

Professor

Hanaa

Reem
Bassiouny



G

PROFESSOR HANAA

Reem Bassiouney

Translated from the Arabic by Dr Laila Helmi

Garnet
PUBLISHING

PROFESSOR HANAA

Published by
Garnet Publishing Limited
8 Southern Court
South Street
Reading
RG1 4QS
UK

www.garnetpublishing.co.uk
www.twitter.com/Garnetpub
www.facebook.com/Garnetpub
garnetpub.wordpress.com

Copyright © Reem Bassiouney, 2011
Copyright © (Translation) Laila Helmi, 2011

All rights reserved.
No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by
any electronic or mechanical means, including information
storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing
from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote
brief passages in a review.

First Edition

ISBN: 978-1-85964-272-6

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset by Samantha Barden
Jacket design by Garnet Publishing
Cover photograph © Reg Charity/CORBIS

Printed and bound in Lebanon by International Press:
interpress@int-press.com

*'Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story ...
the pen has been in their hands.'*

Jane Austen

To every Middle Eastern woman who holds a pen to write her own story.

Whatever type of pen!

For hers is the honour of trying.

*And to every Egyptian who loves passionately, hates passionately
and enjoys Middle Eastern pastries.*

CHAPTER 1

There are days in life that are quiet and dull, and others that pass in a rush of ecstasy. There are days full of indolence, of restlessness. And then there are days ... oh God!

This day in particular seemed endless and depressing, even more so than usual, because today was her birthday. Her fortieth.

Twenty years ago she had vowed that on her fortieth birthday, she would throw a huge party and invite her husband, his relatives and her children's friends, that she would extend the invitation to all officers and employees, to housewives and all those in authority, to decision-makers and self-made men – and to all workers and peasants.

The day had come, but Hanaa was alone in her spinster's den, and as solitary as a wild cat.

Spinster. What an awful, terrifying word!

She was not a spinster and did not look like forty at all. Looking at herself in the mirror, she looked like thirty; twenty perhaps. She was still petite, and her wrists slender and fragile. How does a woman grow old? When her wrist loses the charm of youth. But *her* wrist was full of charm. Her small, sharp features had not changed; they were still like those of a little squirrel. Her figure had not lost its grace. Even the faint wrinkles around her eyes were hardly visible.

It was a well-planned but unsettling day, and despite her courage she hardly knew how to face it. Still, she managed to stay organized as usual, and wrote down her plans for the day.

At nine, she would visit her former professor, who had suffered a light stroke, in hospital. After that, she would try once more to meet with her department head, and finally she had to prepare to travel to the conference the next day.

Only one thing possessed her: one idea nagged at her mind.

She would go to the head of the department while still a virgin.

She would prepare for the conference while still a virgin.

She would turn forty while still a virgin.

The very idea filled her with disgust. There had to be a way out. Her virginity was strangling her, wrestling her to the ground. Her virginity, which she had guarded so jealously for years now, had become her arch enemy. Who was worthy of deflowering Professor Hanaa? Had that man been born yet?

One single idea possessed her: today, she had to lose her virginity – fast – or else she would become a bitter, forty-year-old spinster. If on the other hand she were to lose her virginity, she would turn into a *woman* of forty. That was something to be proud of ... whereas to remain a girl at forty, because he who deserved her had not yet been born? That was simply a catastrophe. Fortunately, she was practically minded, and knew exactly what she wanted.¹

¹ In Egypt, as in many other Middle Eastern and Arab countries, a girl has to guard her virginity until she is married. Virginity for a girl reflects not just her honour but the honour of her family as well. So if a girl loses her virginity before marriage, that may bring shame to all her immediate and even distant family and may also mean that her sisters will never get married. That may also explain why families ask for a dowry, a secured flat and expensive gifts for their daughters from their bridegroom-to-be. Because the man and his family have to save for years in order to marry, he expects his bride to be a virgin. This also means that girls prepare for the day of their wedding long beforehand, since it really marks their initiation into womanhood and into a different phase of their life, one with perhaps more status and pride attached.

Professor Hanaa Saad sat in the anteroom, irritated, watching the department secretary, Mr Abdel Hamid, with an uncommonly intense feeling of anticipation and rage. He was a middle-aged man, always wearing his fake leather jacket and his almost-too-tight grey trousers. His thinning hair wasn't any particular colour and his thick fish lips were mostly either smacking wordlessly or jabbering nonsense. If she had one desire today, it was to smash Mr Abdel Hamid's head with a heavy but sharp hammer until she felt his blood spurting, dripping down her hands, nose and eyes.

