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Invisible Lives

Nina Fatouh and Shahira Marei

Nina Fatouh, born in Switzerland, lived the first 14 years of her life in Madrid, Spain, before returning to her home country Egypt. Currently she is studying Sociology at the American University in Cairo, and is also interested in the fields of art history and child and behavioral psychology.

Shahira Marei, born and raised in Egypt, is a graduating senior at the American University in Cairo in the department of English and Comparative Literature. Apart from literature, she also has great interest for creative writing, art, and theater.

Abstract
While the number of street children in Egypt has been rapidly increasing over the past decades, it was not until very recently that it has started to attract attention and has been recognized as a problem of great magnitude requiring immediate action. In our research paper, we explore the phenomenon of street children in Egypt, its causes and the many greatly influencing factors, with the purpose of raising awareness of the issue. The project includes a study and close examination of the research made on this phenomenon in the form of a literature review. Once integrated with our primary research, it will evolve into a research based short story about street children in Egypt. By presenting our research in the form of a short story, we intend to raise awareness of the magnitude of this rapidly growing problem, by reaching an audience who react more greatly to a creative mode of expression. Hopefully, this research will not only raise awareness of the phenomenon of street children, but also examine possible effective approaches to combating such an intense and complex problem.

Introduction
There is a rapidly growing problem related to the number of street children in Egypt that has only recently started to be recognized as an issue of great magnitude, requiring immediate attention. Invisible Lives, a research based short story, follows two parallel characters, Karim and Zeina, along the course of a single day. The research that serves as the foundation of this creative short story is based on both secondary research, namely studies done both locally and internationally, and on personal one-on-one interviews with a number of street children with different backgrounds, but ultimately leading equally difficult lives. Invisible Lives aims to shine a light on the harsh conditions under which they live, and the brutal circumstances they endure on the streets of Cairo, emphasizing the many social, economic, personal and institutional factors that contribute towards this devastating problem. The narrative aims to connect with these children on a personal and intimate level, gain insight into their lives and into their mental, emotional and psychological state, in hopes of raising raise awareness of the problem of street children.
Statement of Purpose
As the issue of street children grows steadily, fingers have been pointed in all directions in an attempt to identify those who are responsible for the seemingly endless growth of the problem. Parents, governments and even children have been blamed for the phenomenon. However, it is only a minority of the Egyptian society that is aware of the harsh realities of the problem, and of the suffering of these children. For our research paper, we would like to explore the phenomenon of street children in Egypt and most importantly, what has been done about it. In particular, we would like to explore certain organizations and their efforts towards helping street children in order to create and raise awareness about the issue. The bulk of our secondary research will be in the literature review within the proposal; additionally, our primary research will evolve into a short story about street children in Egypt. We believe that applying research to other forms of documentation, such as a short story, may help reach a significant number of people who may avoid issues such as this one because of their lack of interest in reading formal academic research papers.

Methodology
The first step of our work plan was to identify the problem, explore possible influencing factors and causes, and to conduct research on the methods or techniques that have been used in other countries as an attempt to alleviate the phenomenon of street children. This part of the work plan is included in our “literary review”. The techniques that have been most successful and can be considered a feasible option for Egypt are then taken into consideration in a separate part of our work plan, labeled “recommendations”. After such research was conducted, a fictional short story based on the lives of specific street children was created and presented in the Attachment section. To prepare for this part of the research, we visited the Egyptian Association for Societal Consolidation”(EASC), located in the area of Al Haram, and interviewed some of the children in the NGO. The interviews were necessary in providing an accurate basis for our short story and, since they were conducted with children, the interviews were carried out in a causal manner in order to make the children feel at ease. Therefore, the questions written in the sample interview in the Appendix served merely as an outline to help us during our time with the children.

