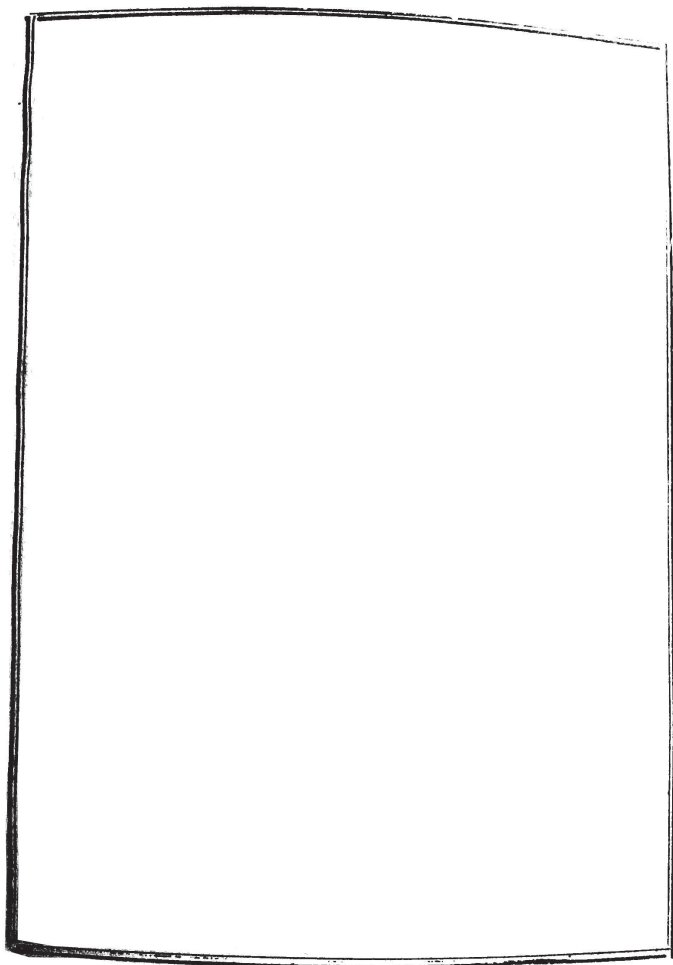
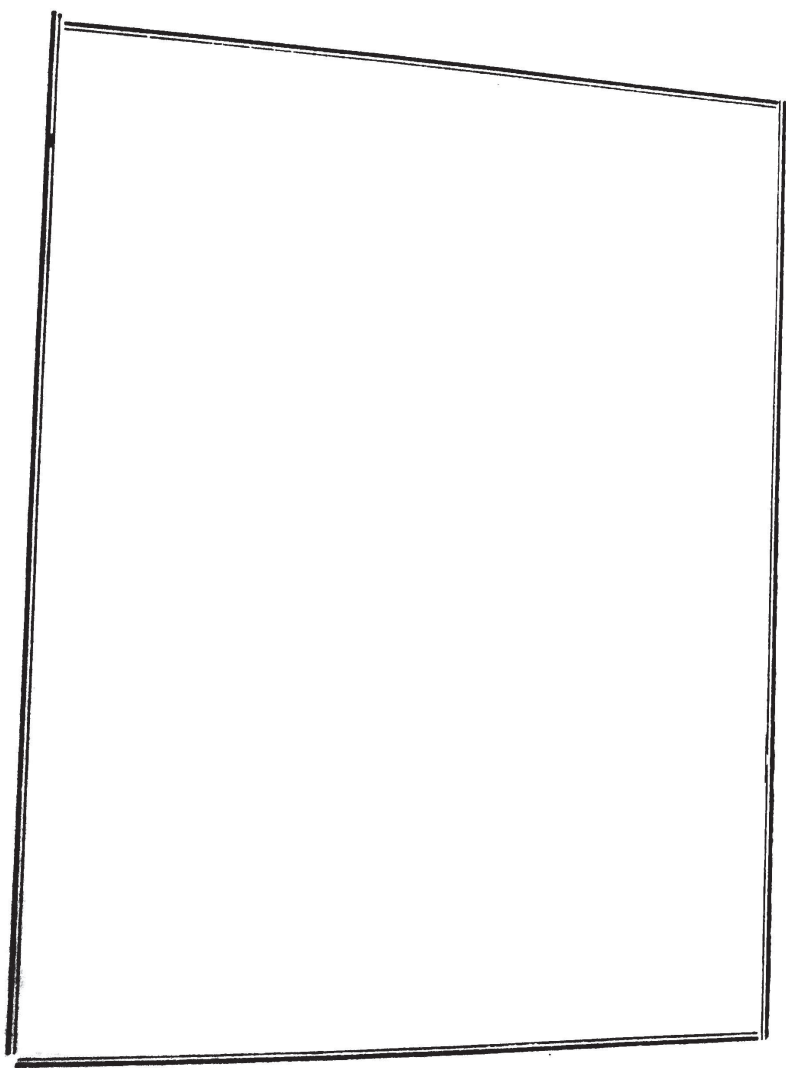