'Professor Hanaa, I already told you that Professor Samy is very busy today,' he said, in the tone of Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah on the day he banned green soup and set fire to the streets of Cairo.

Heaving a deep sigh, her voice harsh and shaky, she insisted, 'He has to sign the consent for my travelling today. If he doesn't, I can't go to the conference and if I don't—'

'Professor Hanaa, I said he was busy!' he interrupted, peeved. He turned away contemptuously and started talking to another professor. She was not ready to give up, though. She had to travel tomorrow. Today she had to lose her virginity, get her own back on that secretary and rip her rights out from the very jaws of the beast.

This was the age of ripping, the age of Abdel Hamid and of fear, hypocrisy and indolence, the age of zealots and colonialists. It was an age she hated, an atmosphere she did not know, and the secretary turned her stomach.

She closed her eyes, listening to the flattery heaped upon the secretary by all the university professors seeking the head of the department's approval.

How long had she been sitting there? How long had she stayed?

Finally she heard the secretary's powerful voice. 'Professor Hanaa, Professor Samy wants to see you.'

She got up, moving steadily in her flowing dress with her black hair and unusual orange sandals. Confidently, she opened the door and looked at her colleague, who excelled in hypocrisy and public relations. The head of the department! She hated Samy; she hated his wife and his son, the teaching assistant; she hated his whole family, who worked at the university. She hated Samy the professor and Samy the man.

The feeling was mutual.

She examined his dyed-brown eyebrows and hair, his velvet tie and brown suit, his long pale face and phantom-like figure. He looked like Caspar in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, except thirty years older and much more vulgar.

Sarcastically he asked, 'So, Hanaa, you want to go to America?'

He called her Hanaa when she had to call him Professor Samy! She hated calling him 'Professor Samy'.

Frostily she said, 'I want permission to attend the conference. I asked for it three months ago and you still haven't approved it. Why?'

'I ask, you answer. Not the other way around,' he said brusquely.

She felt the blood boiling in her veins. 'No. I am asking,' she said forcefully.

He looked at the pile of exam papers in front of him. 'You haven't marked your exams. I could have you up for questioning.'

With every inch of her body trembling, she said vehemently, 'I did not mark those papers because I did not teach that subject. You know that. Professor Ali taught it and then left for a teaching post in Saudi Arabia. You approved his secondment, yet you won't approve my attending an academic conference that will help me with—'

He interrupted her firmly. 'Did you say "you"? Sir! You mean "Sir"! Look, Hanaa, you either mark the exams or I will not give my consent to you travelling.'

She started to open her mouth, but he went on. 'I haven't got time to waste. You have five hundred papers. Can you have them marked by tomorrow morning? If you can, I'll sign the consent. You'll sign for the papers and hand them in to Abdel Hamid in the morning.'

She looked at him in amazement and horror, despair creeping into her brain while ideas accumulated within her.

Her fortieth birthday and still a virgin!

Tomorrow she would go to America, where her first love lived: Ramy el-Masry.

Today she must lose her virginity, mark five hundred papers, slap Samy soundly, then smash Abdel Hamid's head with a hammer. Lose her virginity, go to the conference and perhaps meet Ramy, perhaps not.

Lose her virginity.

She would go back home then.

Once again she sat there staring at Abdel Hamid. With five hundred papers in her lap she could hardly see his face.

'Professor Hanaa.'

Through the papers she saw a young man standing in front of her. 'How are you, Khaled?' she asked mechanically.

He smiled, his eyes never meeting hers. 'Do you need help, professor? Shall I carry those papers for you?'

'Oh would you, please?' she asked, struggling to get up.

He took the papers from her. She got up and moved towards the door, without uttering a word to Abdel Hamid.

Walking next to the young man, she looked at him. Her eyes travelled all the way up to his head. He was tall, dark and slim. He was a typical Egyptian and his eyes never met hers; shyness emanated from every feature and confidence glittered between his lips. She needed a man. Khaled was no older than twenty-five or-six and she was forty. But she was small and slight and she

always quickly got rid of the grey hairs with a strong black dye that matched her thick black eyebrows.

‘Where to?’ he asked calmly.

