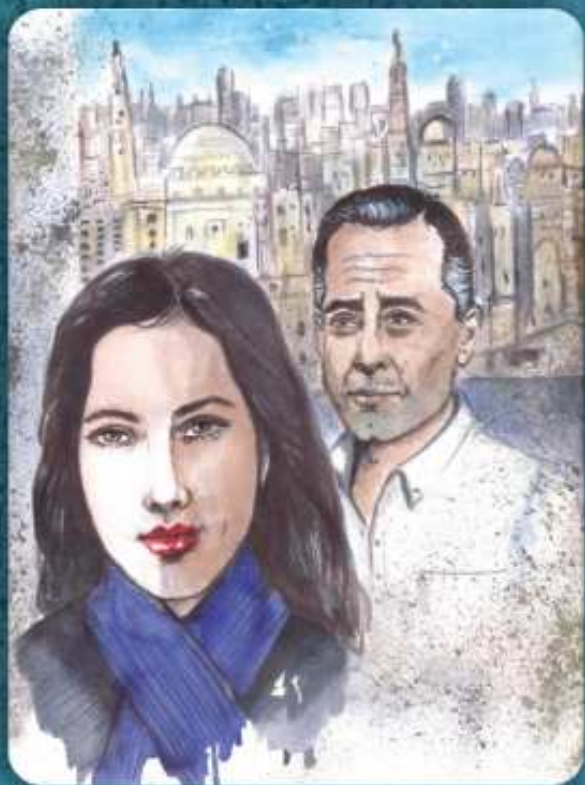


# Souad, The Housekeeper

*A Love Story*

**Mahmoud Bakr**



**CÁTEDRA PEDAGÓGICA**



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*A love story*



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**A Novel**

**By**

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Lovers and madmen have such seething brains  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.

Shakespeare

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 5, Sc. 1





## Prologue

WHEN THE CAPTAIN ANNOUNCED from the cockpit that the plane had entered the Egyptian aerospace, Mohsen Araaf looked through the window and saw the green delta of the Nile. With the approach to Cairo, the green color changed into yellow surrounding Cairo Airport. Three hours ago, he left Geneva engulfed by the green mountains of Savoy Alps, the city he had lived in for twenty five years and might not return back to.

After going through the passport control and customs, he picked up his luggage, and took a taxi to one of the new neighborhoods that were established almost twenty years ago. He had bought an apartment five years ago in what the Egyptians call these days a compound. These compounds are usually encircled by walls and guarded by specialized security companies.

His reason for buying the apartment was to spend his holidays with his wife in Cairo, especially in winter, to avoid going to hotels. His wife loved it and was keen to buy flowers

and plants to give the place a lively atmosphere. Usually these flowers and plants withered after leaving as no one looked after them. She had to buy new ones when she returned the following holiday.

When he arrived at the compound's main gate, the guard, a middle-aged man in a blue uniform, welcomed and greeted him. He offered willingly to help the taxi driver to take the luggage up the apartment. Once in, he saw the furniture covered with white sheets, as it was two years ago. Also, the dust was all over the place. He immediately opened all the windows to bring fresh air in. He carried the suitcases to his bedroom and tried to arrange his clothes in the wardrobe. He also plugged in the fridge and the water heater. After he fished, he went to the balcony that overlooked the garden and sat down on a chair smoking a cigar. He recalled the last time his wife was sitting next to him talking. He also remembered vividly the last days when she was in hospital where her condition was deteriorating due to the cancer she was suffering from all last year until she passed away.

Mohsen, a tall, slim man, in his fifties with white sideburns, worked in the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), one of the

United Nations Organizations, in Geneva for twenty five years. There, he met Alba, the young beautiful Italian woman who worked in an Italian enterprise in Geneva. They had a relationship for three years before they got married.

They were not fortunate to have children. After they consulted several doctors and analyses were carried out for both of them, it was revealed that Mohsen was incapable of fathering any children.

