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How Can I Be of Use to You?

Abstract

The fall after I graduated from college, I moved to Seattle to work as an unpaid assistant for the Egyptian feminist Mansoura Metwally. Mansoura is famous in certain intellectual circles in Europe and North America and has been notorious in Egypt itself since the '70s, when she published a string of works—novels, books of criticism—that challenged patriarchal practices and landed her, several times, in jail. She had a shock of white hair and bad teeth, wore plaid shirts every day, and dressed from the waist down like a serf out of a Turgenev short story.

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How Can I Be of Use to You?

Fiction by Randa Jarrar

The fall after I graduated from college, I moved to Seattle to work as an unpaid assistant for the Egyptian feminist Mansoura Metwally. Mansoura is famous in certain intellectual circles in Europe and North America and has been notorious in Egypt itself since the '70s, when she published a string of works—novels, books of criticism—that challenged patriarchal practices and landed her, several times, in jail. She had a shock of white hair and bad teeth, wore plaid shirts every day, and dressed from the waist down like a serf out of a Turgenev short story.

Every female Arab academic or writer falls under Mansoura's spell at some point in her life. She came to visit my college when I was a sophomore, and, being one of very few students of Arab descent, I was invited to go to dinner with her. I was nervous and wanted to bring her a gift. I hadn't visited Egypt since I was a small child, and one of my cherished objects was a cassette featuring a one-hour performance of Oum Kulthum's most famous song. The afternoon before dinner, I placed the cassette in my double-deck boombox and made Mansoura a copy. I wrapped it and gave it to her over dessert, and she graciously accepted it and said she loved Oum Kulthum. Years later, when I visited Egypt alone, I noticed that this cassette was ubiquitous in all the street markets. Gifting it to Mansoura had been akin to gifting a grain of sand to a Southern Californian. And yet she had made no indication of my naiveté.

When I first arrived in Seattle, I viewed my work with Mansoura as sacred. I was the daughter of bourgeois Egyptians who read the paper and real estate listings—

nothing else. This assistantship was not something they understood—my father wanted me to intern at an ad agency, and my mother wanted me to continue with school and get a Ph.D.

Instead, I lived in a garage apartment five miles from the house where Mansoura was staying for the academic year, and I rode a bicycle—a heavy and impractical three-gear cruiser—the five hilly miles to her house, as I had done every morning over the last six months. Often this ride would be through a thin curtain of rain, but when I arrived in her foyer, she would invariably chastise me for having wet hair. I was always baffled by her superstitions—she reminded me of my hysteria-prone mother, who refused to allow me to leave home if my hair was wet because she was convinced it would give me pneumonia, cancer, AIDS. I didn't understand how someone *The Times* had recently named an intellectual force to be reckoned with was just as ignorant as my mother about wet hair.

I made Mansoura her tea and picked up the area around her workspace—she hated visual clutter and couldn't think around it, or create around it, or write in it—and she stood by the window and watched me work. She then sat at her desk, put on her heavy eyeglasses, and peered over her notes from the previous day.

“Think about it,” she said, beginning the day proper. “Who named the children in your family?”

My father had. I told Mansoura this. She nodded and said, “Just as I thought. It begins with even the way we're named. We must encourage the women to name the children.” She sat in front of her computer screen, her back creased, and typed slowly, with two fingers. I admired the way she forced her body into creativity.

My job was to go over her notes and try to shape them into sentences. I would then show her the sentences, and she would either approve or ask me to go back and try again. It never crossed my mind to tell her to do her job and write these essays, this book, herself. I thought many writers were like this, that ours was a natural writing process.

I sat in an armchair across from her desk and watched her work. There were no photos of her in existence with a different hairstyle or hair color, so that it seemed as though Mansoura had been born already a woman in her sixties or seventies, with the same cloud of white hair. I accompanied her when she spoke to audiences about being a young girl in the south of Egypt and when she discussed female circumcision—as a general practice and her own experience with it. Just a few

years before, I had devoured her personal history about undergoing this practice, *Woman and the Clitoris* (not to be confused with *Woman and the Hymen*), and the next time I had gone back home to Alameda for the holidays, I had asked my mother if she was circumcised, too. She had clutched at her golden necklaces and said, “Absolutely not! That’s something the peasants do.” The next morning she told me not to go out with wet hair, and I told her to stop being silly. “That’s something the peasants believe!” I screamed at her, and left.

