

Cairo is a Knife

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Every morning in Cairo, I would lie in bed, aching with tiredness, until I heard the *fuul*-man on the street in front of my apartment. From that moment, I knew I had only twenty minutes to rush downstairs and get my bowl of fava beans, cooked overnight into a dense paste, brought to life by cumin, olive oil, and lemon juice. I savoured those beans, eaten quickly on the street while chatting with the seller, as others stumbled out of the surrounding apartment blocks, not quite awake, their faces still too soft to bear the brutality of the day to come. *Fuul* lines the stomach and the soul.

I make routines like this everywhere I go. Even if I am only to stay somewhere for a week, I stake out a coffee shop, ensure that I befriend all the staff, and adopt *my* restaurant, which serves cheap, reliable food, and that I will visit every day. These places become the planets whose gravitational pull organizes my orbit through a city.

Whatever the place, I tend to evangelize about it. In Paris, it was a Congolese restaurant that served better *saka-saka*, I contended, than you could find in Kinshasa. There is a restaurant in Juba, South Sudan, composed of a little charcoal grill and a few Formica tables under a tree. On one of those tables there shall always be a little bowl of liver with lime and dried chili with my name on it. In Cairo, my place was also a time. 6 a.m., when the *fuul*-man turned up outside my door. There are many other places to eat *fuul* in Cairo, and many other times to do so. But just then, on that street, well, that was clearly the best *fuul* in the city, if not the world.

"I hate it."

"But you haven't tried *my* guy. My guy makes *fuul* that you wouldn't believe."

"It makes you exhausted. You sleep all day. It seeps into your bones. When you eat *fuul*, you become a donkey, slow and stupid, just like the Egyptians."

He wouldn't budge. Charles hated *fuul*, *kushari*, and *tamiya*, the holy trinity of Egyptian cuisine. It all makes you sick, he insisted. Such food is a trick, he said,

meant to trap you into staying in this God-forsaken country. The vegetables are fake. Artificial. Nothing here nourishes you, nothing here has any nutritional value. A *platas* of potato leaves, served with rice. Like I could get back home. When you try that, that's when you'll understand what food is. Your whole body feels alive.

For Charles, food existed in a proper place: Kenema, Sierra Leone. In Cairo, despite its expense, he would insist on eating rice with every meal. Otherwise, he said, it simply wouldn't be a meal. Such meals were one of few rituals of home that Charles could enact. He was one of many young men from Liberia and Sierra Leone that had fled civil war in West Africa for an uncertain present in Cairo and the hope of resettlement in America or Europe.

Applicants would have to wait months, if not years, for what is called the "Refugee Status Determination" interview. If status were granted, one could see young men walking around town, their green refugee cards jutting proudly out of their top coat pockets. Even if they were approved, however, there was no guarantee of resettlement. That depended on yet another interview, and the mysterious priorities of state departments in far-off capitals. Life for those refugees was lived in the future conditional, the present a bleak bank loan to be redeemed against a hoped-for life to come. To eat *fuul* was to accept that one was going to stay in Cairo, and staying was a nightmare.

In the world of the West African refugees, traditional hierarchies were inverted. The venerated were the absent—those who had already left. The elders, while given a pretence of respect, were scorned, almost as if they were contaminated. Life in Cairo doesn't progress. "You can't build anything here," Charles said. "You just get stupid. You grow into a baby."

Home was a memory the refugees cultivated in the darkness of their apartments, a secret set of rituals kept away from the streets of the Egyptian capital. Little of the contours of life in rural Sierra Leone made sense

in Cairo—the distinctions and privileges of the villages around Kenema were ignored by Egyptians for whom the West Africans were either cheap labor or dead weight.

It wasn't just that the refugees didn't want to live in Cairo; life was quite literally impossible. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) infantilized them. Those waiting for their interviews got a pittance. If the refugees were accepted, they got better handouts, but were still not allowed to work. It was as though the UN agency thought that refugees go through a miraculous reverse maturation when they leave their countries of origin, and become incapable of looking after themselves. The handouts contributed to an Egyptian narrative in which all refugees are "lazy blacks" exploiting the system. When I heard Charles talk about the elderly babies of the West African community, it felt like the UN and the Egyptians had teamed up to make their rhetoric into a reality.

Many refugees worked illegally to supplement their meager handouts, Charles said, and so they could do something that might enable them to have a minimal sense of control over their own lives, even if that something was back-breaking labor on construction sites or in factories. The male refugees would work twelve-hour days, six days a week, before collapsing, injured or ill, after a couple of months. Then they would be fired. Cheap labor or dead weight. The female refugees worked as cleaners or domestic servants and stories of abuse were rife.