‘Khaled, did you want to see Professor Samy? I’m sorry I’ve taken you from—’

‘I’ll go back to him in an hour,’ he quietly interrupted. ‘Do you need help, professor?’

She looked into his eyes, but he shyly averted them. Smiling, she said, ‘I need a lot of help. A *lot* of help.’

In that same quiet voice that she found so provoking he said, ‘Happy to be of service.’

‘Thanks, Khaled. Remember when I used to teach you Victorian poetry? You were my best student.’

‘You’re just being kind.’

Khaled was an exemplary student. He was obedient and helpful, a hard and diligent worker, and he was poor. She could discern his poverty in his hobbies, his constant work, his embitterment with the wealthy, his sometimes straightforward way of expressing himself and his sophisticated way of avoiding conflicts.

Happily she chirped, ‘Could you help me mark these papers? You know I have a conference tomorrow and if I don’t finish grading all these, I can’t go.’

‘Of course, professor,’ he said without hesitating. ‘Anything you want. Leave me half of them. I’ll stay up and do them.’

‘No!’ she hastily said. ‘This is a responsibility. You have to mark them in my presence. I’m sorry – I know you’re being helpful. Could you come and mark them at my place?’

There was something like fear in the look he gave her. ‘If you leave them, I—’

‘Khaled,’ she interrupted, ‘I can’t leave them. I’m only asking you to mark them at my place. I’m not going to be alone there.’

He heaved a sigh of relief. 'I'm sorry, I thought you – of course I'll come. Is after sunset prayers OK? I have a few errands to run.'

'Oh, that's great!' she said triumphantly.

She switched the lights on in the large hall and threw the exam papers on the table. Her house was old; it was her parents' house. Here she had lost them both. Here she would spend the rest of her life, perhaps alone. Perhaps not. Here she had lived for most of her forty years. She loved her home; she had acquired certain habits she could not live without. As opposed to her sister, she was economical with the electricity. She kept the lights switched off till seven o'clock every evening. At seven she would switch on only the light in her room, where she would sip her coffee and read. Before she slept, she would open the large window in her bedroom and take a deep breath of air, looking down at the crowded streets of Zamalek. She would drink the camomile tea some people had recommended and which she had been drinking since the death of her mother ten years ago. She would then go to bed, craving sleep the way a man craves the woman he loves. Sometimes sleep came. Other times it did not.

Professor Hanaa was neat and cautious. Everything in the kitchen had its place. She only ate sweet stuff when she visited her sister. She only ate meat once a week and although she loved grilled meat, she hated grilling it. She would buy it from a kebab shop then go through the process of cleaning it, which usually took an hour. Since she ate her main meal at six o'clock in the evening, she had to plan to buy the grilled meat early.

The cleaning started with her getting rid of the tahini paste, the salad and the bread. The meat was then placed in the oven for half an hour after the minute specks of parsley scattered on the meat had been carefully picked off.

Professor Hanaa did not like visits, especially those from her family. She could see the greed in her brother's eyes and the worry in her sister's. She hated both greed and worrying.

Her kitchen was the same as her mother had left it ten years ago. It was clean and the food in the house was scanty and nutritious. There was carefully prepared salad, frozen soup, frozen fish, and there was the chicken breast that she ate on Thursdays after work.

She picked up her own particular cup and calmly started to prepare her coffee, her older sister's words ringing in her head.

Hanaa. No men and no food. What are you living for?! Those are the pleasures of life!

She glanced proudly at her slender wrist. She was beautiful; that was enough! She had to remain beautiful, graceful, small, slim, and would anyone remember her fortieth birthday?

What did she know about Khaled? She knew he lived in Boulaq. He often mentioned the fact with an air of pride. He was self-confident but his eyes never met those of a woman. Was he a virgin, too? What else did she know? She knew he was religious; he never forgot to pray. She knew he was an exemplary student, and that his best friend was a blind young man whom Khaled helped with everything. Khaled was an example of the kind, patient Egyptian. He had been top of his class, got a place at the university as a teaching assistant and was awarded an MA in the translation of the Holy Quran. And he was a man, he was young – and that was what she wanted.