Literature Review
The phenomenon of street children is a rapidly growing one that is evident in many cities around the world. A UNICEF survey of the number of street children around the world estimates an average figure of 100 million, and the numbers are only bound to increase. Of the 100 million, 10 million are in Africa, 30 million in Asia, 40 million in Latin America, and the remaining 20 million in Europe, the United States, Australia and Canada (Ali 1708). As the crisis has grown over the years, it has attracted the attention of many researchers who have conducted studies in an attempt to understand such a phenomenon, its causes, symptoms,
and possible effective preventive methods. Such research, however, is extremely rare in certain developing countries such as Egypt.

There are very few studies available on the issue of street children in Egypt, and those existing do not focus on the children themselves, but instead focus on the problem and the visual indicators of its existence on a surface level, viewing the children as a “disease needing to be eliminated through, in most cases, more laws and restrictions” (Bibars 204). One of the few studies available that delves deeper into the issue is that of Iman Bibars, a former project officer with UNICEF and a founding member and Chair of The Association for the Development and Enhancement of Low-Income Women in Egypt. Because of the lack of research in the field, Bibars draws as much information from certain studies, such as Shahida el Baz’s *Children in Difficult Circumstances: Institutions and Inmates*, and more importantly relies on her primary research, namely direct interaction and interviews with a number of children living on the street or in juvenile institutions.

While the number of street children in Egypt has been rapidly increasing over the past decades, it was not until recently that it started to attract attention and was recognized as a problem of great magnitude requiring immediate action. While there is a certain movement promoting public awareness of the crisis in Egypt, there is still limited knowledge, and hence a certain degree of ignorance on the magnitude of the issue, its many influencing and contributing factors, its causes and implications.

The word ‘street’ in the phrase ‘street children’ connotes crime, deviance, theft and violence, and hence until recently, little differentiation was made between street children and juvenile delinquents, a mislabeling which led to a strong negative attitude towards the children of the streets (Bibars 201). Currently in Egypt, street children are labeled children ‘vulnerable to delinquency’ by Egypt’s Child Law 12 of 1996 (“A Civil Society”). Internationally, there have been many recent efforts to distinguish the different types of ‘street children’ by offering many definitions. An important distinction is between those who work on the streets and return to their families at night, titled by Moazzam Ali as ‘children on the street’ and those who work and live on the streets day and night, labeled ‘children of the street’ (Ali 1708). Of the ‘children of the street’ who mostly have no ties to their families, some have fled their homes voluntarily, while others, ‘abandoned children’, were throw out by their families and forced to live on the streets.

Because of the challenges faced when defining street children and the lack of research on this issue in many developing countries, specifically Egypt, assessing the crisis can be very difficult (“A Civil Society”). Gathering information and statistics and measuring the magnitude of the problem and the rate at which it is increasing is difficult due to the lack of resources and the limited research. According to a report by A Civil Society Forum for North Africa and the Middle
East on Promoting and Protecting the Rights of Street Children, when attempting to gather information and statistics on street children, the “closest indicator is…the number of children arrested – of the 42,505 children arrested in 2001, 10,958 of them were charged with being ‘vulnerable to delinquency’” (“A Civil Society”).

The rapid increase in the number of street children in Egypt and in other developing countries in the recent years does not have a single cause but is the result of many social and economic changes in which several other influencing factors are deeply imbedded. With rapid urbanization over the past decades, many people have moved into cities which lack the resources or sustainability to support them. This migration and the rapid increase of population in cities that cannot accommodate its inhabitants has leads to many economic and social changes; poverty is widespread, and the average income has quickly deteriorated (Ali 1708). This economic depression imposes a great stress on families, who often resort to either abandoning their children or sending them out to the streets to beg, offer services such as parking or cleaning cars, collecting garbage or, in more desperate cases, resorting to theft and engaging in “immoral conduct” (“A Civil Society”).

According to UNICEF, another vitally important factor in the phenomenon of street children in Egypt is education. The movement of people into cities also imposes a pressure on educational facilities. Schools are no longer able to keep up with the rapid increase in population. They are unable to accommodate the students and hence the standard of education deteriorates greatly. According to studies by UNICEF, most street children in Egypt drop out of school to work and/or live on the streets (“A Civil Society”).