# THE SUBDUER





Day 1

Two years ago, I head to the public notary office in my neighborhood. The office is crammed in a crummy building in a less fortunate part of the neighborhood. I will later learn that this is how most public notary offices live — crammed in crummy buildings. This particular office is made out of two conjoined dilapidated apartments. Each room has a number of employees behind desks or counters engaging from 9 to 4 with a constant flow of customers. My mission is to get my father the forms he needs to give me power of attorney. As illness prevents him from being able to go to the office himself, I need to return to him with the forms as well as the notaries whose job it is to make sure that he understands and consents to giving me power of attorney and witness him sign.

I move back and forth between the two apartments. From room to room and from queue to queue. There isn't always enough space or group-desire for a queue, so we gather around the desk we need in irregular

blobs that organically squirt the next in-line. Bureaucratic processes in these offices are heavily un-computerized. Papers move from employee to customer to employee to customer to employee. Final copies of contracts and such are kept in bulging folders in filing cabinets all around. As I wait in chairs, lines or circles, I notice another paper-trail dotting the walls. A mixture of administrative information, required procedures, warnings and, interestingly, a variety of prayers. I think I met my first prayer while standing in line for the cashier.

*O self do not feel aggrandized  
The day will come when you will leave*

*Time will be short or long  
Then you will be carried away*

*You will visit the house of worms  
And in the earth you'll be buried*

To remember while standing in line to pay that one is mortal. To balance one's rising frustration at the slow line, the queue-

jumpers and the tedious bureaucracy, with the knowledge that, sooner or later, one will step out of this line, this transient world, to meet the worms. Above it is a reminder to photocopy one's ID and driver's license after paying at the cashier. Standing in line with one foot in this material world and the other in the next, I wonder whether this message is meant to sober or dull one's senses. My body weight shifts to the other foot.

I am on fire, O God.

Flames were devouring his soul from top to bottom as it soared upward into a world of dreams. In a single moment of revelation he perceived the world as a surge of dazzling light which he pressed to his bosom and held on to like one demented. He had always dreamed and desired and yearned, but this time he was really ablaze, and in the light of this sacred fire he glimpsed the meaning of life.

— But down on earth it was decided that he should join the Archives Section. It did not matter how he started; life itself evolved from a single cell or perhaps from something even less. He descended to his new abode in the basement of the ministry, his wings still fluttering. He was greeted by gloom and the musty smell of old paper. Outside, through a barred window, he saw that the ground was on the same level as his head. Inside, the huge room spread out in front of him.

Rows of filing cabinets stood on either side, and another long row divided the room down the middle. Staff desks were placed in gaps between cabinets. He walked behind one of the employees toward a desk at the front placed crosswise in a recess like a prayer niche. At the desk was seated the Head of the Archives Section. Othman had not yet recovered from the upsurge of divine inspiration. Even his descent into the basement could not wake him up. He walked behind the clerk, perplexed, distracted, and excited.