She sat quietly, drinking her coffee and staring at the black clock on the wall. Her mind was focused on one problem. Khaled was religious. What could she expect of him? What about herself? She believed in God, but she had a strange sense of frustration and exasperation that she had never felt before. She saw no crime in losing her virginity. Chastity may be a source of pride at twenty and an ornament at thirty; but at forty, it was nothing but a curse! Enough of chastity! What had chastity done for her? Did she know the scent of a man? The touch of a man? What did she know about men?

Ramy had never so much as touched her! What was wrong with the men in Egypt? Were they afraid of women? What was so frightening about a woman? Why so much thought? Why so much gallantry? Why hadn't she lost her virginity in all this time? Why hadn't she forgotten Ramy like he had forgotten her? Why had her life gone to waste over work, study, fear and an impossible love?

She had been stupid, but now the age of stupidity was over.

She had been lazy, but now the age of laziness was over.

Once she had lost her virginity – what would she do then? Celebrate and celebrate. Throw all constraint into the River Nile, for spinsters never get married. Spinsters are a shame to society. Men don't marry forty-year-old spinsters, only widows or divorcees. After losing her virginity, she would throw a great party and invite Professor Samy, Abdel Hamid, her brother, her sister, the porter, Nagat the maid, and maybe—

She clasped her stomach. Maybe it was time for this sleeping womb to awaken and for these wasted ovaries to be fertilized. Perhaps it was time the woman within rebelled and overthrew the respectable lecturer!

Perhaps it was time this bedroom became inflamed and throbbing.

Perhaps.

Khaled was religious. She knew nothing about him. He might be in a relationship. Maybe he found her old, jaded. Maybe.

She had never tried to seduce a man before – no man. Then why didn't she hate men? Why hadn't she decided that men were a blight on society? If she hated men, she could accept things as they were, the way her professor had before her. If only she hated men! But did she even really know them?

Today she would know everything there was to know about men. Everything, and from a reliable source!

She must not, however, forget that she had five hundred papers to be marked and that seducing someone like Khaled would not be easy.

She must think of all the strategies she had read about. Her own life was meagre, her experience deplorably wanting. How was she to seduce him?

She did not want to seduce him; she wanted him to penetrate that obstacle that stood between her and her femininity. She did not want to seduce him at all.

She remembered how, in *A Passage to India*, the English girl had gone into the caves with the Indian man, and then had accused him of raping her. She had not been sure of what took place in the cave. She taught the novel to the fourth year, and Khaled had been one of her students. 'I don't understand this novel,' he had said in amazement. 'Does the author really mean that the English girl doesn't remember an incident like that? That's rubbish. These things are unforgettable.'

She, on the other hand, believed the girl. She thought it was easy for the mind to be intoxicated without having a drink. It is easy for the mind to lose control without resorting to hallucinogenic drugs. Every mind has its key, its weak spot, and is susceptible to delirium.

She was older than Khaled, more intelligent. She – well, she had to mark five hundred papers, she needed to lose her virginity, then she needed to wake up early tomorrow to go to America. She needed to awaken her dormant womb and to revenge herself on Samy and Abdel Hamid and all those who had power and authority as well as all those who served them.

Khaled stood shyly and hesitantly at the door, still wearing his dark blue jeans and checked shirt. It did not seem as if he had had the time to go home. Good. This would make her mission easier. She needed him tired enough to lose control and aroused enough

to act upon it. She was also still wearing the same clothes, formal and modest, so as not to raise his doubts.

Quickly she said, 'Do come in, Khaled.'

He came in quietly, and she gestured for him to take a seat. No sooner did he sit down than he asked, in a serious tone, 'Shall we start grading now?'

He looked at her and she understood the unspoken question. Though not used to lying, she said confidently, 'Nagat the maid is inside, if you want anything.'

He calmed down somewhat and they started grading at the long table.

She looked at him while he focused on the grading. He worked diligently. His features were even and his steady dark eyes were now concentrating on the task at hand. He seemed to radiate an air of patience all around him.

She put down the pen and said, 'I don't know how to thank you.'

Without looking up at her he replied, 'Always at your service, professor.'

Hastily she continued, 'Do you have brothers and sisters?'

'A brother and a sister.'

'Exactly like me. Are they married?'

'My younger brother got engaged two months ago. My sister is at school.'

'And you?' she asked nonchalantly.

Still crouched over the exams, he said, 'I was in a committed relationship until about a year ago, but—'

'Your colleague at the university!' she blurted out.