He discussed the matter with Alba few times suggesting separation so that she could have children with someone else, but she refused categorically because she loved him saying «Would you leave me if I were the reason?»

As it was almost eight o'clock in the evening, he felt hungry and wondered how to get some food. He realized he had no car to go out to buy something to eat or to go to a restaurant. He went down to ask the guard his advice in the matter, who informed him that there was a new shopping mall, with few restaurants, but it was two kilometers away. The guard proposed calling a taxi as nowadays that kind of service was available. He thanked him and gave him some money against the use of his mobile phone.

In fifteen minutes the taxi took him to the mall. He asked the driver to come back in an hour and a half promising him a good tip. He went into a restaurant and ordered an Egyptian dish he had not eaten for a long time. The meal took him almost an hour to finish. After that, he bought some food and drinks, as the fridge was empty. Wondering in the mall's corridors, he found a shop selling mobile phones. He bought one and had it charged. On his way out, he found the taxi waiting to take him home. He tipped the driver generously as promised.

After arranging the food and drinks in the fridge and the kitchen cupboard, he went into the balcony and sat down. He had to think about the furniture and the car that were shipped from Geneva. The shipping company assured him that the container would arrive in Alexandria in three weeks. As five weeks had already passed, it was time to contact the shipping company the next day to make sure it had arrived. As it was getting late, he went to bed after a long tiring day.

He got up at eight o'clock and prepared a cup of coffee with a couple of biscuits. He then called the shipping company agent, but no one answered. He went to shower, got dressed and tried to call again.

This time the agent answered and gave him the information regarding the container, the shipping bill number and all the other relevant details. After a while, the agent informed him that the container had arrived and he had to come to Alexandria to receive the consignment. Mohsen then asked if he had a phone number and name of a person who would carry out custom clearance. He gave them to him and immediately called that person. He advised to go the next day at ten o'clock to Alexandria harbor.

As he had nothing to do at that moment, he decided to go to Alexandria that very day to be on time the next day. It was also an opportunity to spend the evening on the seaside front that he had not seen for a long time. He called the taxi service and asked if it would be possible to hire a taxi to take him to Alexandria. The taxi service agreed and gave him the fare. He agreed immediately. He, then, prepared a small bag with all the necessary things he might need overnight. After half an hour, the taxi arrived and headed for Alexandria. In almost three hours, the taxi was cruising down Alexandria coast, the *corniche*.

He asked the driver to take him to one of

the five-star hotels overlooking the sea. The taxi stopped at the hotel and Mohsen paid him the fare with a generous tip.

After he had settled in his room and showering, he went down to the hotel restaurant to have dinner which consisted mainly of fish. After dinner, he thought of going out for a walk along the sea shore to smell the fresh air and the sea breeze, but he gave up the idea due to the noise coming from the hooting cars and the crowds all over the place. So, he returned to his room to sleep.

The next day after breakfast, he asked the reception desk for a taxi to take him to the harbor. After asking someone, he found the custom clearance office and the person he spoke to on the phone.

The man welcomed him and explained the procedures, the charges due as well as the 'gratuities' to expedite the release of the container. He requested him to wait in his office and ordered him a cup of coffee.

Two hours passed reading the morning papers the man gave him, when the officer came back accompanied by a person introduced to him as a transporter who would deliver his furniture to his apartment in Cairo. He informed

him that the release would be the next day and also a temporary release of his car. He advised him as soon as he arrived in Cairo, he should go to the Traffic Department to officially register his car and get a number plate.

He paid all what the agent asked for and arranged with the transporter the fare for transport and gave him the address. The transporter assured him that the delivery would be in two days.

He then, returned to the hotel where he had lunch followed by a nap until the afternoon. He ordered tea and picked up his telephone note book to search for the number of his friend he had not seen for a long time. He dilled the number but found an answering machine saying that the number was out of service.