"Man's aspirations are infinite," he said to himself.

The clerk introduced him to the Head of Section: "Mr. Othman Bayyumi, the new clerk," he said, and then introduced the Section Head to him: "Our chief, Mr. Safan Basyuni."

He recognized something familiar in the man's features, as if he were a native of his own alley. He liked the protruding bones of his face, its dark and taut skin and the white, disheveled hair of his head. He liked even more the kind and friendly look in his

eyes which strove in vain to reflect an air of authority. The man smiled, revealing his ugliest feature: black teeth with wide gaps in between them.

— "Welcome to the Archives Section! Sit down!" he said, and started to shuffle through the documents of his appointment.

— "Welcome! Welcome! Life," he went on to say, "can be summed up in two words: hello and goodbye." Yet it was infinite, Othman thought. There blew around him a strange mysterious wind, full of all kinds of probabilities.

— It was infinite, he thought again, and because of that it demanded infinite willpower.

— The Head of Section pointed to a vacant, neutral-colored desk whose leather top was worn out and spotted with faded stains of ink.

"Your desk," he said. "Examine the chair carefully. The tiniest nail can rip a new suit."

"My suit is very old anyway," replied Othman.

— "And remember," the man carried on with his warning, "to recite a prayer before opening a filing cabinet. On the eve of last Bairam festival a snake, at least three feet long,



came out of one of the cabinets." He choked with laughter and continued, "But it wasn't a poisonous one."

"How can one tell whether it is poisonous or not?" asked Othman anxiously.

"You ask the section messenger. He comes from Abu Rawwash, the city of snakes."

Othman took the warning for a joke and let it pass. He chided himself for failing to study meticulously His Excellency the Director General's room and print on his mind's eye a full picture of the man's face and his person, for not trying to unravel the secret of the magic with which he dominated everyone and had them at his beck and call. This was the power to be worshipped. It was the ultimate beauty too. It was one of the secrets of the universe. On earth there existed divine secrets without number for those who had eyes to see and minds to think. The time between hello and goodbye was short. But it was infinite as well. Woe betide anyone who ignored this truth. There were people who never moved, like Mr. Sa'fan Basyuni. Well-meaning but miserable, paying tribute to a wisdom of which

he had learned nothing. But not so those whose hearts had been touched by the sacred fire. There was a happy path which began at the eighth grade in the government service and ended at the splendid position of His Excellency the Director General. This was the highest ideal available to the common people, beyond which they could not aspire. This was the highest heaven where both divine mercy and human pride became manifest. The eighth grade. The seventh. The sixth. The fifth. The fourth. The third. The second. The first. Director General. The miracle could be brought about in thirty-two years. Or perhaps rather more. Those who fell by the wayside were innumerable. Still the celestial order did not necessarily apply to mankind, least of all to government employees. Time nestled in his arms like a gentle child, but one could not prophesy one's future. He was on fire: that was all. And it seemed to him that this fire blazing in his breast was the same as that which lit the stars in their courses. We were creatures of mystery whose secrets were hidden to all but their Creator.

"You will first learn to handle the incoming mail," said Mr. Basyuni. "It is easier." He then added, laughing, "An archivist should take off his jacket while working. Or at least have elbow patches sewn on his sleeves to protect them against dust and paper clips." All that was easy. What was really difficult was how to deal with time.

