

The tale of the break-in:

During the recent revolution, Nora's company demanded that she and her family evacuate. The date chosen for the evacuation was February 2nd, the day that camels and horses would eventually stampede Tahrir. The order to evacuate was chaotic; ultimately, the order came suddenly, and we had to run from the Gezira Club where we had gone with our kids and grab our one pre-packed bag, and head for the airport.

Nora had been offering her aunts the key to her flat for some days. By Nora's reckoning, her aunts Sem Sem and Fou Fou, residing lower in the building, may have been more affected if Cairo's streets turned unruly. She thus offered them her flat in case they wanted to come stay, or simply take advantage of the significant stock of food that we had put away in preparation for the revolution. They declined. Suddenly, however, on the morning of our evacuation, they changed their minds. They cornered Nora, amidst the chaos of our final moments in Cairo, and demanded the key. They said that if there was a water break, having the key would enable them to fix it. Their behavior made Nora suspicious, and she said that her dad had the key, and could take care of this. Putting extreme pressure on Nora, she eventually handed over the key.

On our way to the airport, both Sem Sem and Fou Fou kissed us and our kids. They, with tears in their eyes, urged us to stay safe, and come back quickly. They told us not to worry about our apartment, they would take good care of it. Before we had even arrived at the airport, scarcely moments after they had kissed us with tears in their eyes, we discovered what taking good care of it meant in their eyes. For they marched upstairs, changed the locks, and began making preparations to move us out, stealing the property for themselves.

Some background is necessary at this point. Nora is a member of the Soliman family, and we have lived for the past five years in one of the apartments in a collectively family owned property, Soliman House. Nora, as a member of the family, has shares in the building, and is thus entitled to one of the apartments as hers. However, we were not living in the building as owners for the moment, we were living as tenants, in order to keep the peace, paying nearly \$2000 monthly. We had always been model tenants, paying punctually, taking care of all repairs on our own. Our lease was valid through the end of March, 2011, i.e. nearly two months after we evacuated, and for nearly one month following our ultimate return to Egypt on March 2.

For five years, we had lived in peace with the rest of the building, members of the Soliman family as well as other tenants. For the last two to three years, a property dispute had developed within the family's older generation, but it had not affected us. The dispute in the family pitted the eldest of the family's seven siblings, Nora's father and aunt, both residing in the building, along with a non-family shareholder, the widower of a deceased sister, against the younger four. Indeed, threatened by the other four, we paid them the rent, not Nora's father, just to keep the peace. Nora played an

active role in ongoing dialogue amongst the cousins trying to find ways to end the conflict. We maintained excellent relations with all of Nora's relatives. Of the two aunts in the building who would subsequently try to throw us out, we paid occasional visits to their homes, our kids would go down to play with their cat, and we would pass them daily in the building or in the adjacent Gezira Club, and were always on excellent terms.

It turns out that these two aunts joined another aunt and uncle not residing in Soliman House in hatching up an illegal, immoral and cruel plan. They planned during our absence from our home to kick us out, and rent the apartment out to an outsider. In their minds, we were approaching the end of our lease, and they could start getting a higher rent from someone else immediately. They expected to be able to get away with their awful plan under the cover of the chaos of the revolution. Storming our apartment as they did on the day that camels and horses stormed Tahrir, they had every reason to think that the nation's attention would be too distracted to care about a simple family property dispute. While many of the nation's patriots were in Tahrir demanding a brighter future for their country, as Nora had been every day until we were forced to leave, these relatives were locked away in their homes concocting ways to immorally profit by the revolution's chaos.

I still cannot understand what in their minds could justify such an awful plan. We had always been model tenants, and had another two months left on our rental lease. In any case, Nora is also a building owner, and, through the twists of Islamic inheritance law, had the same if not more shares in the family building than did her aunts. Males receive twice the share of females under this law, which is the law of the land, and thus Nora's father and his brother share half the property, the four sisters share the other half. Nora's father has only two children; his brother has five. Thus, it turns out that, of the next generation, only Nora and her sister have a sufficient inheritance share to inherit an apartment in the building on their own. We were subsequently told that the opposing camp suspected that Nora and her father would try to assert their rightful ownership claim over the property at the end of our lease, and that kicking us out was a proactive way to head off this threat. Nothing, however, had been farther from our intentions, and nothing we had ever done could have given them the impression that this was our ambition. Had these relatives simply approached Nora in a lawful way, as would any landlord toward his tenant, we would have attempted to extend our lease, happy as we are in our home of the past five years, but failing to settle upon mutually acceptable contractual terms, we would have simply moved out. This is the ultimate irony of our opponents' strategy. If their objective was to get us out of the apartment, had they simply had the decency to treat us like humans, like any landlord would treat a tenant, they would most likely have succeeded. However, by moving against us immorally and savagely, they may have thwarted their ambitions by undermining any moral or legal reason for us to move out.