He got dressed and decided to pay a visit to Alexandria. He ordered a taxi to take him to the city center *Mabatet Elraml*. When he got out of the car and started wandering in the streets, he noticed the change that took place to the city that was once called «*The Bride of the Mediterranean*». The weather was fine, but the noise, the cars and the crowds spoilt his memories when he used to visit Alexandria before leaving Egypt. He looked for a restaurant

along the *corniche* that was not crowded and went in to have dinner. Afterwards, he went back to his hotel.

He spent the evening watching TV, often changing channels until he felt drowsy and finally went to bed. In the morning after breakfast and settling the hotel bill, he went to the harbor. He found the custom clearance agent waiting for him as per the appointment and gave him all the documents regarding the custom clearance. Then he accompanied him to a huge garage to get his car. He found the car with a number plate of Alexandria customs. There were two young men offering their service to wash and clean the car. He agreed and in an hour he was leaving the harbor heading for Cairo.

After three hours, he arrived at the compound where he parked his car in his private parking lot.

The next day, he had to register his car and get the number plate. He asked the guard for the address of the Traffic Department. He gave it to him and added that he had a friend there who could expedite the procedures very quickly.

He immediately called his friend informing him of the matter and gave him the car description. When Mohsen arrived there, the



man was waiting for him. He gave him all the documents and the man told him of all the charges. Mohsen gave him what he asked for adding a very generous tip. In about forty minutes, he came with the registration and the number plate accompanied by a young man who fixed the plate and of course was tipped too. Now the car was ready and he drove home.

Mohsen was relieved after «mission impossible» and it was time to prepare the apartment to receive the furniture, the books, his desk and all he was keen to keep to remind him of his late wife.

Again, he went to see the guard to ask him if he would help him to find a housekeeper to clean the apartment as the furniture would arrive in two days. The guard told him he was lucky because a housekeeper had just left the work in one of the apartments in the same building three days ago. The family she worked for left Egypt to work in one of the Arab Gulf states. He promised Mohsen to call her to see if she was still available, as part of his duties was to keep the mobile phones of all those working in the compound.

In the evening, the guard informed him that the housekeeper was available and would come

the next day round nine.

The next day after the usual routine, Mohsen was ready to receive the housekeeper. At nine thirty, the bell rang and found the guard accompanied by a woman whom he introduced as Souad whose honesty and seriousness he praised. Mohsen thanked him and closed the door.

He looked at her and found her face characterized by unique beauty, imposing delicate features, tan complexion and brown eyes. She wore a scarf on her head, not a veil, covering her head and down her shoulders. He was surprised as most women wore the veil. She had a mature slender body with medium height and wore a dress with colors that matched the scarf.

He stepped aside and asked her: «Please come in.»

She looked a bit uneasy, though she tried to hide it. He pointed to an armchair for her to sit down. She was trying to scan the sitting room when he surprised her, «Would you like to have tea or coffee?»

«No need, thank you.»

«You're my guest until we come to an agreement.»

«Don't trouble yourself, I can make the tea.»

«There is no trouble». Then she hesitated before asking him «Is your wife here?»

«I am afraid my wife died a year ago.» He uttered the words with a grim face and a sad tone. She felt embarrassed and blushed. She even became confused not knowing what to say. He realized her confusion and said:

«I get it you prefer to have tea.»

«Yes, please.»

Mohsen got up and went to the kitchen and returned after five minutes carrying a tray with a cup of tea, some sugar and a tea spoon.

«Thank you.» Then she put two lumps of sugar and started to stir it.

«As you can see, the apartment has two bedrooms, a sitting room in which we are now, and another room you see over there, where the dining table is. I intend to have it as my study and move the table in this corner next to the balcony. There are also a kitchen and a bathroom with a dishwasher and a washing machine.»

He continued speaking while she was sipping her tea, «What I need is to clean the apartment, wash the clothes and iron them. I need you five days a week.»