All these factors contribute to a disintegration of “traditional family and community values and structures” (Ali 1708). The financial stress and pressure, along with the weakening of family values and the sense of unity has, in many cases, lead to physical and sexual domestic abuse. According to Bibars’ research, parents often abandon their children on the streets, refusing to allow them back into their homes and, in other cases, driven by the despair and frustration of being abused by family members, the children abandon their homes, seeking refuge in the dangerous streets. These children, while attempting to make their living on the streets, are once again subject to violence and abuse, by others on the street and also by authority figures (200).

Although the phenomenon of street children, in Egypt and internationally, is thought to be caused mainly by the economic and social crises occurring around the world, relief programs rarely examine the roots of the problem. In other words, NGO’s and organizations with similar goals tend to aim at helping street children by giving them supplies that will help them survive on the street. However, very few of these organizations set goals that will abolish the main causes of the growing number of street children: the economic and social crises (Ali 1715,
Nevertheless, feasible rehabilitation and awareness programs offered by local and international organizations are the best options available. In order to deal with this phenomenon as efficiently as possible, one should consider both the local and the international attempts to alleviate the problem. Looking at it from both perspectives, or placing the phenomenon in both its local and international context, creates a richer base from which to learn and a wider range of solutions and possible outcomes for which to aim.

Recently, certain laws have been changed in Egypt in order to help street children and avoid misconceptions between them and juvenile delinquents. For example, Egypt’s Child Law (Law 12 of 1996) defines street children as ‘vulnerable to delinquency’ and includes in this definition “all persons under 18 who beg, sell or perform on the streets for money, collect rubbish, engage in ‘immoral conduct’, lack a stable place of residence, associate with suspected persons, and who lack a legal source of income or support” (“A Civil Society”). By refining the previous Child Law into the definition stated above, the government is trying to protect street children from becoming criminals, and even from being labeled and prosecuted as such. Instead, the parents are held responsible for their lack of success in guaranteeing their children’s protection by making them ‘vulnerable to delinquency’ (“A Civil Society”). Nevertheless, very few street children have any contact with their families, therefore, charging parents with the ‘crimes’ of their children is virtually impossible since they cannot be tracked down.

Additionally, there are laws that are not necessarily in favor of helping street children, and some of these laws actually help promote the unfair treatment street children have been receiving from the society. For example, Juveniles Law number 31 of 1974 replaced several articles of the criminal procedures law, other articles of the penal code, and the vagrancy law 124 of 1949. This law does, in fact, define the difference between vagrants and juvenile delinquents; however, in practice, both are treated, and often judged, in similar ways. Furthermore, while this law does not set a clear age at which a child assumes his or her legal responsibilities, it simply introduces protective measures for those who are under 15 years of age (Bibars 209-210). As a result, the age of a street child while being prosecuted is ignored the majority of the time and most street children do not enjoy the privileges and protective measures granted to them through this law. It is safe to say that most laws that concern street children are either ignored, because most children are uneducated and are not aware of their rights, or harm the children more than anything. Thus, an important step towards helping street children would be to educate them and raise awareness of their rights, and to change or restructure the laws that so often seem to harm – not help - street children.

Aside from the government’s attempts to change the laws, NGO’s and other local and international organizations in Egypt and internationally have been attempting to combat the growing problem of street children in a variety of ways. For example, Street Kids International is an organization that has three main aims: 1.
Raising awareness about street children. 2. Providing other organizations and NGO's with training that will better enable them to work with street children and 3. Developing a growing worldwide network of organizations and workers that strive to improve the lives of street children (Street Kids International). This organization, other than helping street children on its own, also serves as a unifying source for all other organizations around the world that require guidance and support. For instance, Egypt has countless NGO’s that aim at helping street children. Sadly most of these NGO’s hire inexperienced people and follow relatively lenient guidelines and vague programs. Street Kids International helps NGO’s with similar characteristics and flaws and provides them with the skills and knowledge needed to reach their goal in an efficient manner. Kuleana, a Tanzanian organization, is one of those who has created a strong partnership with Street Kids International and has benefited from their training and guidance (Street Kids International). Therefore, an alliance with organizations similar to Street Kids International may turn out to be very fruitful for both the NGO’s and the children.