He looked up at her suddenly, rather surprised. Professor Hanaa was not reputed to be curious. On the contrary, she was known to be strict about everything, particularly about marks and forms of conduct. She was finicky, complex and out of touch with the real world. She seemed not to care about other people's

lives, yet he admired her sense of morality and conscientiousness. She disapproved of favouritism and worked hard. He would never have imagined that one day he would be at her home, and that she would ask him about his life quite so bluntly. He glanced at his watch. It was eleven. Hesitantly he said, 'It's getting late. I can take the papers with me and bring them back tomorrow morning. I'll stay up all night doing them.'

It was a mistake to have asked him about his life! There she was, already blundering. Quickly, she refused. 'No, no you can't.'

He wanted to reply, but she said forcefully, 'If you're tired, you can leave; I'll try to get it done on my own.' There was a moment of silence. She held her breath.

What if he left?

She had to appear strong and confident.

What if he agreed?

Before he could utter a word, she added, 'I'm sorry Khaled. I thought you were a student of mine and you wouldn't hesitate to come to my home.'

'I'll stay for an hour,' he replied firmly.

'Are you afraid of the doorman?' she inquired in a challenging tone. 'Everybody knows you're my student and that we work together.'

'I can't stay here, professor. It's not appropriate.'

He burst out without thinking, 'It's inappropriate, and it's against religion for me to stay in your flat in the middle of the night. It's *harām*.'

She got up, her cheeks flushed. 'Do you want tea or coffee?'

She knew what people would think if they found out that he was in her flat in the middle of the night. But she had to stay in control and not lose her temper.

'Oh – tea would be lovely, with three spoonfuls of sugar.'

'I don't have sugar. I never use any.'

He smiled slightly. 'You're the complete opposite of my mother. If there was no sugar at our house, she would declare war on us all.'

He had once again begun to lose his reserve, and she did not want to speak. She was scared of uttering a word that might scare him. She wanted his mind to be intoxicated. It would not be for hours yet. She wanted him to become so absorbed in grading that he lost track of time.

Time passed. The more it passed, the more hopeful she got.

Suddenly she said, 'Do you think helping me is *harām*? I mean, is it exploitation to have you mark exams that I'm supposed to do?'

He smiled. It was the first time she had ever seen him smile. It was an innocent and calm smile. 'But this is not your subject,' he said. 'This is Professor Ali's subject and he's gone abroad, so it doesn't matter who marks it.'

'What do you think of Professor Samy?'

'A charlatan.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You wanted my opinion.'

'You don't like him?'

'He's a charlatan and I don't like charlatans.'

'And Professor Ali?'

'He's a respectable lecturer.'

'And me?'

'A bit strict. I never knew what to expect in your exams. But you're kind and conscientious.'

'I never thought you were that straightforward. You always seem reserved and silent. I never know what you're thinking.'

'What I'm thinking?'

'What are you thinking of?'

'Of my family.'

'You love your family?'

‘They’re all I’ve got.’

‘I don’t have a family any more. My parents died and I know nothing about my brother and sister.’

‘Did they emigrate?’

‘No.’

‘Did you fall out?’

‘No. What I mean is, we each have our own lives. None of us cares about the other.’

For a while there was silence. He looked at her for the first time. Their eyes met. His were unfathomable. Hers were unblinking. He looked at his watch. ‘It’s one o’clock.’

Desperately she asked, ‘How many papers are left? I have fifty. You?’

Looking at the papers, he said, ‘About forty.’

He fell silent for a while, and then – ‘May I make a call on my mobile?’

He produced his phone and started calling a number. Meanwhile she gazed at him, scrutinizing him.

‘Hello, love. How are you, Hajja? ... Maybe another hour ... OK love, take care ... May God protect you.’

Her eyes rounded in amazement. ‘Were you talking to your mother?’

He raised his arms and stretched his back, sitting up straight in the chair. ‘Yes,’ he answered spontaneously.

‘Would you like some tea?’

‘If you don’t have any sugar, then I’d rather not.’

She glanced at him. For the first time she felt he was at ease with her. She didn’t like it. Yes, she wanted him to share her bed – but she did not want him to take liberties with her.

She went back to grading, and silence fell for another hour. Finally, he got up with a smile. ‘Finished. All the exams have been marked.’

He got up. Yes. Without so much as a word ... and it was all over: all her plans, her hopes. She would remain a virgin forever. She would die a virgin.

In horror she said, 'Don't go, Khaled.'