After her three-hour thinking session, Mansoura told me that she wanted to get her daily double espresso from the coffee shop around the corner. There was an umbrella bucket in the wood-paneled foyer, and I lifted the umbrella out and took it with us. We walked slowly, her arm hooked over mine, and I held the umbrella aloft and tried to shield her from the rain. She complained, saying I was protecting only myself, so I moved the umbrella closer to her side, which meant that I was getting soaked. Within two blocks, we were at the doorstep of the café. Mansoura waved me in the direction of the coffee counter and then sat at a table by the windows and brought out her notes, wasting no time.

The usual folks stood behind the counter, including a dark, bearded guy. Every afternoon, I hoped he would greet me with something more than, “Hey, what can I get you?”

“That your grandma?” he asked, and I sighed. I couldn’t imagine Mansoura being anyone’s grandmother.

“No. She’s a writer. I work for her. Around the corner. She’s Egyptian. She’s famous.”

“Egyptian, huh?” he said, and then the dreaded clit-boner-killer: He began to walk like an Egyptian.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, and gave him a five-dollar bill. I wanted to explain why his dance was offensive, but Mansoura was already shouting for me to bring her the coffee. We drank in silence, and then she asked me to walk her to the bathroom. I held her arm, and we crossed the expanse of the black-and-white tiled coffee shop. Outside the restrooms, each door bore the standard gender symbol denoting male (♂) and female (♀). She stood in front of them and said, “When I come out, I will need you to write something. Please get the notebook,” and disappeared into the women’s room.

When she finally emerged, she stood in between the two wooden doors and shouted, “See how the female symbol is docile, upright? It stands there, arms akimbo, as if asking, How can I be of use to you? How can I comfort *you*, help *you*, give of myself to further you? Meanwhile, the male symbol is virile, a penis pointing outward, always exploring, moving forward, the arrow saying, I am busy, I am important, I am on my way to conquering something, someone, somewhere.”

I scribbled down what she said as fast as I could. I was inspired by Mansoura’s ability to remain an activist and find signs of oppression in everyday life. She took the notebook from me when I was done, put on her glasses, read over it, tucked the notebook under her arm, and nodded. “Good,” she said. “Let us go back to the house. I must give dictation now. I am feeling very inspired.”

We walked slowly back through the rain to her house. For dictation, Mansoura felt it was very important for her muse that she sit in a position higher, physically, than my own—although she would never call her inspiration, or her higher intellect, a muse, finding this to be too patriarchal an idea because it devalues a woman’s intellect and in its place situates a younger feminine entity in flowing robes, giving this image all the credit. Also, she did not want to see me while she gave dictation. She didn’t want me, as she put it, “presenting my psyche,” which she would then have to exert an effort to nullify.

When she was done talking, she asked me to input everything she had said from my notes into the computer so that she could read it the following day. I did as she asked, and she watched me and finished her double espresso. When I was done, I saved what I had typed, turned to her, and waited.

She asked me what time it was. It was just after three.

“Good,” she said. “Then we have time. Do you have the earrings I asked you to buy?”

Mansoura had been invited, by a prestigious women’s-only writers’ residency out in Puget Sound, to do a reading and book signing that very evening. In preparation, my job was to 1) print out the text of her talk, which I had translated from Arabic and edited for clarity and 2) buy a dozen pairs of identical earrings, which she was planning to gift to the board members who had invited her, and to the Emerging Arab Women Writers—that was their official title—who were in residence and would be at the event. I had completely forgotten about the earrings.

“Oh, God,” I said, and then lied, “I left them in my apartment.”

“We must leave at four-thirty,” she said from the next room, “to board the five o’clock ferry. So I do not know what you are even doing in my peripheral vision at this moment.”

I scrambled out of the house and went back into the street. Mansoura hadn’t given me any money for the earrings or any instructions as to what they should look like. The rain came down in heavier sheets now, and I briefly thought of going back to get the umbrella, but I didn’t want to anger Mansoura. Three blocks down, I hopped onto the light rail. I sat in the dry, plastic seat and looked at the grey city outside. I didn’t want to work for Mansoura anymore, but my agreement had been to stay with her three more months. I wondered what I could say to get out of staying until May. That my mother had died? That my father had killed her?

