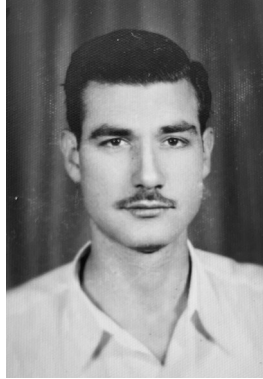


*Two*

**Claude 1945 Cairo, Egypt**



Claude

What am I saying? Yolanda pushes me away and lays next to me, laughing, an uncontrollable laugh that makes the glasses of now warm wine clink and rattle on the bedside table. Frank Sinatra croons his way through another hit on Alex's gramophone in the sitting room, and I'm struggling not to join her mirth.

We enjoy a fantastic afternoon, as all such afternoons are with her. It's another burning hot day. Sweat glistens on her beautiful, slim body. Her petit face pokes out from her mass of tangled auburn hair, and my staring down at her sets her off again.

She's a real hottie, strikingly gorgeous, and she knows it. The mid-afternoon sun streams through my bedroom window in our Al Salmi Street apartment and catches the smoke from our cigarettes, which form a cloud around us.

I just asked her to marry me, and her laughter increases as my indignation grows. Eventually, she settles herself and asks if I am serious. I'm in too deep and say, 'I am.' That starts her off again.

The heat, and perhaps wine, for we polished off nearly a bottle, must have got to me. She's a swell girl, but I have no idea where my marriage proposal came from. Perhaps it's because I'm leaving town tomorrow. My commanding officer has taken a shine to me and, joking, says I'm much brighter than I look and decided to send me to R.A.F. Shiba, in Iraq, to attend an airfield firefighting course. My imminent departure is no excuse for my careless, irresponsible, and downright stupid words. Usually, I would be more careful, thinking things through before opening my big mouth. I laugh it off, saying it is a joke, but Yolanda is no fool, and she detected the sincere tone of my proposal. What surprises me is that once she regains control, she turns towards me and, in as sultry a voice as she can muster, as Lauren Bacall-like as she can make it, says, 'Sure Claude, I'll marry you.'

Grabbing an iced tea from the refrigerator, I move on to the balcony whilst Yolanda takes a siesta. Marriage? Not a hope in hell. The world is my oyster, and I intend to harvest as many pearls as possible.

We have been dating for six months, and from the outset, it was a relationship spinning around the sexual hunger of two passionate twenty-year-olds. Both without a care in the world. I impressed her on our first date by booking a room at Shephard's Hotel. She thought I was rolling in it. If only she knew. I had to borrow money from Uncle Stanley to pay for the room. Ever since we are *at it*, given any opportunity, such as the one that presented itself this afternoon, when over

breakfast, Mamma and Alex said they were off to Giza for the day to visit friends and later join a card game this evening.

It's strange to think that in the middle of a war, people are still going out to card parties and restaurants and getting on with life as if the past five years had never happened. On more than one occasion, I have reflected that Cairo seems to operate in a unique bubble.

With the apartment to myself for once and it being my last day before heading back on duty for four weeks, I was never going to miss the chance for some fun and immediately dashed over to Yolanda's place to whisper the good news in her ear as she greeted me at the door.

Her parents have an enormous house in Heliopolis assigned to them by the French embassy, where her rather flamboyant father, Paul, is posted. Speaking French fluently, I had Paul in my pocket from day one. Yolanda says he tells her I'm a catch. I see it the opposite way around.

"Why do you have a Spanish name?" I asked when first meeting her at a party given by Johnny Overton. Good old Johnny, my pal since primary school and host of the best parties in our gang. She thought to play a game with me and answered in French, to which I replied, "Beau nom, belle fille." The deal was sealed, and what followed were amazing months together when we were only separated by my time on duty.

Cairo is a decadent place, and the air of the numerous cafes is filled with the talk of gossiped liaisons. When the gang speak about this, nearly everyone knows someone in their family who has a lover, and many are not very discreet or well hidden, probably intentionally. I often wonder if such behaviour includes my family. It's impossible to think of Mamma and Aunt Nina having lovers, but why not? They are both beautiful and fascinating women.