Other more mainstream organizations such as UNICEF, and similar but smaller ones, have surfaced all over the world. These organizations use a more common technique to reach the global goal of saving street children: they simply target the basic needs of the children and try to supply them with the tools that will help them survive on a day to day basis. Programs that focus on education, nutrition and HIV/AIDS, hygiene, health and children’s rights are some of the many that are offered by these organizations to their clients, the street children (UNICEF Egypt). Other programs, such as those offered by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, provide street children with an escape from drug abuse at a young age. Unfortunately, the majority of the street children in Egypt take part in drug abuse; this is usually due to bad influence on the streets and a lack of education. The Global Youth Network, created by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, focuses on youths, specifically those living on the streets, and aims at educating them about the harmful effects of drugs and at helping those who already use them (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime).

**Recommendations**

Based on our findings, we believe that there are a variety of qualities in other organizations, from which we can learn in order to try to improve the situation of street children in Egypt. There are a number of organizations that stand out due to both their high achievements and their unique techniques and strategies in targeting street children. Among these are UNICEF, Off the Streets and Into Work (OSW), and Street Kids International. UNICEF is already involved in the situation of street children in Egypt; however, we feel that the unique and unexplored techniques of Street Kids International and Off the Streets and Into Work should be incorporated in our own organizations in order to make a more tangible difference in the lives of the children.
Off The Street and Into Work is a British association that, like many others, addresses the many problems that homeless people and street children encounter on a daily basis. The organization aims at decreasing the number of street children by providing them with a proper education, which is then followed by work opportunities. Additionally, the education and work opportunities they offer are made available in a sustainable manner. Furthermore, OSW acknowledges that homeless people and street children also face structural problems such as prejudice and discrimination, and personal problems such as depression and drug abuse. By acknowledging such factors, OSW puts great amounts of effort in targeting these two problems through psychiatric help and other similar alternatives. We believe that if our organizations focused on giving the street children opportunities such as those provided by the OSW, many of the Egyptian street children would not be on the streets forever.

On the other hand, Street Kids International uses a different technique to target the problem. This is a non-profit organization that, in addition to catering for the daily needs of the street children, focuses on developing efficient training programs for staff or volunteers of other small organizations around the world. The organization helps others create strategic plans to raise money and target the children and one of their greatest accomplishments is their partnership with an NGO in Tanzania. Streets Kids International helped the NGO and the children they worked with by training their staff and most importantly by leading the movement to make the economic empowerment of youth a priority on the National Network for Organizations Working with Children (NNOC). We believe that if a similar partnership were created between Street Kids International and any organization in Egypt, it would make a significant difference in the progress we are making today.
Works Cited


Interview

1) What was your life like before you started living on the streets?

2) Why aren’t you living with your family? Did a drastic event that took place cause your situation? Or was it due to something else? Like what?

3) Taking into consideration the reasons for your living on the street, would you go back home to your family? Why?

4) Are you still in contact with your family?

5) What does your normal day consist of?

6) What are some things that happen to street children that didn’t happen to you while living at home?

7) What kind of life did you lead before receiving help from the NGO?

8) How did you support yourself before joining the NGO?

9) What made you come to the NGO, or accept the NGO’s help?

10) Has your life changed significantly since you’ve been with the NGO? How?

11) How has the NGO helped you?

12) Are you planning on staying with them or are you planning on going back to the streets in a while? Why?

13) What kind of life do you have now? Is it any better? How?

