

(WATER REFUGEES)

A STORY OF CAIRO BY GENAN HECHAM EL-JINDAWI

"I fully understand them. If I was in their situation I would also do anything to get water."

Kareem was looking forward to coming home to eat dinner with his family and family in-law. It was almost two weeks ago he had seen his parents. They usually met weekly but recently Kareem had been very busy and had formed the habit of coming home late. He was working on a new building project and had to clarify some misunderstandings with a customer. Fortunately, Sarah got off early today and decided to invite hers and Kareem's family for dinner. She had gotten off early as it was quiet at the hospital and so the doctor offered her and some other nurses to go home early. Kareem had reacted happily to Sarah's call regarding the dinner invitation as he felt he needed to relax and lead his mind away from the call he got from his friend in Libya. The telephone conversation between him and his friend had drained all the energy from him and had affected his concentration all day.

While Kareem was walking the crowded street, he looked at the old looking cars and was disappointed that Egypt was still using this ancient transport method when almost the entire world was using electric self-driving cars that has parking spaces all around the cities and are rented by a chip implemented in their hands. The thought of how Egypt's situation had changed tragically since the water catastrophe in 2050 would never leave his mind. The situation in Egypt of course was not perfect before the water catastrophe but he still longed for the time before 2050. Kareem had sold his car many years ago and decided to walk instead. The traffic had been unbearable and he could not handle the long hours in traffic every day and decided as many other Egyptians to walk. Today it took him half an hour to get home, while it took him 2 hours by car a few years ago.

Kareem felt the relief wash over him the moment Sarah opened the door for him. He gave her a hug and walked inside to see the rest of the family. Sarah announced dinner was almost done and therefore told them to get ready. They took turns to wash their hands and then rushed to find their seats at the table. "What a blessing" Kareem's father sighed. "A few years ago we could neither wash our hands nor meet at dinner". Sarah's mother commented that they did not have water nor food to meet on that time and the families broke into laughter, all except Kareem.

"Thank God" they said and began eating.

"Are you okay, darling?" Sarah asked. "Yes darling, I am fine" Kareem said and sent her a nervous smile. They continued eating with a "thank God" from time to time. Suddenly Kareem said, "Omar called me today". His announcement seemed to go unnoticed as everyone around the table continued eating.

Sarah's and Kareem's mothers helped Sarah with the dishwashing and the men went into the living room. "I wish we also had a self-cleaning dishwasher and utensils as most countries do," said Sarah's mother. Sarah and Kareem's mothers reminded her that they are very blessed nowadays to even have water and food. Sarah's mother agreed and continued to thank God, "we do not need more than that," she said.

They were all sitting in the living room and drinking tea when Kareem said, "Omar called me today" for the second time that day. Kareem's father said, "Omar from Libya? How is he?"

Kareem angrily said, "You know how he is, you know that they are suffering just like we suffered a few years ago. You all know that the Africans are suffering from water shortage and are dying every day and yet you all choose to ignore it and only care about yourself." Kareem's mother was very touched as she answered him, "Kareem my dear son, we do not just care about ourselves as you might think. But naturally, we care about our own family and our dearests. I will not stand idly by and watch you suffer and be dying, as that was the case a few years ago. Do you not realize the pain we went through when we saw our loved son dying because of malnutrition? Because I do and I will not allow that again. Besides you should know how much we all love Omar".

Sarah served the dessert and the conversation was not opened again.

Later that night, when Sarah and Kareem were lying in bed, he told her that he would never forget what she did for him when he was admitted to the hospital. He told her that she saved his life and that he was forever grateful for it. He lovingly kissed her hand and told her that he could not bear to think of Omar and other people suffering the way he did. Sarah reminded him that there was nothing they could personally do but that they should comply with the government if they really wanted the access to water. She always used to tell Kareem that the government is their savior.