Ten years ago, after Father left, and as Mamma put it, ‘Never to return,’ I naively asked her if I would be getting a new father, and she quietly told me not to worry about that because we were fine just as we were. But we weren't. Even as a young boy, I recognised something was wrong. The changes in our daily lives were subtle yet unmistakable.

Fewer sweets and treats around the apartment. More meals at home and a notable weariness from Mamma whenever she had to dip her hand in her purse at my many requests.

Within weeks of Father's disappearance, I overheard Mamma asking Aunt Nina to help. She tried to be discreet, but I knew what was going on. Their complicity and concerns were apparent. Uncle Stanley regularly came over with Teddy, and we would play for a while. When they left, an envelope would mysteriously appear on the hallstand.

Mamma also took a job at Express Cleaners in the Zamalek district. At first, not finding her at home was a shock as I had never known her work before.

I would take a tram and find her there most afternoons after school. My wonderful Mamma often looked drained and exhausted from working in the monstrously hot laundry in the city's stifling heat. I was embarrassed by our changed circumstances and never mentioned my home life at school. But, my school chums were no slouches and knew what happened but were kind enough friends not to raise the subject.

Aunt Nina, smart and cunning, convinced Mamma to make use of her language skills. In the house, we spoke French, but being from Cyprus, Mamma speaks Greek and picked up a good understanding of English from Father. And so Mamma became a French teacher, and a regular stream of people wanted to learn the language. Most of those who came were

businessmen or students, and she gave up the laundry work within weeks of embarking on her new profession.

I would stay in my room when the lessons were in progress or go out and play with friends, perhaps hanging out at Teddy's house. One afternoon, I came home believing that the afternoon's lesson would be finished and was surprised to find a giant of a man sitting in the lounge drinking tea. He introduced himself as Alex, and as Mamma emerged from the kitchen, I could see she was flustered and blushing. But not Alex, who, with the broadest of grins, started speaking to me in incomprehensible French.

I liked Alex from the outset. I was then nine years old, and my father had left the family home two years earlier. My impression of what a father is was so different from my friends. They would speak of day trips and football games, and these were activities I only ever did with Teddy's father, Uncle Stanley. Father always seemed to be too busy. He worked at the British Embassy, like Uncle Albert, Aunt Peppa's husband, but precisely what they did was unclear. When Father and I did things together, it was usually to grab a soda or ice cream. A couple of times, he took me to watch his racehorses.

On those occasions, there would always be other men from his work, and he would proudly present me to them and ask me to speak to them in the many languages I knew. Later, I saw this as his way of showing off to those men, taking some credit for his clever little boy. The truth is that he had no claim to fame for my linguistic skills or, in fact, for any of my upbringing. I can only thank Mamma, Aunt Nina and Uncle Stanley for that.

So, Alex came into our lives and never left. The gentle giant of a man with an easy smile became the best father any boy could ever ask for. Never previously married, and with no

children of his own, he loves Gladys and me as if we are his own. And we equally adore him.

After nudging the sleeping beauty a few times, she rouses from her siesta, and I suggest we go out for a drink somewhere along the river to cool off. I showered whilst she slept, so sit up in bed and wait. She pads back to my room to dress. I can't take my eyes off her; she knows it, putting on a show like the girls in Emad al-Din Street. She wants me to wear my uniform, to be her dashing airman, but I made a point to strictly reserve the wearing of my uniform for days I am on duty. She pretends to sulk and then nods her approval as I slip on a flowery short-sleeved silk shirt and light pants. 'You'll do,' she cheekily says. I'll have to, as she won't find a more handsome man in Cairo.

We make our way through the city, and I think about when I first signed up for the R.A.F. in 1942, joining as a junior clerk, taking that route as I was too young to be called up. My formal education was over at seventeen, and there would be no college or university for me. The war was in full swing, and I was eager to get involved. However, money was the main reason for not moving on to higher education. With Alex around, we were comfortable but not wealthy. So the war beckoned and appeared like my best option.

Despite my lack of further education, I'm smart and smarter than most of the gang I hang out with. Already speaking four languages and pretty good at the sciences and mathematics; I was eager to get involved and serve before it was all over. The way I saw it, even if we had the money, there was no time for education with a war to be won. Most of the gang took the same path; the glamour of battle called but, little did we know it would still be raging years later.

