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Carine Topal

MAX IN EGYPT

Years ago, years ago, my mother and her mother left Dresden, city of gold-rimmed porcelain and fine china cups, to take the train to another country, dip into the mud and mineral baths at Trencin Teplice. It was Czechoslovakia, 1933. There they would crouch and turn until the wet earth shrunk from the early sun and became their second skin.

Grandpa Max sailed to Egypt where he schooled dark-haired Fatimas in the art of western romance. He called all the girls Yasmine. It was the *khamsin*, time of the hot winds which left men, like grandpa, sipping mint tea, sucking the *nahna* until there was nothing but a withered mint leaf on his marble-white left hand, because in his right, he held his cigarette, German style, index finger pointing, tapping ashes of the cigarettes he lit and handed out lavishly to young girls, girls from the province of Sawhaj, girls from towns with names that sang Zagzig, Akhim, Ismailia.

The tips of grandpa's index and mid-finger were saffron-yellow. And he pressed these fingers to take the pinky of one girl, anyone, and he pressed these fingers to take the nipple of another and twist it in his mouth, then watch it return, glimmering from saliva. And the nipples, when dried and pink, had a yellow tinge too.

Grandpa Max lived an extraordinary life, drawn into the circle of glittering objects, snake charmers and transvestite dancers. The pleasure of female pursuit was here, in Cairo and Alexandria. Here, the smells of the souk—zatar and sesame—the endless carpets and billowing trousers floating from the walls. A boat ride down the Nile. Who would have known that in several years, Max's life would be a ship filled with Persian carpets, crystal chandeliers and all that fleeing Jews could carry.