Furthermore, it turns out that a pattern of aggressive and hostile seizure of property was a habit by this side of the family. They have tried to muscle in on their siblings'

share of the property for years, changing long established leases, and threatening tenants to pay them, and them alone. None of the money that they gained from these stolen leases was shared with the other share holders in the family properties, their own brother and sister.

The conflict quickly escalated. Nora's parents have always had keys to our home, and Nora had left many things for her mother to pick up, including fresh food in the fridge, and a bag of priceless jewelry. When Nora's mother went up that afternoon to collect these things, she found her key didn't work, as the aunt's had already changed our lock. Assuming she had picked up the wrong key, she went back down. Nora's father then tried, and hearing intruders in the apartment, locked our second lock, and thus, in a somewhat humorous twist in the tale, locking in Nora's aunts as they scurried around our home nosing through our belongings and preparing to move us out. Simultaneously, Nora's one respectable aunt, who lived directly under us, had heard footsteps upstairs, and, knowing we had already left, had alerted Nora's father that she suspected thieves had broken into our home. When Nora's father confronted the aunts, they told him, spitefully and cruelly, that Nora had given them the key, that she was planning never to return to Egypt, and that Nora had specifically told them to ensure that Nora's parents were never able to set foot in the property. This willingness to lie, and to say evil harmful things, would turn out to be one of the aunts' favorite approaches, one they would return to again and again. Imagine this: saying to your own brother, that your niece, his daughter, had specifically told them never to let her own father into her home. Imagine the cruelty. Later, they told Nora's father that Nora had told them that he had cancer and she wished he would die. Imagine the heartless cruelty. Imagine the utter immorality and utter lack of humanity required to say such things.

During this time, Nora's aunts were sleeping in our apartment, apparently packing our things. Once we returned to our home, we realized what "packing" meant to them. Our clothes were thrown in heaps on the floor and in boxes. Priceless photos of our children lay discarded in garbage cans. Antique furniture, passed down to me from my parents and grandparents, lay smashed. All of our belongings lay in a heap in one room. Our electronics were rudely disassembled and left lying in a heap. Priceless items were stolen. Our daughter's art was carelessly ripped from the wall, and has subsequently disappeared, leading this 8 year old child to write an impassioned letter wondering why they treated her with such evil-ness, and wondering what she ever did to them to justify such an attack.

On February 16th, five days after Mubarak's fall, our opponents were trying to move quickly, making a fait accompli of moving us out before the requisite social order could be established to stop it. Somehow, even in the chaos of the revolution, Nora's father managed to find police at their posts, and filed a legal claim to stop their evil plan. Even though Nora's father was acting alone, and the opposing side had brought with them their spouses, their children, and hired thugs just for the purpose, Nora's father was somehow able to stop them, and get a legal order that nothing could be removed from

the house until a legal determination about the apartment's rightful occupant could be made.

During this time, just after we had arrived in the USA, Nora tried to monitor the situation by phone. We had several disjointed conversations with Nora's uncle. As a quarter share holder in the family inheritance, his will was influential. During the first call, he bizarrely accused us of trying to sneak out of the country. This bizarre claim was supposedly based on testimony from the same two aunts who live in the building, who were to lead so much of the ensuing trauma, that they had seen bags already in our car the day we left for the airport. This was not true. We received the call to evacuate, and hurriedly went upstairs, collected our things, before leaving for the airport. However, it seems they based their entire strategy around this erroneous claim. More likely, they lied about their mistaken memory in order to give credence, at least in their own minds, to their delusional story, and justify, at least to themselves, what they were about to do. During a subsequent call with this same uncle, he retracted his earlier confusion, sounded conciliatory, and said that don't worry, he would ensure things were alright, and would welcome us back to our home. In the third and final call with this uncle, he told Nora that somehow his mind had changed, and that we would never again set foot in our apartment. Bizarrely, he offered, as if it was a favor, to select a new home for us, and move our things, "at their own expense," into this new home. Imagine allowing relatives, relatives who clearly hate you, to choose a new home for you and your family, and forcibly move all your things there. I cannot believe that they failed to grasp the absurdity of their suggestion.