Charles told me that women he had never seen before would accost him on the street and accuse him of rape. A crowd would gather, hissing *samara* (black) at him, and he would be lucky to get away with his life. On crowded buses, men would punch him for fun and then deny doing it in front of other Egyptians, who would also deny that the men had hit him, as Charles' belief in a reality into which he could intervene slipped away. Everyone hit me, he said, and no one hit me. The world became incomprehensible. Cause and effect were suspended. You have to understand, he told me, that the first lesson a Sierra Leonean in Cairo needs to learn is that the Egyptians are always right. Other lessons: food is poison, people aren't to be trusted, and everything you have can be taken away from you at any time.

Charles stood in shops, waiting for service,

studiously ignored. He talked to Egyptians in the street, and they looked straight through him. Charles counted the ways in which he couldn't be seen. Egyptians couldn't see his undergraduate degree from Fourah Bay College in Freetown. For them, he was not a scholar but a savage, and only uncertainly human. His boss at the factory couldn't see his injuries, until Charles could no longer work, and then he couldn't see the wages Charles was owed. Wherever he walked in Cairo, Charles was invisible, except when he became all too visible, and then the only thing visible about him was that he should not be there. That was when he would be punched or kicked. If I fought back, Charles said, I would lose my residency permit. They harass me in Arabic and I do not understand. It is better not to understand. Nothing I say would make a difference. It is better to be mute. If they see me, they kick me. It is better to be invisible. It would be better not to be here.

I couldn't go to Charles' place, for he wasn't allowed visitors. He rented a tiny apartment on the outskirts of the city with six other Sierra Leoneans, at a premium. Africa tax, Charles said, shaking his head. Egypt doesn't realize it's in Africa. His neighbours didn't allow him to open his windows. They said they were disgusted by the sight of Charles and his friends. Charles told me that the landlord didn't let them decorate the walls of the apartment, so they lived amid peeling paint and water stains.

That's why I work in the factory, he said, that's why my back is bust. Even if it kills me, work is better than that apartment. If I stay there, I live in the past. Nothing happens. Sitting in the blackness, surrounded by closed windows, Charles found himself running over his history again and again. Repeating his past in the suspension of the present, waiting for a future that may never arrive.

Charles had been shipwrecked. When you are drowning, Charles told me, you reach out for something, anything. Cairo is the knife you grab to stop yourself drowning. He was badly beaten during the Sierra Leonean civil war. A doctor made tiny incisions all over his body, and placed bitter leaves under his flesh. That cured me, he said. When he came to Cairo, though, his skin began to itch all over. The air of the city is poisoning me, he said. The city attacks my body. I got pills from

a pharmacist, because you can't trust these doctors; sometimes, they try to kill us. The pills help, but they are expensive. I don't know how I will pay for them. I can't sleep at night. I think of the future, and I think of how to pay for the pills. Now I need sleeping pills too, he said, smiling, and I lay awake at night thinking of how I will afford them.

The air is so bad here that he cries all the time. We are all crying, he said. It's the pollution. Even the air attacks us here. I am becoming soft in the head, he said. There is no one to talk to and nothing to do. All I do is think. Thinking is a disease.

Charles waited for his interview with the UNHCR. I was at the American University in Cairo, working on refugee cases, and I saw how contingent the UN's decision-making process was. Sometimes, UN officers would reject an application because the refugee came to the interview in his best clothes. Too well dressed, the officer would write, not credible. As if wearing a tie determines whether one is a refugee. Sometimes, Charles said, I think they want us to be in rags.

Charles waited. He waited for an interview. Then he would wait for a decision, to be given by the UNHCR without explanation and according to opaque criteria. He remembered the Nigerian soldiers just outside Freetown who grabbed his hands, looking for the calluses that would prove he had shot a gun, and thus that he was indubitably a rebel. Charles saw other farmers led off and killed. He didn't know why fate intervened at that precise moment and determined that the heavy calluses of his hands, roughened by years of work on the land, would be invisible to the soldiers. Only the Lord knows, Charles said. Only God can explain such things.

Charles waited. In the meantime, he refused to eat *fuul*. It's disgusting, he said. There is only one place I like to eat. McDonalds. There, I speak English with an American accent, and everyone thinks I am a tourist. The Egyptians respect me as a foreigner, no one bothers me, and I can eat in peace, alone. It's like I'm white. Sometimes, I dream about having enough money to get a room at the Marriott in downtown Cairo, while I wait to leave the city. They can't make me wait forever.