## Day 2

I left the other day with the necessary stamped and signed papers, and returned on the appointed day and hour to pick up the assigned notaries for the second leg of this process — father's signature. I am asked to wait as they are held up finishing some work in the office before they can leave. I sit down. I watch the other people filing from one desk to the other. The usual questions of which paper, where to get it, and what next in the mess of these offices are answered patiently and impatiently by kind or not employees. High levels of patience, teeth-grinding and fear of consequences keep these offices from bursting in everyone's faces. On the wall in front of me:

## Important Note

New Cairo is a subsidiary to Nasr City district as of 2/7/2011

Kindly—

Fill the green contracts  
using Word application  
And upload it on a CD  
or a USB stick

Wise Saying

Be in this world like a passer-by  
And leave behind you a nice trail  
For in this world we are only guests  
And all guests will leave

A young man waiting next to me is wearing a black t-shirt with a picture of a cute young girl on it. The left corner of the picture has a black stripe. Under it written in big black letters: Retribution. I ask him if I can take a picture of it with my cell phone. He agrees. I learn that the five-year-old girl had been the victim of a heinous crime and that this and other pictures of her were all over her home-city of Port Said a couple of years ago. She had been sexually assaulted and thrown off

the roof of her building at the hands of two minors from her neighborhood. The crime sparked public outrage and demands for retribution from her killers who received lesser sentences because of their age.

In the other room, I see the back of another young man standing before another sitting employee. My eyes fall down to his knees where slightly above his right knee, above his trousers, he wears a gun-holster, gun included. From the relaxed conversation and his casual gun-wear I gather he is not a guest like us. He is a fellow state functionary. On the other wall:

O God

*O God teach me that forgiveness  
is the highest degree of power  
And that seeking revenge  
is the first sign of weakness  
God if you deprive me  
of the blessing of health...  
...leave me the blessing  
of patience and faith...  
And if you deprive me of money...*

*leave me hope  
and if I wrong people, give me  
~~the courage to apologize~~  
~~and if people wrong me,~~  
give me the ability to forgive*

And if the ceiling comes crashing down on the office and everything in it, God give me the spine to duck. And if the notaries come already, that would be fine. I busy myself to kill time. One of the two notaries I am waiting for finally appears to say the other one is still busy. I wait.

Finally, both employees are free at the same time and ready to leave with me. Another man appears and insists that it's his turn and they have to go with him first, that it won't take long, and that they absolutely need to do this first. A discussion of what, where and for how long ensues. The notaries don't mind either way. I give in and agree to drive the notaries to his place first where they would witness a signature and the rest of the works while I wait for them in the car. A silent short drive followed by a 30-minute wait after which they reappear and we head to my father. The

ceremony began of checking that my father is aware and consenting to give me power of attorney, followed by the serial signing of papers. Operation signature successful. I now have to drive them back to the office and get an appointment for my third and final visit, this time directly to the Director's office, to collect the signed and registered Power of Attorney.

*By My might, I shall surely aid you  
even if it should be after a while*





#### IV

Why do I imagine Nietzsche, specifically, accompanying me on journeys into the labyrinths of Egyptian bureaucracy? Perhaps it is because I want to get past feelings of guilt which he deeply condemns. I want to summon his character, pulsating with aggression, to describe in his violent cadence the people and desks and walls and the words strewn about between them all as an exhibition of the desire for nothingness, a display of values turned upside down which the will to life should invert back once again.

I imagine him thumping angrily against the rules posted on the walls and the religious prayers and sayings scattered in the space, on eye level, like lanterns. Under their light, he will be obliged to perform the obscure rituals of bureaucracy, whose secrets are hardly revealed. This is why he will have to fully yield to the instructions of the priests of the temple of bureaucracy.

In the temple of bureaucracy, the rituals falter between a rationality that uses specific rules to direct society toward its material interests, and an ascetic air, hovering over the space and emanating from the texts hung on its walls, taking value away from those material interests. My walk through those texts with their ascetic character was what he described as the "spiritual revenge" or the "imagined revenge" of those who feel weak, spiritually weak. It is a revenge against the world of selves immersed in struggles of power, possession and pleasure. The world that passes right through them and slips through their fingers.

The attempt to strip off the personal, to thrust the world, its selves and its desires through a web of impersonal and predetermined procedures, will seem to him like what he called the 'automatic activity,' which the priests of ascetic practices hold on to tightly. They are physical and psychological practices that aim to lead individuals to shed their individuality, enabling them to receive a flow from a higher authority so that they harmonize with a presumed cosmic order. He will not be

deterred by any sympathy for that modernist presumption that impersonal processes lead to equality or rationalization for he despises them relentlessly as much as he despises modernity itself.