I got off at the stop four blocks from the market. I walked through the wafting smell of fish and coffee to the first jewelry stall and found pairs and pairs of feathered earrings hanging on a large metal rack. I told the white, dreadlocked woman behind the stall that I wanted twelve of these earrings, each wrapped individually. She rang me up and gave me the total, which sounded like a make-believe combination of numbers, and I decided to use the credit card my parents had given me “for extenuating circumstances.” I hadn’t used it yet, saving it for an emergency-room visit, or maybe a visit to a Planned Parenthood in case I were to get laid so *often* in Seattle that I would need a Plan B pill. I began to cry now, thinking of the naïveté of my pre-Mansoura self.

I took the light rail back to Mansoura’s house, the earrings in a bag in my lap. Years from now, I would take a train from Alexandria, my mother’s hometown in Egypt, to Cairo, and think about this afternoon and wonder why I didn’t look a little longer at the earrings in that market for even more ludicrous pairs—for small fake pearls, say, that could have resembled clitorises glinting in the many ears of Mansoura’s worshippers.

Mansoura was waiting for me when I returned. She was wearing the same exact uniform she’d always worn, but her hair was braided into two pleats at the sides of her broad face. This made her resemble an elderly baby.

A car, sent by the women’s residency, showed up minutes later, and we were on our way to the ferry. I sat in the front seat with the driver. Mansoura liked to sit in the back by herself; a few weeks ago I had thought it was because she liked to have

space to think and write, but now I knew it was because she didn't want to seem like anyone's grandmother, the way she had seemed at the café earlier.

On the ferry, the driver told us we didn't have to stay in the car. Mansoura asked me to help her climb the steps upstairs. She wanted to look at the water. I let her hold onto my arm and helped her onto the outside deck. The ferry heaved out, and Mansoura faced away from the hot-dog stands and condominiums. I watched as small, white wisps of her hair came loose from her braids and haloed her face. In that brief moment, I wished that I had never met Mansoura in real life.

We soon saw the island approaching, little green hills and tiny houses. When the ferry docked, I helped Mansoura back into the car, and she rolled down the window and breathed in the island smells: pines and hills and damp. Tall trees surrounded us. We passed a patch of black and brown alpacas, and, a few miles later, the wooden sign to the residency peered out on the left, and the driver pulled in and parked near a big, metal shed. I got out of the car and carried Mansoura's things—her notebook, a file folder holding the printout of her talk, and the bagful of earrings—over the grey gravel and into the office to let the women there know that she had arrived.

Mansoura liked for people to greet her at the car. She said that when she went back to visit her family's property in the south of Egypt, the people working the land would come greet her at the car. When she drove to her beach apartment in Agami, the street kids would come greet her at the car. When her taxi arrived at the Cairo airport, the not-so-secret police would come greet her at the car. It was how she liked things.

The women streamed out of the office and to the car, where they all made a fuss over her, and I stood back and watched. A few minutes later, the residency director told me I could look around the property, so I did. There were several small, detached studio spaces for the women to write, make art, or compose music, and a single, large wooden lodge where the women slept, showered, and ate dinner together.

Before the reading, the Emerging Arab Women Writers came out from their studio spaces and rushed to join the residency's board members in greeting Mansoura. She embraced them and signaled for me to give her the bag. She brought out the small boxes and distributed them to all the women who were forming a semi-oval around her, like a human halo. Each opened her gift and screamed and put on the

earrings. Now Mansoura resembled a mother bird surrounded by her dozen feathered chicks. I was glad my ears were naked.

She read the piece I had prepared for her and took questions. I drank wine and wandered out into the dewy night to an unlocked studio space. I sat at the cleared desk and drank. I hadn't thought much of myself as a writer—I had planned to get a Ph.D., like my mother had always expected me to, to write a dissertation on Egyptian women writers like Latifa al-Zayyat, like Mansoura. A soft rain began drizzling again, and then I heard a thundering applause, which meant the event was over.