14) If you could do anything in the future, what would it be? What are your dreams and aspirations?
4:55 am

Karim’s eyes were shut. He lay there, suspended on the fine hazy line between sleep and wakefulness and remained submerged in that state for several moments, unable to cross to either side. Unaware of where he was and where he slept, his mind was conscious enough to know that he was asleep, and while his senses seemed to be sharp and alert, everything they perceived was contradicting. At the tips of his fingers he could feel the soft grains of sand, and yet he could feel the hard asphalt on which he lay, asphalt that would soon grow warm, absorbing the sun’s rays. Although his eyes remained shut, he could sense the night’s imposing darkness slowly lift. He inhaled deeply, aware of the humid August air that made it difficult to breathe, and yet he could also feel a soft cool breeze brush his cheek, bringing with it the unmistakable scent of the soft Mediterranean Sea.

* * *

Her heart beat so fast and hard it could be heard, and no matter how strongly her mind urged her to move, her feet remained nailed to the dust floor. A million scared and confused thoughts rushed through her head, like a raging ocean.

Nothing made sense anymore.

She stood in the doorway and could not feel her legs, feet nor arms, nothing but her raging heart and her mind, about to explode. She knew Ali lay inside, fast asleep, with his closed eyes, unaware of the danger he was in. With their uncle standing at the foot of the bed, Ali’s face was no longer visible to Zeina. A wave of fear took over her senses, and her mind continued to scream, urging her to move because she knew that, for Ali, this would be the single moment that would change him forever, as it had changed hers years before. Her uncle remained at the foot of the bed, a man that was once the embodiment of safety and security had become her biggest fear and the reason why she had taken Ali and fled to the streets, a place that felt far safer than home.
Her feet remained rooted to the ground and just as her mind was about to explode, her whole body flinched. She opened her eyes. Her heart was beating faster than she ever thought possible. She quickly gasped for air. She pushed herself up with one hand, while the other sweaty palm hugged and supported her growing stomach. Her mind was still flooded with thoughts that were now even more confused and incoherent. Feeling completely lost in time and space she quickly looked around her, in attempt to make any sense of anything at all.

It was still dark, but soon she could make out Ali lying by her side, his small body softly and monotonously rising with each breath. As her heartbeat slowly returned to its normal pace and her mind started to clear, Zeina remembered the important deal awaiting her that day. Looking around the small alley she slept in with her brother and their friends, her eyes rested on those who would accompany her in completing this task. With mixed feelings of hope, fear and apprehension, she looked forward to the day that may change their lives once again. She lay back down with one hand remaining on her stomach and the other stroking Ali’s back as she looked at him with hopeful eyes.

* * *

5:15 am

Karim opened his eyes and lifted his head off the couple of books he slept on. Within moments, thoughts, images, and scents of Alexandria slowly faded away, and as he took in his surroundings he realized that he was hundreds of kilometers away from home. Every morning, he cherished these few moments when in the midst of confusion, he daydreamt of the smell of the sea, and at the same time dreaded waking up and finding that it was all a dream. It had been two years since he had been kicked out of his own home, and yet he could not live with the idea of living on the streets for the rest of his life. Even as a young boy, listening to his father’s stories about the endless opportunities and possibilities, Karim was overwhelmed by all the things he wanted to accomplish and all the places he wanted to see. But if there was one thing his father had taught him, it was that nothing came easy, and if he were to ever succeed and move forward in life, it would require a lot of hard work, commitment, and extensive ambition, time and effort that he was more than willing to invest.

A little over two years before, just before his father’s death when Karim was about eight, he was already on the right path. In school, he was not like the other boys; he was thirsty for knowledge and always craved to reach the top of his class. Even at times when the classroom, out of control, seemed to be more like a playground, with his teacher, oblivious of the chaos, sat at the desk fidgeting with some papers and the daily newspaper, Karim took refuge at the
back of the room, immersed in the books borrowed from his father. After his mother remarried, Karim found that he had become a source of discomfort to his stepfather, who only a few weeks later forced him to leave. He never really understood why, and during the first couple of months of life on the streets he had tried to return to his home and was met by his aggressive stepfather. It was then that he moved to the streets of Cairo with hopeful dreams and decided never to return again.