Next morning, as Kareem was walking the Nile-way, he thought of a time where this way used to be a river. Just a few years ago, the Nile River was still a reality and served water to almost all Egyptians. Even if the quality of the water was very poor and was responsible for many poisoning cases among the Egyptians, it was still a river and Egypt was still proud of the Nile that played a significant role in the Egyptian civilization since ancient time. Kareem remembers how the international studies warned people about how the Nile River would dry since he was a kid. In 2015, some studies warned of a water catastrophic in Egypt in 2025. That did not happen and therefore the Egyptians and the government never took those warnings seriously. Again in 2040, international studies warned that Egypt was already on its way to a huge water catastrophic that would destroy the entire country. The government, however, ensured the population that it would never happen and that the Nile River would always be the main water source for Egypt. Only eight years after, the Egyptians began feeling the consequences of those warnings and it was then obvious that the Nile was disappearing. That led to a revolution against the government and requirements for serious solutions. The situation worsened and the water catastrophe became a reality just two years later. The country had been through many revolutions during the catastrophe and the situation was unbearable. Violence and unsafety was an everyday issue as well as seeing people dying on the streets. The Egyptians experienced a deep distrust and people were willing to kill to get access to water. The vast majority of the rich Egyptians escaped to other countries but the poor population, which is the majority of the citizens in Egypt, were left in Egypt with nowhere to go. No one requires a modernization of Egypt anymore. Egyptians only require water. During this political uncertainty, a group of researchers claimed that they had the only solution for this huge water catastrophic. Kareem could not even remember how these researchers exactly came into power but he specifically remembers the day water felt like a reality again. He remembers the day he saw the tap running water and felt it on his fingers. The government never shared their secret as to how they did it but they explain it as a very complicated technological process. The knowledge did not feel too important at the time, as people were just grateful to have regained the access to water.

Since that day, the government ran their own policy, both domestic and foreign. The only improvement the government really accomplished was to solve the water problem and recreate the security. Kareem loved Egypt so much and naturally felt depressed to see his beloved country in that disappointing state. He thought of the different ways the other countries were living in. What he saw on the television was completely different from what he saw in Egypt. Not only was the transportation different but the entire way of living. Kareem used to wonder how different his life today would be compared to the life he had as a small child. "While the entire world

is moving forward, we are still there,” he thought. Kareem returned to reality from his thoughts when a football, made of old clothes and rolled together, hit his head. Two small children with outworn clothes came running up to him and apologized. Kareem had a weakness for children. He kissed them on their forehead and went quickly ahead. He could not avoid thinking about the desire to be a father. Since he married Sarah, they had been trying to have children. They had been to all kinds of doctors and clinics hoping for a solution. The doctors were always ensuring them that there was nothing wrong with both of them but they never got an answer as to why Sarah was not able to become pregnant. Every time the tests showed that everything was as it should be. Today, eight years after, Kareem and Sarah never talk about being parents anymore.

Kareem entered his office and saw that his colleagues were standing in groups and discussing vehemently. The atmosphere seemed different at the office this morning, he thought.

Hani came over to Kareem and asked, “Have you heard the news?”

“Is Omar alright?” Kareem asked nervously. Kareem, Omar and Hani had been friends since forever. Kareem could not remember a time where they were not friends. They had been inseparable until Omar traveled to Libya to visit his dying mother during the water catastrophe in Egypt. One month later, Egypt got the new government, which solved the water problem by a secret technological process. The government quickly chose to close all borders with the African neighbors and therefore Omar could not return home. The government feared that Africans would come to Egypt in large quantities as they still suffered from water shortage in their home countries. The Egyptians knew that the only reason the governments refused to share their technology with other African countries was the power factor. This water source was the only thing that made the government powerful. The government had not done anything else for Egypt. If the Egyptians found the water source, they would not allow the government to continue, Kareem is convinced. “This is not about Omar right now, this is about us. The African countries have decided to meet today to discuss how they can get the water from Egypt,” Hani said.

“Nothing new, my friend. It is not the first time they meet to discuss the water shortage,” Kareem said. “Exactly! All the other meetings were about the solution of the problem but today it is about a plan to get the water from Egypt,” Hani said.

“I fully understand them. If I was in their situation I would also do anything to get water. Our government deserves to be executed,” Kareem said.

“Kareem my friend, the problem is that if the African countries attack Egypt, they would not spare the Egyptians. You know that they blame us for supporting our government. They hate us as much as they hate our government,” Hani worried.

“That is exactly what we are doing. We are supporting our psychopathic government when we do nothing to stop the government from doing horrible things towards our African neighbor because we are afraid of the water shortage. Therefore, we deserve what our government deserves,” Kareem said.

Kareem went to his desk and turned his computer on with shaking hands. “What a shitty computer, who in this entire world uses this kind of technology in 2060?” he snarled. “I bet that Europe cannot even remember what computer this is,” he continued.

Kareem was completely quiet for the next 15 minutes and thought deeply. He imagined how his and Sarah’s future would look like if Egypt, in the worst case, ended in war. He imagined his parents, his friends, his neighbors and he imagined his beloved Egypt. He was terrified of these imaginations and decided to begin working instead.