Other family communications were also going on during this time. Another of Nora's aunts had savagely called her to tell her that she was the "daughter of a dog," all sorts of other savage expletives, and that she would never set foot in the property again. The motivations of this aunt, in particular, are hard to understand. Married to the agent of a French arms company, she had benefited tremendously from the Mubarak regime, maintaining luxurious homes in Paris and London, as well as one of the largest yachts on the Red Sea coast (vainly and pompously titled the "Gilan O," after herself). She repeatedly threatened Nora with her connections, frequently saying that her daughter, who had married into the extended Mubarak clan, was "hand in hand" with Gamal, and that she could destroy Nora if she chose to. These aunts thought they could get away with their immoral act under the cover of the revolution. Ironically, they probably could have gotten away with it under the corrupt Mubarak regime, given the family's close connections. As will come out later in the tale, they were ultimately held to pay for their crimes, a justice that could have only come out in post-revolutionary Cairo, where everyone is sick of the corrupt insidiousness of the old power brokers and the old ways, of which this aunt is the personified example.

Also during this time, Nora was in regular contact with her cousins. In spite of the cruel, mean things said by many cousins, some quietly supported Nora, explaining that they had tried to counsel their parents away from this dangerous escalation, but they had

failed. Most cousins held their tongues; some said horrible, hurtful things. The stories that these cousins told indicated that their parents had lied spectacularly about their actions. One cousin, for example, accused Nora and her father of hiring the thugs who had become part of the scenery around Soliman House. By these own thugs' admission, however, they were hired by one of the aunt's sons-in-law on the instructions of that aunt. Evidently embarrassed of the truth about their actions, at least in front of their own children if not in front of society in general, these aunts had spectacularly rewritten their own evil deeds.

Back at the apartment, things quickly escalated. Prevented from moving us out, the aunts hired "baltagi," local thugs, with biceps the size of tree trunks, specifically ordered to prevent, and presumably hurt, anyone trying to block their evil plan. Nora's father began a legal proceeding to prove the wrong done to Nora. The prosecutor's office ordered no one to enter the home, and no things to leave the home, until this determination was made. In spite of this order, Nora's aunts continued to enter our home, sleep in our home, and pack up our things.

We returned to Cairo in early March, and tried to resume our lives cast out of our home, with our three young children in tow, with no access to our things. We thus started a seven week odyssey that would see us, and our children, moving around town like vagabonds, living in six different homes over a period of nearly two months, taking advantage of the generosity of friends. Counting the month spent abroad as part of the forced evacuation during Egypt's revolution, this was a total of nearly three months out of our home. I'm sure that parents will realize the utter difficulty of this situation. The whole episode was unbelievably traumatic on our children. We had to buy an entire new set of school supplies for our daughter, including school bag, lunch box, gym uniform and the rest. Whenever we'd return to one of our temporary homes, our three year old would scream, "not this home, I want to go to my grey home," referring to the best name our four year-old son could come up with for the only home that he has ever known. That same son would repeatedly plead with us, as if our evacuation from our home was somehow his fault, "I promise I'll be good, I'll never be bad again, please just let me go home." Our one year-old seemed lost and confused.

Throughout this time, the legal case moved forward. Nora gave testimony to the prosecutor. With the legal as well as moral right clearly on our side, things moved steadily, if slowly. Failing to get any legal traction, our opponents spared no effort to block things through their normal corrupt practices. Nora's uncle offered "rewards," a barely disguised bribe, to a court official if he would keep the case buried at the bottom of the pile. At the very end, when we were about to be returned into our home by legal force, the final police officer said that he couldn't implement the order because of pressure from the "highest possible place." Evidently, Nora's aunts had no problems trying to use their connections at the highest ranks of Cairo's military establishment to block justice. However, they badly miscalculated their country. Egypt is done with such corruption and immoral profiteering. Their evil attempts to pervert justice were thrown

out, and they may well be held accountable for their corrupt attempts to pervert the system. Throughout this time, our opponents were smug in their assessment. One cousin told Nora that their lawyer had assured them with 90% confidence that we would never return to our home. One of Nora's aunts' husband, not even a blood relation to Soliman House, rudely told Nora to scamper back to her father's home, the only place in the building, according to his smug assessment, in which she was welcome.