As he walked through the streets of Cairo, with the books under his arm, Karim headed towards the intersection where he sold tissue boxes, his dark eyes and his perceptive mind absorbing his surroundings. The sun was gaining its strength, its rays descended down on the city that was slowly awaking. The streets were now flooded with noisy cars. Their hot, imposing and suffocating exhaust filled the air. He looked down at his hands that were covered in dust, his dirty shirt that he had worn throughout the heat of the previous day, and his worn out shoes and was aware of the passerby’s judgmental eyes. He lowered his head and avoided the people’s gaze.

Minutes later, he reached the intersection and stood on the pavement, under the heat of the sun, ready to start a new day. Around him people rushed by, with places to go, hurrying to escape the heat and humid air. He offered tissue boxes to the passers by, most of who looked away, and increased their pace as they walked past. Slowly, he approached a young woman hailing a taxi and offered her a tissue box with one hand, hiding the other behind his back. Upon seeing her sad expression he lowered his timid eyes. She slipped a couple of pounds into his hand and turned away opening the door of the car. Karim thanked her with a warm smile, and insisted she take a box of tissue, which he handed to her as got into the taxi. She smiled back him, her eyes filled with pity as the car drove away.

* * *

10:30 am

Zeina and Ali roamed around the streets of Cairo begging for money, their stomach’s cringing with hunger, holding on to the last meal they shared the night before. The scorching sun, along with the weight of her belly weighed heavily upon Zeina. Although only wearing a button shirt and pants, her clothes were now far too tight, making her feel the heat even more, and making it difficult for her to lean back and sit on the pavement.

Oblivious of the people’s disdainful looks, she lowered herself to the pavement and hoped someone would give them a few pounds. She sat there, with a lack of energy and observed Ali’s young, innocent ignorance and worried
about how she would get his next meal. Unaware as the hours passed by, Zeina’s mind was flooded with thoughts, worries and anxieties. The hope of completing today’s deal was a small consolation to Zeina, to which she clung helplessly.

This deal was the biggest she had done in the seven months that she had been living on the streets, and she knew that if it went well she would be able to do many more. It was like a test that would prove her strength of character and her commitment to the trade. And if she passed the test, she would ensure more than just a couple of pounds a day for her brother.

After hours of sitting on the pavement, almost in a daze, she slipped her hands into her almost empty pockets, retrieving the little money remaining from the day before. Holding Ali’s hand she got him some food and impatiently waited for time to pass.

* * *

Karim stood on the sidewalk of the same intersection that was now immersed in the chaos of rush hour. His sweaty hand grasped the tissue boxes that he had not yet sold, with his books under his arm, as the other palm felt the dampness of the little money he had made, neatly folded and placed in his pocket.

He looked around, and up at the sun, wondering how many hours had passed. Stopping a man that walked by, Karim asked for the time, anxiously awaiting the reply. Upon hearing that it was passed ten, a smile appeared on Karim’s face. Walking rapidly amongst others, away from the sidewalk on which he had spent his early morning, Karim softly smiled to himself. Like other passers by, he now had a place to go.

It was a twenty-minute walk in the scorching sun, and Karim’s wet shirt stuck to his back. Upon arriving to the organization, he confidently walked through the main door, and was greeted by warm familiar faces. Worried that he might misplace or lose books that were not his own, he immediately searched for Amira, one of the organization’s volunteers, and returned them to her while thanking her appreciatively. He looked down at the new books she had brought him that day with eyes shining with enthusiasm, holding them carefully, afraid to dirty them with his sweaty hands.

