stood transfixed. The passenger door opened and a blinding burst of light erased her vision. She brought a protective hand to her face and squinted hard at the brightness.

In the center of the blaze, a black dot appeared in the distance. It began to move towards her. As it did, a storm of colors erupted all around it. The dot expanded into view and became what she recognized as a bag of MusliClean laundry detergent.

"Good Muslims buy MusliClean," the booming voice of God announced, echoing all around. "Buy some today, and enter the draw to win this female-friendly automobile." The car that God was driving reappeared alongside the bag of detergent as fireworks broke out in all directions.

Then silence and blackness.

A moment later, at exactly 4:32am, the call for the dawn prayer exploded into her head: "ALLAHU AKBAR! ALLAHU AKBAR!"

Donia Nour woke with a start, along with Greater Egypt's other 124 million citizens, down to the smallest babies. It was never too early to instill the habit.

In the darkness of her bedroom, the waking world was quiet—almost quiet. Donia could hear the distant mosques of Cairo, tens of stories below, reinforcing the summoning to awake and pray.

She sat up in bed and glanced through the window. In the darkness she saw the barely visible black pillar crowning the skyscraper opposite her building like a stingray's erect tail. She remembered the exact day it was installed. It was on her 11th birthday: the last day she ever had normal dreams, the last day she had an undisturbed night.

Since then, every night began with the Ministry for Sleepvertising and the Ethereal Adan beaming promotional material directly into sleeping Egyptian brains. They only ever paused for the chant of the Adan—the call to prayer.

Donia sighed and relaxed back into her bed, convincing the nagging part of her brain that she would get right back up again. But her thoughts began to sink into a jumble of images where jars of jam, soft drinks, and shampoo bottles randomly jabbed at the blackness of incoming sleep.

But the dominating frequency of the Call shattered the images, and the words of the ethereal Adan, "PRAYER IS BETTER THAN SLEEP!", blasted Donia into wakeful consciousness again.

She groaned, then caught herself and mumbled a request that Allah forgive her. She had already received a Note of Concern the previous month. Delivered onto the small screen in her prayer-booth, it said:

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

Dear Ms. Nour,

It has come to our attention that you have missed the dawn prayer for the nights of September 9th and September 10th, 2048. Please be advised that continued failures to fulfill the Dawn Prayer Duty of the Good Egyptian Declaration may be harmful to your soul, and may lead to investigations into your Reputation.

Peace be upon you,

The Ministry of Redemption Strategies

Donia was not going to risk any such investigations, not with her history of arrangements.

She forced herself up, zombie-walked her way to the back of the prayer-booth in the corner of her dark bedroom, and stood still.

“In the name of Allah,” she whispered.

Instantly a mechanical arm bracing a wet towel extracted itself out of the booth’s plastic enclosure. It swept over her hands and forearms, dampening her face and hair and poking at each of her ears. She sucked water out of a metal straw, rinsed her mouth, and spat into the small sink. The towel finally brushed over her feet as she weakly lifted up each in turn.

Purified, Donia walked around the small enclosure and entered the prayer-booth, covering her head in a veil that boasted a glowing Dolce & Gabbana logo. She directed her body north towards the Mugamma—the Nezam’s headquarters—and lifted her hands to her temples and brought them down to her stomach. A few moments later she knelt, lifted herself up again, then bowed all the way down while pressing her forehead firmly against the floor. She listened for the soft beeping sound that meant that the booth, along with the government data center it was connected to, had registered her first bow of the day.

But no sound came.

The muscles of her stomach tensed. This was no time for a malfunction. The last thing she needed was the Nezam following up after her again. She pushed her forehead with greater pressure against the prickly carpet of the prayer-booth until finally: *teet*.

She sighed the words “glory to God above” three times and repeated everything once more.

It’s going to be a long week, she thought as she rose again.

There would be the endless office hours as well as the Great National Vote. But it wasn’t either of those things that now worried Donia. She had little time left, but if all went well, she would soon finally have the quick operation to make her seem virginal again. After that, there was the marriage arrangement. And that could last all night long.

It would be her thirty-third marriage and deflowering—and, she hoped, her last.

“Assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullah,” she voicelessly mouthed as she turned her head to greet the angel sitting on her right shoulder. Then, concluding her dawn prayer, she looked the other side and extended the same salutation of peace to the angel on her left shoulder, the angel that was said to keep track of her misdeeds—he, along with the Nezam, of course.

2

Ostaz Ostaz

Ostaz Mukhtar was wearing nothing but his white briefs again. It was precisely 10:30pm, and, as was his daily custom these sweltering summer months, he sat semi-naked in the living room's upholstered recliner, a smoking pipe fuming in his left hand, a glass of cognac settled in his right.

On the table next to him was the empty box that had contained his koshary dinner. Only a chickpea and a few grains of rice remained in there amidst the leftover streaks of tomato sauce—there were no other survivors after the feeding massacre that had just taken place.