He looked at her in amazement. Quickly she explained, 'I have something I want to give you.'

He did not understand what she wanted. What in the world had happened to Professor Hanaa?

He remained standing there. She ran to the old kitchen and looked up at the high ceiling. How high it was! How gloomy! And the maid hadn't cleaned it. No, she hadn't cleaned it. When she got back from America, she would have a word with the maid who hadn't cleaned the ceiling. For now she had to seduce the young man who she had begun to hate. Her patience was running out.

She knew what she wanted and what to do. She had planned her scheme carefully.

She flicked the main fuse and the flat went dark, according to plan.

She heaved a sigh of relief. In the dark, she could give him what she wanted. In the dark flat, in the dark of night, maybe he would become intoxicated.

'There's a power cut. I'll bring a candle,' she called out.

A candle was ready at hand.

Lighting it, she went back to the hall. He was holding the flat door open.

'Why are you standing there? Do come in.'

Firmly he said, 'I must go back home.'

Before he could move she once again said, 'Wait five minutes, please; there's a big problem.'

For the first time he looked into her eyes with a hint of doubt, as if he didn't know her.

Curious, he asked, 'A problem?'

Closing the door, placing herself squarely in front of him, she said, feigning distress, 'The house is haunted!'

He burst out laughing. 'Haunted?'

She took his hand firmly before he could move, chattering away so he had no chance to speak, and she dragged him towards the couch. He seemed to have surrendered to her.

'No, listen, Khaled! I've seen them. They come out when there is a power cut. The female floats around like a puff of smoke. Then the male blows out the candle and then relights. And the noises – no one hears them but me.'

Speechless, he looked at her astonished. He sat on the couch silently listening to her.

She was talking rubbish, and she knew it. She did not believe in such things – but she was sure he did. The religious among the lower classes always mix religion with superstition. She had observed this before, in her mother's servant, in the doorman and his wife and so many others.

In a voice filled with fear she said, 'Do you hear something?'

The scene was beginning to tickle his fancy. 'Professor Hanaa, are you joking?'

'Not at all. Don't you believe in *djinn*?'

'Of course I do.'

'Do you know anyone who is possessed?'

'Possessed how?'

'Possessed by a *djinn*.'

'Yes, of course. My aunt was.'

'What did you do about it?'

'I prayed and a pious sheikh helped her. She was very unwell. Imagine – the *djinn* nipped her toe and it was paralysed!'

She sighed in relief, certain that she was approaching her target.

'Khaled, can you hear? What can I do about these noises that are following me around? The day my mother died I heard them all night long and—'

She went quiet. She was not lying any more.

'I was scared of going into her room. I still am. I always feel her standing there next to the bed, scolding me because I'm still alone.'

Was there bitterness in her voice? Could he hear it?

Silence prevailed. They were sitting on the couch. She did not move. She just stared at the candle, and her eyes became spellbound by it. The tears silently flowed over.

This was her chance. She knew that weakness in a woman was a virtue. The problem was she had never ever been weak. No man had ever dared conquer her. Men want to be victorious, want women to be defeated. She hated weakness and defeat.

Wiping away her tears, she said hurriedly, 'I fear the dark. I fear the loneliness and death that surround me.'

He swallowed and started to get up. She caught his hand, saying, 'Don't leave me. Not now. Don't leave me in the dark.'

He sat quietly down again.

She had to act quickly.

Slowly, she put her head on his chest. She started caressing his chest, pressed her body to his and whispered, 'Do you think there are *djinn* in the house?'

Her fingers unbuttoned two buttons of his shirt. She pressed her hand to his chest, felt the strong muscles against her palm. For the first time she felt the rough hair of a man's body. He smelled of pure Egyptian sandalwood soap. Confused, he whispered, 'I don't know.'

He did not move. He did not push her away. What was going on in his head? She would love to know. Maybe she would never know. At the moment she did not care. She did not even care what she felt. There was a mission to be accomplished.

Spontaneously she rubbed her cheek to his neck, whispering, 'I hate darkness and loneliness and silence. And you? Why aren't you speaking?'

He stared at the candle. ‘Professor Hanaa – the candle is almost burnt out. Do you want—?’

‘I want to give you something. Remember?’

‘I don’t know if I’m worthy of it.’

‘It’s not precious any more. It’s old and worn.’

‘I don’t think you possess anything old and worn.’