The day seemed very long and the tension felt thick. He tried not to think about the consequences of the African meeting but it was impossible not to. His colleagues discussed the meeting over and over again but he stayed quiet and did not participate to the discussion anymore. The only time he talked about the meeting again was when Sarah called him. She was nervous and afraid because of the rumors that had spread quickly among the patients and staff at the hospital. People were talking about a war against Egypt and about torture and executions. Kareem told Sarah to be strong and not to believe the rumors. He told her that the African countries were weak and therefore do not have the resources to invade Egypt. He advised her to listen to the Egyptian media instead of the foreign. Sarah was surprised that he wanted her to listen to the Egyptian media as he used to get angry when anyone referred to the Egyptian media. Kareem told her that this time they were telling the truth. They ended the call but Kareem did not feel Sarah was less nervous.

That Saturday morning Kareem stood up to Sarah crying. A fear controlled him and he did not dare to ask her for the reason she was crying. The whole week had been a long terrible nightmare as rumors of an African invasion of Egypt were spread among the Egyptians and a feeling of helplessness had taken over them. Nevertheless, the local channels had assured over and over again that the Egyptian governments would never allow an invasion. Kareem held Sarah's hand and kissed it. "We will be fine," he assured her.

"I do not think so, Kareem," she said indistinctly as she cried.

"They are already in Egypt and has taken control of the national TV channel. They ask everyone to stay home unless they want to risk their lives," she continued.

Kareem felt a heavy weight on his heart. He began with a sentence but did not complete it. He had predicted it; he had always told Sarah that the African countries would not stay quiet for very long. He was sure the situation would change dramatically if the Egyptians do not push the government to another water management and therefore a better African policy. Nevertheless, Kareem hoped that it would never happen. Kareem and Sarah were quiet most of the day, except for when they called their families to ensure that they were safe. Both Kareem and Sarah's families lived 15 minutes far from themselves and had always been neighbors. Kareem remembers how happy his parents were when he told them about his desire to marry Sarah. Their marriage had only made the bond between the families even stronger.

The situation in Egypt did deteriorated dramatically since the first day of invasion. The news is uncertain and the rumors dominate the situation. Some claim that the president and most of the members of the government did leave Egypt shortly before the invasion. Other claim that they all were murdered. Nobody knew anything for sure. All what Kareem knew was that Egypt was not theirs anymore. Already two days after the invasion, Kareem and Sarah tried to visit their families but were stopped by an African barrier with five men in military uniforms. Kareem and Sarah had to show ID and wait two hours before they let them go. What was supposed to take 15 minutes took 2 hours. It had become common to see Africans in Cairo's streets, as it was common to get beaten and raped. Nothing Egypt had ever been through could be measured with the current situation.

Never has violence and fear been so dominant, even during the water crisis. The African nations had control of the water supply in Egypt but the water was still available for all. Kareem's friend Omar came to Egypt and was anything but happy. Kareem's dream to see Omar in Egypt, drinking of its water and living among his friends, finally came true. Still, Kareem was not happy and neither was Omar. No one knew what the secret technology contained of and no one seemed interested to know. The thirsty Africans got water and the Egyptians lost their country. The whole situation was chaotic and neither Kareem nor Sarah had been at work since the invasion. They did not have the opportunity to visit their families. It was too dangerous to go outside unless it was necessary. No

one really knew how it would end. Certainly, Kareem believed that the hall situation indicated a divided Egypt. He believed that Egypt would be shared between the different African countries that contributed to the invasion.

Many Egyptians regretted their role during the Egyptian government's control. Among them was Sarah. She apologized to Kareem because she did not support him in his criticism against the government and their water management. Kareem told her not to apologize. He told her that he was also weak, "The only thing I did was to criticize, I never did more. In fact, I was also afraid to lose the water again. Nevertheless, what good is it to have water without a country, without our Egypt."

Kareem wept for the first time since he was a child when Sarah told him that she was pregnant. "After all those years of waiting for a baby, it happened just two weeks after the invasion," he thought. It was extremely hard to hear Sarah's desire for an abortion. She did not wish their child to grow up during those conditions. Both she and Kareem could not imagine a future for their child in Egypt. Kareem agreed an abortion was the best for them but he also decided that Egypt was not their home any longer. That evening they both decided to move to Europe.

"We refused to leave our country during the water crisis and we refused to leave our country during the dictatorial regime because we believed in a better future for our country. Today I cannot see any future and I neither can I call Egypt a home anymore. Let us go to Europe and start a new life in conditions that fit with 2060 not 2015. We will try to get children there and give them a decent future," Kareem said overcome with emotion.