Next to the box was a crumpled paper that rested idly like a giant piece of popcorn. Ostaz leaned over, put his cognac down, and retrieved the paper. He smoothed it and read the first sentence once more.

Judicial Summons

The addressee is to appear at the Imbaba Court for Misdemeanors, Cairo, at 9am, Wednesday, 23 July, 1952.

Combing his moustache with a thumb and forefinger, Ostaz began to snort laughter as he read on.

“Blah, blah blah...,” he said to himself. ““On two accounts of blasphemy... encouraging immoral debate... threatening public values...””

He crumpled the piece of paper again and flicked it away from him like a child ridding himself of something sticky.

“Bloody idiots,” he told his empty house, chuckling each syllable out as he drummed at his bare, puny paunch.

He got up, turned the knob on his radio, and—without paying much attention to the ensuing music—began dancing to no particular rhythm as he puffed on his pipe. Twirling past a globe of the Earth that sat in a wooden toilet, Ostaz sidestepped his way to the chalk-busy blackboard beneath his hefty library at the far end of the living room.

The Challenge of Liberal Democracies under an Illiberal God, said his handwriting at the top of the board. Ostaz picked up a piece of chalk and, wiggling his bottom rhythmically from side to side, wrote in hurried handwriting at the bottom corner: *They have no case, the bastards. Teaching, here I come again!*

Just then, the doorbell rang.

“Farid,” Ostaz sang. He dropped the chalk, trotted across the room, and put on the robe de chambre he had left draped over the back of his recliner.

A moment later, he opened the door while holding out a one-pound banknote.

“How much longer will you keep this up for, Ostaz?” his neighbor said. “You’ve been losing this bet every week for seven months now.”

“Not much longer. In fact, if the monarchy is not overthrown before the month is out, I will run naked across Zamalek.”

Farid laughed. “And if the British reinvade, as I continue to tell you?”

“If that happens, I will personally seduce their new queen and make her moan for retreat. How about that?”

Farid shook his head as he smiled, and took the money from Ostaz. “Goodnight, you mad fool,” he said, turning to walk back across the yard to his own villa.

Ostaz shut the door, removed his robe, and lay back down on his recliner.

He sighed as he thought of the events of the year. 1952 was promising to be very long. Half of downtown Cairo had burnt down in January, and Egypt was on its fourth prime minister since then. Cairo University, along with all the other universities and schools, had been mostly closed throughout the year.

But everything was going to be all right, he insisted. He would win his farce of a trial, he would reclaim his position at university, and no matter what the political fate of Egypt was, he would be back to doing what he was best at next term.

Ostaz picked up his cognac and brought it to his lips.

“Or I could just fuck everything up and go to jail,” he told his drink. He tilted the glass towards his mouth, took a sip, and mulled it over.

And then he began to choke on it. Something was happening. And it wasn’t making sense. Green light had exploded into his living room. It was all around him. He was swimming in an inexplicable emerald haze.

Ostaz coughed up the brandy and dropped the glass, lifting himself up on the arms of his recliner. He looked to his right and left, searching for comprehension. But before he could decide whether he ought to run or whether abrupt insanity had just hijacked his mind, Ostaz Mukhtar vanished into nothingness.

One week later, Farid stood outside his villa, looking at Ostaz’s empty residence. He bent down and picked up the copy of the *Egyptian Gazette* that lay rolled on the ground. The front page was littered with news of the repercussions of the king’s official abdication the day before.

He rummaged through the first few pages, but they were all about the coup d’état that the Free Officers had carried out on the very night of his neighbor’s disappearance. It was only at the back of the newspaper that Farid found what he was looking for.

Philosophy professor’s disappearance: alien abduction?

Neighbors claim “extraterrestrials” behind Ostaz Mukhtar’s mysterious disappearance

Neighbors of Ostaz Mukhtar, who was declared missing last week, reported seeing a mysterious green light descending over the home of the Cairo University philosophy professor on the night of his disappearance.

While police forces are currently overburdened due to the political situation, a preliminary investigation has confirmed that it is these green lights—consistently described as column-shaped and descending from the sky—that prompted neighbors to knock on the door of Mr. Mukhtar’s Zamalek villa, only to find no one home.

“He’s disappeared off the face of the Earth,” said Farid Sami, who claims he spoke to the professor the night of his disappearance on July 22nd.

A spokesperson for the investigation told The Egyptian Gazette that Mr. Mukhtar had fled to avoid a court summons that was scheduled for the following day.

“But there was a revolt that morning, for God’s sake,” his neighbor Mr. Sami said. “Every trial—everything in the country—was canceled that day. So why would he escape?”

Mr. Mukhtar was at the center of a Cairo University scandal last year following complaints by some of his students and their parents that the

professor encouraged them to debate the moral implications of issues such as atheism and homosexuality. He has since been sued for blasphemy and disrupting public values.

Farid folded the newspaper and sighed. Wherever Ostaz had gone, Farid owed him a lot of money.