My walk through the prayers and aphorisms hung on the walls is a portrait of what he describes as the morality of the slaves, the weak and the priests. A morality that glorifies compassion, leniency, gentleness, forgiveness, empathy, preventing harm, refraining from revenge, vanquishing lust and selfishness. They are morals that diminish the value of life, and its instincts which he glorifies, to the lowest degree: a fleeting life, glory be to those who renounce it and to what awaits them in another world.

In all of this, he will see a conspiracy to 'turn the value of life' head over heels, a celebration of nothingness, and an attempt to fabricate the will for asceticism and piety — the attempt of the defeated to adopt any will, after a bitter defeat in adopting the will to power. He will mock the erosion of the will to nothingness and the celebrated ascetic ideal when he enters the offices.

of most senior employees. On their walls, expressions of asceticism, transience and subservience disappear and are replaced with images and signs of gratitude, thankfulness and humility before God, attributing sovereignty to Him alone, He who gives sovereignty to whom He wills and takes it away from whom He wills.

I will share with him my observation of how power casts its shadow over religious imagination, and how the imagination of believers in performing their rituals to the divine has changed from the theology of sultanates and kingdoms to the theology of rational modernity and then to the theology of bureaucracy and technology.

In the theology of the sultanate, unrestrained divine power appears, with its selectivity towards its submissive subjects who stand before it in what's akin to a royal court. Subjects receive divinity's generous gifts or annihilating fury, and accept human inequalities as they accept disparities in the ranks of people in the eyes of kings.

Religious imagination in the modernist theology seeks rationality, justice and equal-

ity spread throughout the world by divine authority. The religious imagination will appear socialist at times, liberal at others and sometimes will lead the human mind to the keys of the natural sciences. The religious imagination will try to interpret the divine will metaphorically, with its disparities, paradoxes and supernatural manifestations, using literary significations that can be integrated into a logic aligned with rational science or constitutional democracy, in congruity with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

From within the modernist theology emerges the bureaucratic theology, the theology of procedures and rules. It will recall metaphors of divine bestowals of the sultanic nature and turn them into impersonal rules: if you recite that prayer a certain number of times you will receive a specific reward in the afterlife. Gradually, the role of the divine royal being, bestowing generously or withholding calamitously, is reduced to a 'computer' that will automatically calculate the reward for you if you recite the prayer or someone leads you to do so unconsciously.

recite it. The moment you read that paper, points will be awarded to your balance. The one who put that paper there, in your line of vision, will also be awarded points, recorded in the register of procedures animating the automated just mind, in accordance with yet another programmed precept: the one who guides to good-doing is equal to the good-doer. The automatic mind spontaneously applies the rules. The religious imagination will deconstruct the religious experience from a complete holistic experience, a journey in the relationship with a higher being whose will is impossible to encompass fully, or a wandering journey in the kingdom en route to the court and royal presence. The religious imagination will reduce this experience to one that is closer to submitting to impersonal procedures, a game of points with a haughty management, a match with an automatic referee system that records your quantitative achievement and accumulates it. And as in computer games, you will move from one level to the next until the goal is reached.

Nietzsche will surely forgive my idea's possible philosophical shorthand and unsym-



pathetic assault. I think he will encourage me to further develop it, to follow the genealogy of religious ritual in relation to prevailing forms of authority, and then to express it, in a sharper, and more contemptuous way. I will thank him for giving me the opportunity to express my anger in a philosophical way and to be in temporary accord with him against bureaucracy, a battle in which both sides agree to put sympathy aside and to embrace, in the meantime, a certain nihilism.

