

Story for performance #519
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Tags: [Egypt](#), [child/parent](#), [death](#), [husband/wife](#), [war](#), [home](#)

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In the flat in Cairo where we were living after World War Two, there was a narrow mirror in the hall in a gilded frame; it was hung too high for me to look into, but I could watch my mother's face as she checked her reflection while the suffragi, Mohammed, went to open to the visitor who had pulled the little bell on its spring and made it dance and jingle. At the sound, Mohammed would glide across the cool polished floor in his soft slippers, his slight shadow cutting through the stripes of the shuttered twilight of our interior world. My mother, who by now had settled herself on the sofa in the drawing room, would then rise to greet her guest as if surprised, springing forward in a shimmer of tulle, her light shawl left drifting on the chintz soft covers and cushions. When she came to a standstill—she alighted, it seemed to me, as airy and luminous as my fairy doll—I'd catch hold of a bunch of fabric from her dress and steady myself to look from behind her at the new arrival: a stream of visitors would drop in during her 'hour' for tea in the afternoon when my father would be at work. As often as not, they'd still be there when he came home.

Calling out, 'Elissa, I'm home, it's a bloody dustbowl in town,' he'd stride into the drawing room, rubbing his hands.

'Had a good day, darling girl?', he'd ask, as he kissed my mother on the cheek. Then to me, he'd add, 'And what about you, little woman?' and swing me up in the air once, twice, three times even, and then set me down again and make straight for the drinks tray, shouting to Mohammed to bring a bucket of ice. My mother never joined him, but the guests did. They smoked too, my father keeping the flattened oval of the Egyptian cigarettes he favoured between his lips as he bustled about, my mother's friends often preferring the Virginia tobacco brands that were kept in wood-lined silver boxes and offered round by Mohammed after he'd taken over the tumblers of gin and tonic and bitters, or other mix of choice—whisky and soda, or whisky and water.

My mother didn't smoke either. She'd sit quietly, her dress fanning out around her slender legs, while the guests...well, the guests entertained her.

When her friend from her home town came, I never made a peep, because I knew that if she remembered I was still there, she would send me away. Zio Falco—he had a very fancy name, with a title from Italy as well as some high military rank—was a decorated veteran of both world wars, as well as the Partigiani, and he arrived sometimes in riding gear, sometimes in civvies, sometimes even in Arab dress which I loved to see—for he'd come riding in from the desert to the west. He was living there with the local Bedouin; he would only ever drink mint tea—'With five sugars, remember!' he'd remind Mohammed in Arabic—and he'd sit beside my mother on the sofa. He would talk, and she would cry.

That afternoon in 1951, he reported, 'Elissa, I have been looking now for three years in the dunes, and we have so far uncovered the unmarked resting places of one and

half thousand Italians, and nearly three hundred others of every flag including Allies from the Eighth army, your esteemed husband's fellow soldiers. But besides these—may they rest in peace at last—we have unearthed at El Alamein, among the debris of battle, the rusted tanks and shells, the unexploded mines and live ammunition still buried there where it was abandoned—we have dug up heaps and heaps of unidentified bones...The desert took their owners, many thousands who have no names—but the desert is merciful and the conditions have preserved these remains. God willing, with patience and pains we shall identify more of these sacrificed heroes—from all sides, regardless of nation.

'I shall not give up, Elissa. Not until I have tracked every trackless waste in that heaving dry sea of sand...'

'But the mines, Falco!' My mother would murmur. 'The mines are so...'

He would take her hand and kiss it, and finish her phrase.

'Perilous, I know. But don't be anxious. My trackers, my men, the local people of the desert, they have a sixth sense, dear beautiful lady! But alas, we have lost some of them—six have died in this great endeavour.

'This is our great work!'

On this occasion, he brought the first plans for the mausoleum he was building at El Alamein, and spread them out on the coffee table to show her. My mother was poring over them with him, and he was kneeling on one knee, pointing to this and that when the front door sounded, and in came my father, and cried out,

'To what do we owe the pleasure of this rare visit?'

And Falco leaped up, and shook my father's hand warmly, and began showing him the plans too, and soon they were both talking very loudly at once.

That night I heard my mother crying in their bedroom. Later, when I was older, I would learn that my father's greatest, most painful jealousy rose when she saw people from Italy; it filled him with fear that he, her husband, who had rescued her from her country at its lowest ebb, would be shut out of her innermost life. That evening, when I heard her crying I crept in to be with both of them in their bed. Several soldiers were roaming around my bed, taking up positions at the foot and by the sides, and they would not go away even when I pulled the sheet over my head and wished them away through my magic doll. So I thought my mother was crying because they were coming in to her room too, and I ran through their ranks out of my room, holding on to my doll for a shield, whispering that she must do some magic to send them away so they could be found by Falco in the sand and kept buried for good in his shrine.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Marina Warner.