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المطاردة
THE CHASE

El Salem
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To my friend in exile,

It has been almost two years since our last correspondence – double that time since I last returned home – and guess what. *I made it back*, can you believe it? I'm not sure if this means I am still in exile or some sort of liminal space, but as I sit on this checkered sofa, the choppy European wind sending wafts of cigarette smoke throughout my room, I am reflecting on this privilege, and how much I have to tell you. Perhaps you already know this, but the fact that my first homecoming was both a grand and entirely ordinary happening confirmed to me that I am in fact haunted. And I'd say you are too.

I am now faced with the harshness of our worlds: the world that you and I live in together and the worlds you and I have created for ourselves. As I write this to you, the ghosts of yesterday are folding up our space and time, crumbling all of these worlds around us. It seems once we leave, we may never *really* return.

And with some twist of fate, I was told that the world you and I said goodbye to no longer exists. Neither our homes nor our friends nor our cities. And what we still see, taste, hear, and feel of it are simply our ghosts. *Enty fahma?* Somehow, my first return home was actually another departure. A lock-and-loading and belated farewell to the world of yesterday: a world which has been existing only in our memory.

Though these worlds are mere remnants of yesterday, the ghosts of these worlds can breathe life into what appears to be dead. This is what we have at stake in welcoming these ghosts and in pursuing the truth of yesterday as it still is. The lives we lived happened *Tabib*, I swear to you.

You know how I would dream of my return. I would see the streets from above, clogged as they always are. The banks of the Nile would widen as I descended onto the city and the willowing branches of the fire leaf trees sway tenderly as they gestured me home. I would whisper to myself to confirm that, after many sleepless nights, I have finally returned. Unironically, I would go back to the city that never





sleeps. Even with every light dimmed, how can anyone sleep in a city that has never known rest?

Back to my loved ones and my lovers – those lost, those who have left, and those who remain, steadfast and patient. And you would be there with me, too. Back to the warm embrace of my grandfather, after a four-hour train ride that should have always been just two. Back home. But you and I both know that our imaginaries can be deceiving. My homecoming warmed my heart in more ways than I could have ever anticipated. But everywhere I looked, I saw these ghosts. When I drove over the Nile, she did not widen her banks. The fire leaf trees that lined the street of my house were wilted and chopped to their trunks. It has been three years since my grandfather returned to the soil from which he once came. Those who remain from *rifaaq el-tareeq*, our friends, had aged and were all either trying to leave or fighting to stay. Even my lover's body lost its familiar touch, a foreignness I had thought my muscle memory would protect. What I had imagined would be a homecoming became instead an unchoreographed dance with the ghosts of yesterday.

The home we once knew, the world we had spent decades building, was nowhere to be found. Neither familiar nor warm, I found myself in the carcass of a city. After my uprooting I felt as though I had lost something in that city that could still be salvaged, and now not only have I lost that city altogether, but all the years she took from me have gone with her.

But listen. I remembered many things like the back of my hand. The shortcuts through side streets, the small bistros that have not changed their recipes, the bars in which I found and lost love, and the way it feels to be in my body. One day after the rain, as I crossed under one of the countless new overpasses, it felt as if the dream world and this world were momentarily overlapping. The muscle memory that kicked in helped with navigating the nefarious traffic, but seemed misplaced in a city swarming with ghosts. I believe this city is no longer ours, *ya Tabib*. Maybe it never was.

It was not only the fire leaf trees that were chopped: rather, the entire city had been razed to the ground and rebuilt. I was seeing the skeleton of a city that once was, in her streets that curved differently, her





shuttered storefronts, and in the absence of her gardens. What do you think happens to your muscles and to your memories when the world that conditioned them no longer exists? It felt as if the city hoisted herself atop me, replacing time-frozen images with those of today. The city was fighting to take her rightful place as the victorious – truly *al qahra*.

I returned home from exile only to find that I had actually taken the city with me. It appears that when I left, I killed and packed her, too. Over seas, rivers, deserts and mountain tops, I dragged the body of my entire life. Kouti said to me that our exile now is only a continuation of that which began when we left the womb. She's not wrong. But where do we place the memories, the half-baked dreams, the trauma, the disenchantment, and the defeat?

We can't place them anywhere because these very things become the ghosts that haunt us.

It feels like I had no choice
no choice

I had no choice

It feels like I had no choice but to leave. It feels like I chose to leave. But maybe this haunting is my fault after all. I thought I would find another city and another shore. I would pack all my belongings into two suitcases, bid the city and the sea of my foremothers goodbye, make sure the pigeons flew back to their coops at sunset before kissing my lover one last time across town. I would have an ice cold Stella, make sure the gas stove was not running, lock the door twice and when and if I were to return, it would be just as I left it. It seemed like a fool-proof plan, *mesh keda? Bas a7a*, it turned out that I was the fool and there was no plan.

Would I have left had I known I could never never **never** never n e v e r return?

Back in my exile, these ghosts are both visitors and residents, terrifying and nostalgic. But as nightmarish as they appear, sometimes they are reassuring. In this haunting, these ghosts feel like a shard of glass in my hands. They come to me on the subway in a European city, in the shape of a friend no longer with us. It's always both terrifying and pleasant seeing Mohamed. They come and bring the smell of





my mother's cooking in the stairwell of my building and send goosebumps down my spine when my playlist is on shuffle. Through these ghosts, we are able to remember and to return – even if momentarily. We might have left, but we are still here, somewhere. *Mesh keda?*

Maybe we should allow ourselves to become ghosts of another kind who haunt a different kind of haunting. Because as ghosts, we can return to the worlds that are no longer ours and live lives we could not afford before. As ghosts, we will settle and home ourselves and digest and inhabit. We will haunt those who took our city and destroyed our worlds and ended our lives. We will return and return and return – to the same, to the different, to the new, to the old. We will return, my love. I promise you it's all possible. And while that is all we have on hand, it is not at all a small matter. Besides, there are infinite endings. Once one ends, another begins.

So tell me, with the start of spring and the forthcoming bloom, what do you think has just ended and what do you think has just begun?

Warmly from my exile,
El Salem