Day 3

Four days later. Director's office. Endgame. Nature at dusk. Nature at dawn. Separated by a fan. None of the soiled A4 sheets of paper taped to the walls. The grim director hands me the registered contract. Success. I thank him and decide to crown my victory with another trophy from the Director's office. I tell him that I am an art lover and if I can please photograph the nature paintings on his wall. He agrees. I take out my cell phone and photograph it from my seat across his desk. At that moment, a junior employee walks into the tiny office and catches me, red-handed, photographing. He reports me to the director who is standing right next to both of us. The director confirms that its ok.

A week or so passes before I take my fresh Power of Attorney on its first trip. I am in the office of the branch manager of my father's bank. I proudly present him with the Power of Attorney that he needs. He takes it and dives into his computer. I have had to deal



with this branch manager before on several occasions, alone and with my father. I have grown to dislike him over the years. Inflexibility as the highest form of intelligence. He resurfaces from his screen saying the signature is invalid. Why??? Your father signed here in Arabic while his authorized signature on our system is in English (or the other way round). Can I see? He shows me a very unclear picture of a scan of a faded photocopy of the signature on his screen. I say, but this is hardly visible. AND I think I see two signatures there, one in English and one in Arabic. He looks more closely into the screen, then calls someone to get him a hard copy of dad's signature. He gets it and, lo and behold, my father has his signature registered in both languages. Yes! The manager then says but his signature here is first, middle and last name, while here it's only first and last name. What does that mean? The paper is invalid. The paper is invalid? Have to re-do the whole process.

## VI

When did the idea come to him?

Perhaps it had sought to entice him for a while without his paying it attention. It would wink and disappear. And then, in an instant, it appeared fully formed. He observed it with a frown, not wanting to scrutinize it yet, preferring to keep it at a distance for a time.

He leaves his room on the roof at a set time that does not change. Seven o'clock in the morning. He casts his gaze about before going down the stairs to the wider section of the roof: some of the neighbors may have caught him unawares and discarded worthless odds and ends in the corners. As a result of his strictness, the terrace has remained empty and clean. On moonlit nights, he used to like to stroll there, lean on the railing, and from his high perch, look out at the lights that extend off into the distance, and at the people and cars in the streets below, small like children's toys.

He wears an old coat with threadbare collar and cuffs; he wears it winter and summer. In the beginning, he wore it to conceal any of his clothes that might be dirty, since he often forgot to wash them, and then he got used to it.

His dignified step as he descends the stairs. The building has five floors, the floor two apartments, and each apartment is small, one bedroom and a living room. He has not gone into a single one. His relations to the neighbors are confined to passing greetings. Neither he nor they wish for more than that. Occasionally he runs into one of them on the third floor, a woman of middle years. Her husband, as he has heard, does shift work and is sometimes gone for days. She is bent over, sweeping her doorstep, and she observes him from her bent position. She does not hide the desire in her eyes, her full chest showing from the opening of her blouse whose top button she has undone to give it breathing room. He avoids her gaze. For her, he would be a safe relationship. A bachelor. In the same house. Just a few steps and she could be at his place. No one

would wonder about her going up to the roof and hanging out her laundry once her own clothesline had-filled. She could change the position of the tv aerial. Any old reason.

Pretty or not, he doesn't want her. Not her, and no one else either. Nothing comes from them but bother. He can't imagine himself with a woman in his room. In his solitude he doesn't want anyone. He relaxes in bed, his thoughts wandering here and there. He prefers imaging them moving about his room in the way he desires, whispering the words he likes. She's his neighbor. She tried once. She was the first and the last. Despite that, her glances still call to him. She came up to the roof. He saw her from the partly opened door of his room. She was wearing a galabiyya of the sort worn at home, with plush slippers on her feet. She went to the tv aerial and came back. Stopping in front of his door, she rested her shoulder on the door frame, her feet hugging each other, her fingers moving lightly on her chest. His things are strewn all over the room and he is lying in bed.

She asked him, her eyes directly on his, to help her change the position of the aerial

since her reception was distorted and the serial was about to start.

