

Mona Prince

from *Three Suitcases for Departure*

WE HAD TO DO SOMETHING. My friends and I had started to get involved in political matters, and we agreed to stage a march at the university after the semester break, which had already been extended for a month as a precaution against any student protests. For security reasons, several well-known student activists had been arrested, as well as many whom the university suspected could be potential protesters.

It was the first Monday after the break. My friends and I left the faculty of literature and met up with another group of students on our way to the department of law. We formed lines and held up banners with our slogans:

No to the invasion of Kuwait!

No to American interference in the Arab World!

Down with Zionism!

Jerusalem for the Arabs!

Samira, Soha, Safa and I were in the front. Yusuf, Ali, and Osama were next to us. Hussein, who cared so deeply for his country at the time, led the march.

The university closed its gates, just like it usually did on these occasions that "threatened the safety of the university and of Egypt," as the security officers were fond of saying. The university guards stood ready with their walkie talkies, watching the situation develop—only seconds away from calling up, God forbid, the Central Security Forces, who would respond to the criminal transgression of the students' protest.

I was surprised then—although I no longer am now—that the majority of the students didn't care about what was happening to themselves or to their country. They masked their eyes and busied themselves with vacations and parties. I cursed them then—now I only pity them. I turned away and joined in the chanting and singing. *Biladi, biladi, laki hubbi wa fu'adi*: My country, my country, you have my love and my heart.

That was the first time I had participated in student demonstrations with my friends. My relationship with Abd al-Rahman and with Sanjay before him had distracted me from anything. Perhaps I was just like those students I had cursed. Because it was my first protest I didn't realize what the consequences would be.

The march ended and we returned to our classes. I was shocked when they suspended Samira, Hussein, and me. Suspension wasn't something new for Hussein—he had been suspended and arrested before—but this had never happened before to Samira and me. We went together to the university administrator to ask about the reason for the suspension.

"I suspended you because you interrupted classes and destroyed the grass that we just paid 500 pounds to plant," he told us.

"We didn't walk on the grass, and we definitely didn't stop any classes. All the students are getting ready for their parties and vacations anyway!"

"What you did is considered high treason. You deserve death, not suspension."

The intensity of my anger almost pushed me to laughter, but Samira glared over at me. The administrator turned to her and said, "You're even wearing red. That means you're a communist."

Samira asked him what 'communist' meant, and I was floored by her naive response, which quickly ended the discussion.

We were suspended for a month. I didn't tell my family right away. My father was in Cairo and I didn't want to worry him. I knew that he would never approve of what I had done. He was a firm believer in minding your own business—as if my business had no connection to the real world and its problems.

I went back home that day and didn't talk to anyone. I went to my room and barricaded myself there, pacing back and forth until dinner, when I finally came out to tell what had happened. *You have no right to get involved in these things, my girl. Mind your own business! There's no reason for people to do this. Even if someone took part in a demonstration fifty years ago, today they can re-arrest him whenever anything pops up. Why are you causing all these problems for yourself and our family? You're going to ruin your future. There's no point in throwing it all away! You aren't going to change anything—you're going to wear yourselves out for no reason.*

I ran back to my room to take refuge within its deaf walls. I called up Abd al-Rahman to tell him what had happened.

"They're right. Listen to them."

His answer shocked me. How could he say something like that?! I ended the conversation and slammed the handset down. *They're right. Listen to them*

We didn't accomplish anything. We had actually strayed down dark and forbidden paths. Were they right? Had we really made a mistake?

Questions . . . questions . . . questions

Translated by Andrew Heiss