I began to walk back to the lodge when I saw the driver reading a magazine in the car. I wanted to go over to him, to ask him to drive me to the ferry; wanted to cross the now black-indigo of the Puget Sound; wanted to go to my garage apartment, pack all my things, and hitchhike back to California, back to my family, back to their familiar oppression, their unspoken support.

Instead I stepped into the lodge and watched the feather-eared women praise Mansoura for the rest of the evening as I brought her glasses of wine and carried her coat.

We spent the night in separate rooms in the lodge, and in the morning, she woke me and asked me to walk around the property with her. I rose and threw on a pair of jeans and kept my t-shirt on. I didn't bother with a bra. When I came out of the lodge, she was sitting in a golf cart, smiling mischievously.

“Can you drive one of these?” she said.

“Would I be allowed to?” I said. “That is the real question.”

“What are they going to do? Arrest us?” she asked in Arabic. “It would not be my first time in jail. If I wasn't afraid of Sadat, then I am not afraid of some rich ladies. Come on, I'm too old and tired to walk but I want to see this whole place. Drive.”

I got in and drove the golf cart over the gravel and along the marked path. Nettle bushes and foxgloves lined the path, as if warning us, but I kept driving. It felt lovely, driving an open golf cart bra-less, free, Mansoura silent by my side. At a clearing, we saw a meadow, and she told me to stop.

We sat on a wooden bench by the meadow and listened to the birds. After some time, Mansoura said, “This pond reminds me of one in Germany I used to swim in. I spent a summer there, in Leipzig, when I was a young woman, you know.” I hadn’t known. “One day, I discovered a secret pond, small, like this one.” I took out the notebook so I could write down what she was saying, take dictation, but she held her hand over mine and stopped me. “I would walk there every morning and undress completely, naked like the day my mother bore me, and swim the length of the pond four or five times. One morning, I noticed, while I was in the water, a male groundskeeper clearing leaves and pruning shrubbery. I didn’t know what to do. Should I just emerge from the pond, nude and proud, and pretend I hadn’t seen the Do Not Swim sign? Should I wait for him to leave? Or should I ask him to help me, to bring me my towel and my clothes? That last option seemed far too intimate, and for the second option, I was too impatient.”

“What did you do?” I said, genuinely curious, even though I rarely ever interrupted Mansoura.

“I went with the first option. Climbed out of the pond completely naked, toweled myself dry, and left. The next morning, he was there again, at work. And again, I undressed and went back in the pond. I did this every morning that entire summer. We had an unspoken agreement, this stranger and I. I swam nude, and he never spoke to me. I miss that pond. I miss that man.”

Mansoura stared straight ahead now at the murky meadow. She’d needed that man by the pond, just as she needed me then, by that meadow. At the end of each day, I was an audience to her need for an audience. I was her silent groundskeeper in the dark. Mansoura gripped the edge of the wooden bench and then asked me to help her stand. The women would soon be waiting for us at the lodge for brunch.

We returned to Seattle a few hours later, having taken the ferry back in silence. The sun shone in small patches: a gift. After the car dropped us off in front of her house, she asked me if I wanted to come in and begin work for the day. I told her I had just gotten my period and would need to go home, and she nodded. “Don’t be long,” she said, and I rode my bicycle in the direction of my garage apartment, the clean air whipping at my jacket.

That was the last time I saw Mansoura in real life. Years later, I saw her on Al-Jazeera, giving an interview about the Egyptian revolution. She looked exactly the same as when I had left her: white hair in braids, a plaid shirt on. As she spoke, the interviewer called her “the grandmother of the revolution.” I nodded; that was the

one thing Mansoura would be content to be the grandmother of. The interviewer walked with Mansoura around Tahrir Square, and I saw that she was leaning on someone's arm, someone just outside the camera's view.

This summer, I go back to Whidbey Island for six weeks to write. I will stay in the wooden lodge; I will be an Emerging Arab Woman Writer. When, on the application, I was required to fill out the name of a reference, it did not give me pause. There, on the grey, wide line, I had not hesitated. I knew whose name to use.

Randa Jarrar is the author of the novel, *A Map of Home*, which won a Hopwood Award, an Arab-American Book Award, and was named one of the best books of 2008 by the Barnes and Noble Review. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Salon*, *Guernica*, *Utne*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. She teaches in the MFA program at Fresno State, and is the fiction editor for *The Normal School*.