He said he didn't understand the positioning of the aerial and that she could just use the position of any of the other aerials as a guide.

She seemed not to hear him. She stayed where she was, glances here and there.

She asks him, "Where do you put the tv?"

He says he doesn't have a tv.

She asks him, "And you don't watch the serial?"

He doesn't answer.

She murmurs, "And I was thinking I'd watch the serial at his place."

A last glance at him, and she turns and moves away. Her step is still on the roof, but he doesn't need to close the door. He knows she won't come back again.

The narrow alley gives onto the bus stop, and the bus takes him to the Police Directorate where he works as an accounts auditor. He has a quarter of an hour to eat his breakfast.

The foul cart with its stewed beans is behind the building and a number of employees

and laborers are gathered around it. The employees carry their plates and little loaves of bread to a wooden table and stand along its length. The laborers stay by the cart. Eyes on his plate, enjoying the smell and the hot steam, the idea comes back to him, in those moments as he steals a glance at the faces in front of him, the steam rising in slender plumes from the plates towards them. How many an idea had come and gone, but this idea, of all of them, comes back to him insistently, until, as he left the fuul wagon behind, he said to himself, "How simple it would be. Like all great ideas."

His office is in the corner of the hall, where ten employees mill about. He was distracted, mulling the idea over. Just a few more papers to prepare and the matter will be over. He has enough experience to implement it with precision. The first step is the one he is always hesitant to take. After that, nothing will stop him.

And why not?

An envelope, in which he will put a few pieces of paper with the Police Directorate logo. And the eagle stamp. He has an old

one they wanted to destroy a while ago when a new one arrived but he was able to hide it. He doesn't know why he wanted to have it — maybe for what it represents in terms of power. He finds it amongst a bunch of odds and ends at the bottom of the drawer and pushes it, along with the ink pad, into the envelope. He'll take it when he leaves for home. And there, he'll prepare his plan in peace.

He sat down lethargically. He told himself he wouldn't think about the idea until he got back to his room. He excels at forging all the signatures of the officials he needs, including the Minister. He has trained his hand during his free time in the office as a kind of amusement. As soon as a new official arrives and he sees his signature on papers that cross his desk he gets busy copying it. He puts a transparent paper on top of the signature and traces it time and again. There is just one whose signature he hasn't tried to forge, the Head of Personnel. The man has an aversion to him, and makes his distaste obvious with movements of his hand and facial expressions. This man takes off his jacket as soon as he enters his office and hangs it

on a hanger next to him. He sits with an open vest that reveals a brilliant white shirt and the tie he changes every day. On the occasions when he goes into his office to have some papers signed, the man signals to him with his hand to leave them on his desk and go. He does not raise his head towards him. Just a gesture with his hand, its pinkie ring with the purple stone glinting as it catches a shaft of light.

He met him once in the hallway. He stopped him, looking at the coat in disgust. From top to bottom. Then he asked him,

– Where did you buy it?

– I don't remember. It was some time ago

– Aaah, yes. A long time.

And he walked away.

He couldn't get enthused about forging his signature. He just couldn't get enthused. He sees his signature on many papers but does not pause. An ordinary signature. Like a thousand other signatures that he sees and that don't inspire him to try to counterfeit it. But now he will need it for his project. He extracts a copy of an administrative decree with the head of the department's signature