Sitting among other children of many ages, the youngest a girl of four and the oldest around seventeen, Karim sat down in a small hall, for his first meal of the day, appreciating every bite. Along the next few hours, and like every other day, all the children showered, changed clothes, and played while Karim read
one of his new books. That day, the organization had brought in a carpenter to teach the children the basic skills of carpentry. Karim listened attentively and enthusiastically, trying to absorb all the information at once, as he made mental notes, which he soon put to practice. He was overwhelmed by the feeling that reminded him so much of his early childhood, when his father took him to his workshop where he sat and admired the men’s creations. When he was done, Karim sat back and sighed with satisfaction.

* * *

7:35 pm

After another hot, long and tiring day on the streets, Zeina and Ali finally started heading back to their alley. Ali’s mind was fixated on the thought of spending some time alone with his friends. Even though Zeina, Ali and the other children shared the same alley and kept each other company during to those nights where they most missed their families, he wanted to feel like a man without his older sister looking after him with such motherly concern, concern that he had not received from his own mother. He knew she did it out of love and he knew that he was the reason why Zeina tried so hard to make money day in and day out. But he felt if only she gave him a chance to prove himself, he would. Then he would provide for her and protect her, as he so desperately wanted to. And for now, the only chance he had of at least feeling like a man at such a young age was to spend time with his other friends while his sister was working.

Zeina’s thoughts were far from Ali’s. She was simply drained out and the only thing she could think of now was getting to the alley as soon as possible and resting so that she could continue her day and hopefully end it with a closed deal. She could not stop now, she had to regain her energy and prepare herself mentally of the task that lay ahead.

A few hours after arriving at the alley, Zeina woke up, feeling somewhat better than she had earlier. She drank some water in an attempt to freshen up and feel a little more energized, but she was unaware that it was not water that her body called out for, it needed food. Zeina had used all her money earlier in the day to buy Ali some breakfast. She had not eaten anything since the previous day and her body started to slow down, its energy depleting. Her mind was occupied with thoughts of the events that would take place in a couple of hours, which left no space for her mind to think of her body’s physical needs nor the signs it was so bluntly sending out to her.

When she finally felt ready to get up, she walked towards her brother and told him she would be gone for a few hours and expected him to stay in the alley until she returned. She would meet him in the alley at eleven that evening and
promised to buy a big dinner for both of them to enjoy together. With no explanations given, Ali knew that she would not tell him where she was going, and so he did not bother to ask. He was simply satisfied with the idea of spending some quality, and most importantly unmonitored, time with his friends. With a quick kiss on the cheek and a few more detailed instructions on what she expected him to do while she was working, Zeina left. She glanced back at Ali and with a worried sigh, she hoped that he would be able to take care of himself for the next couple of hours until her return.

* * *

These few hours of the day rushed by far too quickly and soon Karim found that it was time to leave. Thanking Amira once again for the books, he looked back at the place in which he had spent so many hours of everyday of the past two years. He started heading towards door only to be stopped by the carpenter from earlier in the day, who took him aside and complemented him on his great work. In his clean clothes, smelling nothing like sweat, dust and car exhaust, a scent he was far too familiar with, Karim stood up straight with pride and yet a timid smile. He felt a rush of satisfaction and fulfillment, a feeling that had become alien to him in the past few years. Listening to the man, unaware of the magnitude of this moment, he was soon overwhelmed to hear the carpenter’s offer of a part-time job in his small workshop, where he would be taught even more skills, and would start merely learning, observing and completing minor beginner tasks. Agreeing to meet him again the next morning, and with all other words escaping his mind, Karim thanked him several times.

Walking out into the street, Karim headed to where he sold tissue boxes in the early morning. He did not notice as others walked passed him, nor that the sun had gone down and that traffic was starting to quiet down. The words of the carpenter echoed in his ears, as he was still unable to fully grasp or perceive them. A small opportunity though it might have been, Karim stood on the pavement now, books in one hand and tissue boxes in the other, overflowing with hope and confidence. He spent the next few hours there, selling tissue boxes while his mind was elsewhere. He thought about later in the evening returning to the alley, where, after attempting to read a few pages under the weak street lights, he would lay his head down on his books and doze off dreaming of the scent of the cool breeze of the Mediterranean Sea. Only this night he had much else to think about, and when morning would slowly creep upon him, and the thoughts and scents of Alexandria would slowly slip away, Karim knew he would wake up, gladly shedding those thoughts aside, making room for thoughts of the future, full of small hopes that were pregnant with meaning and great opportunities.