Eventually, justice was delivered. The initial judgment was titled "tamkeen," and simply judged on the legal occupant of the home at the time of the February break in. The tamkeen judgment was entirely in Nora's favor. The legal system had done an exhaustive check. They had inventoried the contents of the apartment (clearly all ours), and interviewed all the building neighbors and locals familiar with our situation to determine who was the rightful occupant. All evidence clearly demonstrated that we lived in the home, and had done so for five years. One of the bawabs who manned the door downstairs was pressured by our opponents to lie and say that Nora no longer lived here. When he refused to participate in their lie, he was fired. Imagine his poor family. For telling the truth, this man, and the family he supported, would have to suffer. Our opponents' injustice did not end with us.

Confronted by this clear legal loss, they developed a new strategy. They identified a poor unsuspecting minor official from the Embassy of Guinea, and paid him to enter into a lease with them for the flat. By somehow tangling a foreign embassy into the situation, they thought they could confuse and delay the situation, enabling them to prevent us from re-entering our home. This seems to have been their strategy all along. Clearly lacking any moral or legal justification, they seemed to abandon that line of argument, willing to simply do anything in their power to delay or confuse the case. For them, victory would simply be maintaining the status quo of us kicked out of our home. Eventually, they figured, we would simply give up. Our children would not allow us to go on in this limbo forever. Once we had settled in another home, they could simply forge ahead with their evil plan uncontested. However, as they would repeatedly during this saga, they misread their country, and their old corrupt ways have no place in the new Egypt.

The lease given to the Guinean official was, of course, bogus. Many services in Cairo are available for a fee, and this poor unsuspecting official had simply been paid to put his name on a lease for 6 months for 4 of the flat's rooms, bizarrely, not even the whole apartment. When confronted by the police, one of Nora's aunts rather tragically tried to flutter a plaque bearing the Embassy's name in their face. "But it's been rented to an Embassy," she bizarrely and sadly cried. Of the stacks of lies perpetrated by them, another came out at this time, that all of our things had been moved into one of the apartment's rooms, and that Embassy furniture was now in the rest of the flat, thus explaining the lease which did not extend to the entire apartment. They thought this would help their case; actually, the act of allowing outsiders into our flat, and moving in

someone else's things into our flat, in direct contradiction of the court order, may well get them in serious trouble.

The result of the tamkeen order was that a police force came to implement the order, and put us back in our home. However, this initial order did not have the authority to break open the doors. Thus the police force met with Nora's aunts, who refused to open the door, claiming ridiculously that only the Embassy of Guinea had the key. This gave Nora's aunts another opportunity to show their true colors. One of them said to Nora, "be careful, God will judge you for what you have done by killing one of you children." Imagine this, an aunt, with whom we have always been close, threatening death for one of our kids, their own niece or nephew, as a result of their own greedy property grab.

Failing to convince the other side to open the new locks they put on the door, the police returned to get the second order to break the locks. This was promptly given, and we returned to the station to assemble the force to break the locks. Realizing the seriousness of their predicament, this raised the desperation of our opponents to a new level. They, under the cover of night, tried to sneak the poor unsuspecting Guinean official into the apartment. In spite of the clear legal judgment against them, they calculated that if he was actually in the apartment, this could delay justice somewhat, requiring us to go through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to implement the order to return us into our apartment. We camped out by our door, and they failed to sneak him in.

Meanwhile, at the very final stage, as we were getting the police force to implement the order, they pulled their trump card. The senior official at the police station claimed he couldn't implement the order as he had received pressure "from the highest possible place" to delay the order. In response, we simply asked that he read the file. "Please," we argued, "they are using the discredited tactics of old corrupt Egypt to pervert justice. Just read the file, and decide based on the merits of the case." And read he did. He locked himself away in his office, and at the end of 45 minutes announced that not only was he going to implement the order, we was sending the majority of his squadron, around 30 officers, to implement the case. Their plan had backfired. The strength of the force sent to implement the order proved just how sick he was of the meddling corrupt ways of the old regime.