‘Give me a chance.’

‘Why me?’

‘Don’t ask. Don’t speak.’

The candle had burnt down. This was her chance. In the darkness, there are no restrictions, no inhibitions. She ran her hands along his body and he held her tight.

She did not like kisses. She didn’t know them, she didn’t want them. She wanted only one thing. She needed no words any more. All she could feel was her fragile wrist throbbing between his hands. The target was close ...

Clumsily she unzipped his trousers; she moved to his lap and lifted her skirt, and there it was. The end of her virginity. No kisses, no caressing, no passion – he was inside her, and there was relief mixed with a slight pain that did not bother her. The target was achieved.

How much time had passed? She sighed as she smiled inwardly, and lay on the couch, every inch of her body relaxed. He had gone. It was her habit to achieve her goals quickly and skilfully. She had not even removed all her clothes. She hadn’t wanted all the niceties now. She had only wanted to carry out the mission.

She had given him the gift. It was five in the morning and she was tired. She had to think about America, the conference and today’s glowing success.

* * *

The call to prayer used to comfort him and give him hope in the coming day. Especially the dawn call to prayer, but today – today!

He closed his eyes, bowed his head and at first did not feel the hand on his shoulder until he heard his friend's voice.

'Khaled. Khaled! It's prayer time. What's wrong with you?'

He did not look at him. It was Muhammad, his blind friend. His closest friend, who was closer to him than his own brother.

Muhammad tapped him on the shoulder again, fumbling his way through the darkness that had been his lot since childhood. He was trying to find his way to his friend, but he couldn't.

'What's wrong with you?' he asked. 'Why are you so late?'

He breathed slowly, as though trying to understand what had taken place the day before. He then calmly said, 'I was helping Professor Hanaa mark exams.'

Feeling for the chair so he could sit, Muhammad smiled. His fingers were used to feeling everything and anything without shame or hesitance.

'The complex Professor Hanaa! Do you remember her lectures? She always explained profusely then gave us a challenging look like we were creatures from another planet and wouldn't understand a word she said. A strong woman, but also a wretched one!'

'Wretched?' he asked rather indifferently. 'Why?'

'I don't know. At her age – how old is she? Late thirties I would say.'

Muhammad was quiet for a moment then chirped up as an idea struck him. 'Do you think she's still a virgin?'

Khaled answered in annoyance. 'It's *harām* to speak of women's honour during the dawn prayers. Go and pray.'

'And you? Why aren't you going to pray? What have you done? Have you been with a prostitute?'

Angrily he burst out, 'How could you say such a thing?'

'I was joking! You're never laid-back about dawn prayers. Why today?'

He did not utter a word. He felt uncommonly upset.

Slyly Muhammad said, 'Honestly, haven't you wondered if she is a virgin? I think she is. Her voice has a strange note of melancholy. Is she beautiful?'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'You used to describe everything to me.'

'Are we going to talk about her all night? I'm tired.'

'Let's talk about Safaa then. How I yearn for a woman and you could marry Safaa in an instant and yet you don't!'

'Perhaps I will.'

'Have you decided to go back to her? That would be for the best. She's a nice girl and she loves you. Your mother and your sister don't want you to get married but you need to be married. We all need marriage. Especially men. It's different for women. A woman doesn't have the same needs we do. She can live without a husband. She can remain a virgin if she wants; a man can't.'

'True, if she wants.'

'So, she's a virgin?'

He pondered for a while. 'Either she is one or she was one.'

'I don't understand.'

'It doesn't matter. Go pray.'

'What's up, Khaled?'

'Today my life was turned upside down. Something I neither wanted nor expected has become a burden on my shoulders. May God forgive me! I didn't want it. Go and pray! Pray for me and never ask me what happened today!'



Reem Bassiouney the author of five novels. Her first novel *The Smell of the Sea*, appeared in Egypt in 2005 and was a bestseller. All her novels have multiple editions, and are widespread in the Arab world. Her second novel, *The Pistachio Seller* won the best Arabic translated novel award in 2009 and came out in English from Syracuse University Press October 2009.

Her novel *Professor Hanaa* which appeared in Arabic in 2008 has also appeared in multiple editions including a government subsidized one. It won the first prize in the Sawiris literary award, the biggest award in Egypt. It was also selected as the only novel to come out in 'reading for all book' series (2010), which is the most prestigious series in Egypt.