* * *
9:45 pm

A rush of anxiety took over Zeina’s mind as she was walking towards the kiosk in which she would deliver the package she held in her hands. She remembered the threats she had heard from the dealer who had handed her the package wrapped in an old, dirty newspaper. The deal’s completion rested in her hands and if anything went wrong, she would have to pay the price herself. But Zeina’s young mind did not fully comprehend or even imagine what could possibly go wrong. She felt capable of completing the task and was confident that nothing would stand in her way, but the dealer’s threats and comments resounding in her head made her uneasy. She started doubting herself and her judgment. In spite of her motherly attitude towards Ali, Zeina was still very young and sometimes the youthful innocence within her incapacitated her to see the risks of certain situations. And as her innocence once again clouded her judgment, with the package tightly held between her stained hands, Zeina pushed away her fears and doubts and kept walking.

Arriving at the small traditional coffee shop in a shady backstreet, Zeina was not taken aback by her surroundings. She was used to the sights and smells that poured out of these areas, and despite the million worries that had flooded her mind only moments ago, she felt comfortable and confident. She walked into the nearly empty coffee shop and asked the only customer, a young man enjoying his shisha, for the man she was to deliver the package she was holding so carefully. The young man pointed towards the back of the coffee shop, and as Zeina politely thanked him and walked across the quiet shop towards the back room, she could feel her heart beating faster by the second. Her veins throbbed with each heartbeat. She knocked at the door and quietly walked into the room where three men, not one, awaited her.

Feeling intimidated, yet keeping her composure, she laid the package on the table in front of them and waited for a response and of course, the money. But Zeina was suddenly aware that the men were not satisfied. With a rush of fear taking over her, she watched as the men accused her and demanded to know where the rest of the package was. Completely confused and speechless, and with the men growing more and more impatient, Zeina remained nailed to the ground as the men came closer to her and with a single punch brought her to the floor. As she lay there, she felt the men’s heavy shoes piercing into the stomach and back.

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4:55 am
With great effort Zeina struggled to open her eyes. For a moment she did not recognize the feeling that weighed down on her, an odd overwhelming sensation of her whole body aching and pulsing with pain so great her mind could not grasp or comprehend. Her head was throbbing violently, and as she tried to lift it off the floor, she feared it would explode. Although it was too dark to see, she could feel the bruises all over her body, her warm blood rapidly rushing through her veins, her heart beating fiercely and her stomach cringing with pain. She wiped her moist face, and recognized the taste of blood on her lips and its smell mixed with that of her sweat. Supporting her aching stomach with one palm, she attempted to lift herself with the other, leaning on a parked old rundown car. The moment she was on her feet, her eyesight weakened and the world around her spun wildly.

She tried to collect all the strength and energy she had, attempting to think clearly, and looking around hoping to recognize where she was. Thinking of Ali’s sad and innocent eyes awaiting her, she started to walk, slowly and with immense and profound effort placed one foot ahead of the other, unaware of where she was walking to. With each step her body grew weaker and her weight too heavy a burden. Feeling her legs and hands starting to shake, she leaned her bruised back against a dark dirty wall in the alley. Now completely covered in blood down to her feet, the excruciating pain in her stomach left her breathless and attempting to gasp for air as she clung tightly to her stomach. For a moment, the pain seemed to subside, leaving her thinking that perhaps she had lost all feeling. She started to wonder if her whole body had gone numb, or if she had lost complete consciousness. But before she could continue contemplating these thoughts, the piercing pain in her stomach returned more excruciating than before, stripping her of her breath. Everything went dark and she felt her legs give away.