Confronted by such an overwhelming force, for the first time ever, our opponents were embarrassed to show their face. Locksmiths in the employ of the police broke through the collection of locks our opponents had fixed on our front door, and were shocked at the devastation we found. Nearly all of our belongings had been piled, in a great heap, in one of our rooms. Beds were disassembled, dressers were moved and cracked, clothes were thrown in great heaps here and there, antique chests were cracked, windows were left open and dust and filth were everywhere, the cigarettes of laborers were thrown with disregard on the floors of the balconies, we found photos of our children in garbage cans, our daughter's art was ripped from the wall. The fact that all

our furniture was heaped in a tall tower in one room proves one additional lie given by the aunts, that they allowed no one apart from themselves into the apartment. For example, one of our couches, massively heavy, was balanced spectacularly, and precariously, upon one of our dressers. While Nora's aunts, who are twins in spite of the fact that in their police filings one gave her age as 71 and the other as 68, may be in adequate health, they cannot possibly have moved the enormous couch to its precarious position three meters off the ground.

Many things were stolen. Chief amongst these was Nora's jewelry. One entire bag of jewelry was stolen, containing a priceless collection of the Egyptian designer Azza Fahmy's pieces collected over decades. This bag was simply gone. Another bag of jewelry was rifled through, and the choicest pieces were selected and taken. Unbelievably, my 8 year old daughter's collection of crystals, housed in her Hello Kitty chest of drawers, was stolen. Could it be that thieves mistook these for diamonds? Somehow I doubt that Nora's aunts themselves were responsible for these crimes, though knowing what I now know to be true about them, I wouldn't put it past them. However, as the state of our furniture, disassembled and moved around, attests, they clearly allowed all sorts of workers into the apartment. It would come as no surprise if, during the course of disassembling our things, a bag or two disappeared into a worker's tool bag. Either the aunts are guilty of direct theft, or allowing people into our home who stole. Even if it was not their hands who stole our things, it does not diminish their culpability. Allowing the people in our homes who stole is just as bad as stealing themselves.

These relatives, and their spouses, now stand accused of theft, and damage to our property. The claims are not ours; rather, they are the claims of the court officials who toured our home when we arrived for the first time and documented the damage and destruction. Suddenly, in light of their new-found culpability, the approach of our opponents shifted drastically. Up until this point, when they perceived themselves to be in a position of power, they treated us with disdain, confidently dismissing our very existence. Now, however, threatened with jail time, their tune changed. "How," they pleaded through their emissaries, "could we risk locking up family members over this dispute?" We have no interest in seeing Nora's aging relatives wind up behind bars. However, the irony of their argument bears emphasizing. When they were in a perceived position of power, they justified to themselves doing any number of unimaginably evil and cruel things to Nora and our family, including breaking into our home, lying about our deeds and intentions, threatening our children with death, and leaving us homeless for seven weeks. Suddenly, however, when their evil plan was foiled and they find themselves held accountable for their sins, suddenly their moral radar is working just fine. The selectiveness of their moral compass, allowing themselves to inflict savage cruelty at one moment, then meekly retreat behind the mask of pity the next, is astounding.

How can this family emerge from this tragedy? The root of the conflict, now in its second or third year, relates to the ownership of the family properties. Currently, this apartment block in Zamalek, as well as two other buildings around town owned by the Solimans, is a collectively owned family property. No person owns any single unit. All own all together. Thus, the units currently inhabited by all these protagonists, our supporters and opponents alike, are not actually owned by the occupants. They simply reside there based on the consensus of the others. Nora's father, sensibly it seems given the hostile relations that exist between the inheritors, is urging the family to split the units. Thus, instead of everyone owning all units together, each would own certain specified units, and would be free to do with his or her units as they see fit. This seems obvious, and should have been done years ago. It was this rather sensible suggestion that lies at the heart of the conflict. For some reason, one camp, the same camp as tried to kick us out of our home, has opposed this split, preferring to continue the ugly family war rather than sensibly find solutions. Perhaps their spectacular crime, and the trouble that now faces them, will convince them that the time for such ugly warfare is now over, and that it is time to do the sensible thing, split the family properties, and move on with their lives.

Soliman House was built in 1931 by Nora's grandparents. It was built as their gift to the generations that would follow in order to keep the family close together, and ensure friendly relations with one another going forward. How Nora's grandparents must now be turning in their graves seeing their descendents act so cruelly toward one another! This foresighted couple, who had the wisdom to build in a corner of Zamalek that would turn out to be prized real estate, has had their memory sullied by their own children who have, illegally and immorally, tried to evict by savage force their own niece, the granddaughter of the building's founder, out onto the street. I can only imagine how these wise ancestors would deal with their corrupt and grasping descendents if they had the chance to today.