



Source: Steven Erlanger, 'New freedom in Gaza: A day's stroll into Egypt', *New York Times in International Herald Tribune online*, 14/09/05.

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I sat on the step in the doorway looking into my father's Tea House. I could see a big beam of daylight shining through the gap between the heavy curtains at the other end of the room. The curtains kept the toilets and alleyway out of the Tea House. Well, that's what my father said. Those curtains, they keep the outside out, he said. Dust was floating down through the beam of light to the floor. I tried to stare a big spec out. I followed it all the way from the top to the bottom of the beam. It was hard to keep track of it. It got muddled up with the others dancing and dodging inside the beam. Then I made up a race. Three specs at a time, against each other, a race to the floor. They had to be big ones. I leant my elbows on my knees to hold my head steady and concentrated. If they disappeared before halfway I'd pick some new specs and start again. I had to squint my eyes really tight to follow them.

I played dust races until my father tapped me on the shoulder to move out of his way. My eyes were squinty and a bit hurting. Father was balancing a wooden fruit box on one shoulder as he made his way over the step into the empty Tea House. The quiet was nice but sad at the same time. Father said that we would be shut for five days.

I come here every day after school to work. I collect the glasses emptied of mint tea and wipe the tabletops before the next men come in to sip and talk. This is my third year. I was seven when I started. I wasn't allowed to carry much then. But now I am really good. I can carry ten glasses of tea at once and remember who ordered what, and who is first and who is last. The men can sit deep in the cushions for hours, sipping mint tea or coffee and talking, talking, talking. They all know my name, and sometimes give me treats. Like the man they call Agent, he gave me a pencil with a car shaped eraser on the top of it just last week. So I like it when they are in a good, funny mood. Even when my feet are tired, there're lots of jokes and fun.

But I don't like it when the men are leaning forward out of their cushions. They talk kind of mad and gruff then. They don't look at me. They just bark their orders for tea or coffee. So then I make up my own fun and give them all names in my head like 'prune face' and 'bread nose'. When I take their tea to them I'm laughing inside at their new names and having fun even if they are all being mean and grumpy.

I thought because the Tea House was closed it would be a kind of holiday for me after school, and that I would be allowed to go out to play with my friends. But father said he wanted me to be here, he would find something for me to do, and he wanted 'business as usual'. This afternoon was a lazy one so I could sit for a bit and make races, and stare, and wonder about stuff.

'Father?'

'Yes.'

'What happened to that man? You know the one everyone calls Agent?'

'Don't know' he said dismissively.

'But you must know—he was here that afternoon when you shut the Tea House, I saw him.'

'He wasn't here that day', he said.

'Yes, he was. He came like normal. You know...' I remembered because he always scruffles my hair as he goes out to the table at the back near the curtains. 'You know every Tuesday he is here, and he has tea with the guy with the laptop, you know. Laptop man, the techie one, with internet and everything. He showed me, he was on eBay. Can we do that? Can we get eBay and a laptop?'

'Son', father said sternly, 'you will not speak of him and you will not ask questions. Do you understand?'

'Yeah, but I saw him and...'

'That is enough now!'

I bit my bottom lip. I swivelled around away from him.

There wasn't any work so I started some more dust races. The light had moved to just catch the edge of the table where I had seen Agent last, where he was talking to laptop man. Laptop man was, as usual, settled into the deep cushions. Sometimes I thought he would never be able to get out of them. I took their tea to them and hung around a bit, and heard them talking with some English words like clear stream and hacking and other stuff I don't remember now.

'Father?' I called out, keeping my head steady and eyes on race 54.

'Yes' he answered.

'What's Luxembourg?'

'It's a country.'

'Where is it?'

'Stuck between Germany, France and Belgium. It's a bit less than half the size of the West Bank.'

I looked away from the dust race towards father. If he is interested in something he can get quite carried away with information and I didn't want a full school lesson now in the middle of race 54.

'Why?' he asked.

'Oh, just that laptop man was telling...' There was a thump and I stood up.

Father had banged a table with his fist and shouted, 'Enough! I have told you we will not discuss him or any of his friends!'

I nodded quickly and said breathlessly, 'Yes, yes, it's just that I heard...'

'No!' He paused. 'You've got too much time on your hands. Do you think this is holiday time? Here's something to think about...there are sixteen teapots in there', he pointed towards the kitchen, 'and they need to shine so I can see my face. So—off—you—go!'

I scuffed my feet on the floor and walked toward the kitchen. I really wished I'd kept my mouth shut. What's the problem anyway, they're not going to listen to a kid. And I'd lost track of race 54 now on top of everything.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Idle.*