But I got bored of not being old enough to serve in combat. So I left to join B.O.A.C., the British airline that Alex told me would rule the skies one day, for no other reason than to get my foot in the door for what I hoped would be my future career: aviation.

Time passed slowly, but eventually, 1943 came along and I finally got my call up on my nineteenth birthday, this time I would be joining the forces proper.

A year before first entering the R.A.F., Mamma met me after school and, together with Gladys, took us for a slap-up meal at Groppi Cafe. When we finished our steaks and sodas, she told us her divorce from Father came through, and we were finally free of him. Mamma suffered at the hands of his rampant alcoholism. They were traumatic times that I still struggle with and try to push to the back of my mind. That afternoon at Groppi, Mamma was beaming from ear to ear, and I was no longer wet behind mine, knowing this meant Alex would soon be moving in. And he did; within weeks, and I can genuinely say I never saw Mamma so happy.

Now, a year after my call-up, the war is all but over for most of us, and we can hopefully get back to life as it was before. Cairo is the Paris of the Orient, yet with an exotic flavour. Thankfully, the Germans never made it here, and I like to think I played my part in that.

Yolanda and I reach the Ezbekiyya Gardens and backtrack on that afternoon's conversation. Sure, she's sweeter than honey, and I'm really struck by her, but marriage, no way. I'm thinking of a way to back out while keeping her hot. The last thing I want is for her to ditch me right now. I'm off to Iraq, and then God knows where, and I like the idea that she is here in Cairo awaiting my return. Sure, that is selfish, but needs must, and of

all the chicks I have met in recent years, she is by far the sweetest and, in bed, definitely the most fiery.

We sit at a cafe on the banks of the Nile, and the glittering gold sun slowly sets as we sip our ice-cold beers. I see trouble heading our way in the form of my cousin Ronnie. The little scamp is with a gang of three boys. He's only eight and has his sticky little fingers in many pies. Teddy says his brother follows in their father's footsteps; in other words, he is a wheeler-dealer in the making. With a cheeky grin as wide as the river, he pleads poverty, asking for some piastres to buy ice creams for him and his chums.

We return to our beers once we've got rid of the little tyke and his gang. Thoughts of Father swamp me. Why? It has been some years since his disappearance.

Drinking often makes me think of him and the association with him being an alcoholic. It disturbs me greatly—the mystery man who would drink himself into a stupor. As a boy, I overheard Uncle Stanley telling Mamma it was because of the Great War. He spoke of that war often but never Father. He said it affected all of them differently and that with Father, he turned to drink. I remember thinking later, when I recalled what Uncle Stanley said, how did it not affect him also? Why was he not an alcoholic? But, perhaps Uncle Stanley had other ways of coping with his trauma.

Surreptitiously, through my dark sunglasses, I study her. I'm hidden as I look across at her and think that as cute as she is, the last thing I need is some broad thinking I'm going to get hitched to her, and her perhaps getting in the way of my plan to leave the R.A.F. and go into commercial aviation. She smiles and gives me a quizzical look as though she's reading my mind—intelligent and beautiful, she really is the complete package.



We are destined to go in opposite directions; her father will be moved to another embassy after the war, maybe even back to Paris, and she'll go with him. I could end up anywhere, but I won't stay in Cairo, of that I am sure. People in the know say the skies over Africa will open up when all this mayhem is over, and airlines will be eager to find people like me with aviation knowledge and languages.

Taking another sip of her beer, she looks over at me and, as cool as a cucumber, tells me she knew I was joking about the marriage thing earlier. Not knowing what to say, I say nothing, reaching out across the table and taking her hand in mine. I feel like a bit of a fraud, but then I am the master of deceit and seduction. Truthfully, it feels good having her slender fingers intertwined in mine. It was a swell afternoon, and I tell her so, adding I cannot wait to see her again after returning from Iraq.

She beams her enchanting smile, winks and assures me she will be waiting, but quickly adds, 'Not indefinitely, Claude, so don't stay away too long. Otherwise, I'll have to find some other airman who will wear his uniform when ordered.'