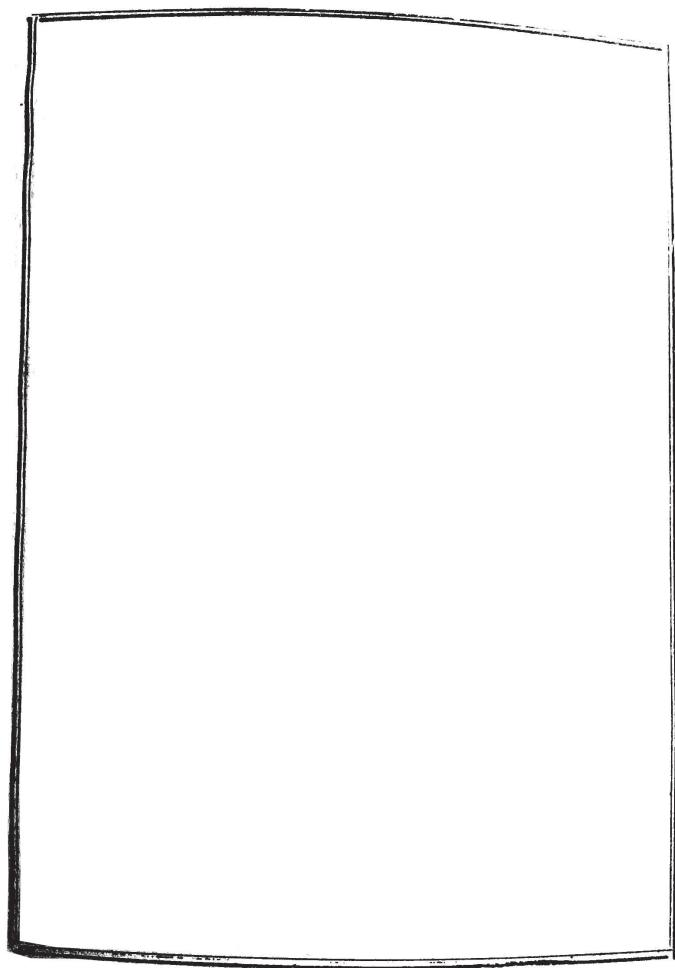


on it from a file in front of him and slips it into the envelope he will be taking home. Ten minutes and he'll master it. Tomorrow is Friday, a holiday. He applies himself to preparing the papers he'll need to send on their way on Saturday. On leaving, he passes by the used furniture shops in Ataba to buy a desk, a chair, and a typewriter. He'll have to have the typewriter. Even if it means buying a new one.

Auditing, the end of the line for all financial transactions at the Police Directorate. The last word. The check for the amount payable will be drawn. The enclosures that have suffered so long, handed back and forth between offices until the check's issuing, along with memos and decisions and what not will all be put into a file which will make its way to Records, where it will rot. Who will ask about the file after that? And if some problem should arise, they always go back and question the auditor whose job it was, and he will be there to answer their questions. He can even make a show of going down to the Records to consult the file which does not exist.

Khalidiyya Police Department. That will be its name. A little town in Upper Egypt. There are so many town-names there and nobody remembers them. Khalidiyya. A name like those in common use there. Who could imagine that it's a fictitious police department? And that the town doesn't exist either? He'll get the enclosures ready tomorrow. The memo from Personnel. The Minister's decree. The salary table of employees of the Department. He may be able to dispense with writing the Personnel memo, since they usually prefer to keep their own memos, considering the signature of the employee responsible for the disbursement form sufficient. As a consequence, he won't have to forge the signature of the Head of Personnel. He'll make do with the Minister's decree.

"With reference to the relevant laws, and for the good of work, and pursuant to the authority vested in us, we have decided to establish a Police Department in the city of Khalidiyya."



## COLOPHON

- I – Visit to the Public Notary Office: Day 1  
By Maha Maamoun
- II – Respected Sir  
By Naguib Mahfouz  
Trans. Rasheed El-Enany  
Cairo: The American University  
in Cairo Press, 1987. 26–29.
- III – Visit to the Public Notary Office: Day 2  
By Maha Maamoun
- IV – The Theology of Bureaucracy  
By Amr Ezzat
- V – Visit to the Public Notary Office: Day 3  
By Maha Maamoun
- VI – Khalidiyya  
By Mohammed El-Bisatie  
Trans. Lisa White  
Cairo: Ruwayat al-Hilal, 2004. 6–10.

This publication is part of  
The Subduer by Maha Maamoun  
Graphic Design: Anton Stuckardt

Cairo/Berlin, 2017