



Source: Michael Slackman and Mona El-Naggar, 'Israel's foreign minister meets Egypt's chief; more talks set', *New York Times online*, 11/05/07.

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I woke up.

There was a heavy warm weight on my back. I was lying in a pile of bodies against a wall in a large dimly lit warehouse. Everyone was wearing heavy winter coats. I was lying on my stomach; my back and legs were totally covered with bats.

Slowly, and very carefully, I extricated myself from the woollen coat and slid away from the pile of bodies.

My friend, Marion, was sitting at a table, not far from the bodies. I sat down and she served me a cup of hot tea. The cup felt warm in my hands. We talked about the situation outside, the propaganda that had developed to such an extent that no one spoke clearly or told the truth anymore. We never mentioned the bats, but in the back of my mind was a memory of their warmth and weight. This memory was comforting. Marion didn't seem to notice the pile of bodies and I didn't look at it.

We talked for hours. We didn't make any plans. How could we? It was better to sip our tea and pretend that nothing had happened. Outside, there were riots; the police responded with tear gas and bullets. People were running wild. We had nothing to say about this; instead, we talked about the beauties and the horrors of language.

On the far wall of the warehouse, someone had placed a sign made of very clear words. The phrase, moulded in acrylic or glass, was filled with debris—all sorts of small objects were embedded in these words. Brightly coloured children's toys, a pair of sunglasses, paper clips, and shoelaces, five small tin boxes, a disposable camera, frying pans and flowerpots...

Suddenly, I looked down at the pile of bodies, but there was nothing there except a pile of coats, completely covered with bats. I remembered how warm they felt, the pressure of their bodies on mine, and how comforting their weight had been. Away from them, I felt exposed.

Marion was still talking, sipping tea and moving her hands in wide circles. I turned my attention back to her. The tea was cold. We talked about how it had been, before the troubles. She had a farm, two horses in the barn, a very friendly dog and a diffident cat. Marion was always at her best with animals, even if she didn't notice the bats.

While we were talking, part of my mind kept drifting to the pile of coats. My coat was on top. I was cold, but the idea of disturbing the bats was too repulsive. I shuddered.

'Are you cold?' Marion asked.

'It is a bit cold in here. I wish I had my coat.'

We looked at the pile of coats and that's all that it was—there were no bats. I briefly wondered where they had gone and why we hadn't seen them fly up into the rafters.

'You could put on your coat,' Marion said.

I lifted my coat out of the pile and brought it over to table, where there was more light. I held it close to the floor, the inside of the coat away from me, facing Marion. I shook it.

Huge cockroaches began to crawl out of the lining of the coat. I shook it some more, hoping they'd fall off quickly. Thousands of fleas swarmed out of the lining. It looked like they would never end, black clouds of them, leaping out into the warehouse.

I dropped the coat and ran.

When I got to the other side of the warehouse, I found myself face to face with those clear words. They were lit from behind and the multi-coloured objects inside seemed to float and sparkle. The words were so large and I was standing right up against them. I couldn't make out what they were saying.

'It's even penetrated into our warehouse,' Marion said as she crept up behind me.

The light from the words was warm. And I was cold. I wanted to lie down right there and rest. Marion pulled at my arm, insisting that I come back to the table on the other side of the warehouse.

'We'll get bitten by fleas,' I said.

'There are worse fates,' she replied.

We sat again at the cold table. When I looked at the place where the pile of coats had been, I saw that it was empty. All of the bodies first, then all of the bats, then all of the coats—gone. The cockroaches and fleas were hiding in the warehouse, waiting for more coats or bats or bodies.

'We have to stay here,' she said. 'You have to get used to it.'

I remembered what it was like to sleep in a bed, a warm quilt pulled up to my shoulders, soft pillows, and a purring cat. She remembered that too. We didn't talk about the shouts that were coming closer. We ignored the knocking on the door of the warehouse. We thought we heard gunshots, but we didn't mention it.

At times like these, you make lots of promises to yourself. If I get out of here, you think, I'll be a better person. I'll give my change to the homeless. I'll take better care of my friends.

'All these things are personal,' Marion explained. 'They don't affect the political situation at all. It's too big for us. Even with the best intentions, we can't figure out how to help.'

I wondered who had made the words.

'Some artist who thought she was saving the world,' Marion explained. 'But the world took her and chewed her up.'

I asked if she meant that literally.

Marion wrapped my large woollen coat around her body, slowly put her arms in the sleeves, and said:

'Of course, everything I say is very clear. You only have to listen to the words.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ellen Zweig.*