WHEN YOU MOVE to another country as an adult, the language flows around you like a river. Perhaps a child can immediately abandon himself to the current, but most older people will begin by picking out the words and phrases that seem to matter most, which is what I did after my family moved to Cairo, in October of 2011. It was the first fall after the Arab Spring; Hosni Mubarak, the former President, had been forced to resign the previous February. Every weekday, my wife, Leslie, and I met with a tutor for two hours at a language school called Kalimat, where we studied Egyptian Arabic. At the end of each session, we made a vocabulary list. In early December, following the first round of the nation’s parliamentary elections, which had been dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, my language notebook read:

mosque
to prostrate oneself
salat (prayer)
imam
sheikh
beard
carpet
forbidden

One of our teachers, Rifaat Amin, prepared a five-page handout entitled “Arabic Expressions of Social Etiquette.” This supplemented “Dardasha,” which also featured some lessons about social traditions, including the evil eye, the belief that envy can cause misfortune. In “Dardasha,” icons of little bombs with burning fuses had been printed next to the kind of phrase that, even during a revolution, qualified as explosive: “Your son is really smart, Madame Fathiya.” Fortunately, this compliment–bomb was promptly disarmed: “This is what God has willed, Madame Fathiya, your son is really smart.”

I often heard that phrase—masha’alab, “this is what God has willed”—when I was out with my twin daughters. Occasionally an elderly person smiled at the toddlers and said, “Webish, webish!”—“Beastly, beastly!”—which confused me until somebody explained that a reverse compliment is another way of deflecting the evil eye. Rifaat’s handout taught us what to say when somebody returns from a trip, or recovers from illness, or mentions a dead person (allah yirhamu, “may God rest his soul”). Beggars can be deftly buffeted with a piece of deferred responsibility: allah yisallak, “may God make things easier for you.” There’s even a dedicated phrase for anybody who has just received a haircut: na’iman. The neighborhood barber said this every time he finished cutting my hair, but I didn’t understand until Rifaat’s tutorial. The first time I responded correctly, the barber smiled, and then for five years we followed the script:

“Na’iman.” “With blessings.”
“Allah yir’amu alik.” “May God bless you.”

Rifaat was in his fifties, a thin, intense man with eyes that flashed whenever he became animated. He had thick white hair and the dark skin of a Sa’idi, an Upper Egyptian. Rifaat’s father had been a contractor who grew up in a southern village known as Abydos, whose region had likely been the homeland of the kings of the First Dynasty, five millennia ago. Rifaat was proud of this heritage, and, like many southerners whose families had risen in social class during the mid-century, he was a staunch Nasserite—Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had led the revolution of 1952, was another Sa’idi. Every evening, at ten o’clock, Rifaat watched the Rotana channel’s rebroadcast of a concert from the nineteen-fifties or sixties by the singer Umm Kulthum. Once, Rifaat prepared a class worksheet that included the sentence “There is not a real Egyptian who does not love Umm Kulthum.”

But Rifaat had other qualities that seemed out of place in Egypt. He was Muslim, but he drank alcohol, avoided mosques, and didn’t fast during Ramadan. He said that the hajj was a waste of money that would be better spent on the poor. Since his teen-age years, he had...
The vocabulary lists for Arabic lessons reflected both the country's shifting politics and its enduring difficulties.
followed a mostly vegetarian diet, a rarity among Egyptians. Rifat's siblings told me that their father had often shouted at him when Rifat refused beef and lamb, but he held firm. Even as an adult, one of the few meat dishes that he ate was chicken prepared by his older sister, Wardiya, who had a special way of removing the skin.

Wardiya sometimes delivered meals to Rifat's apartment, because he was a man without a woman. A decade earlier, he had had lymphoma, and she had cooked for him weekly. At one point, briefly, he had been engaged to a foreign woman, but he seemed happy that it hadn't worked out. He lived alone, which is also unusual in Egypt, and Wardiya told me that she disagreed with Rifat about two things in particular: religion and his belief that men and women are equal. But he had persuaded her to give the best possible education to her daughters—in his words, this was a weapon. "If her husband lets her down, then she'll have a weapon in hand," Wardiya explained. "She can rely on herself."

Rifat was natural in the presence of women, which was one reason Leslie and I had classes with him. Cairo is notorious for sexual harassment, but the male response to women also runs to the opposite extreme. If Leslie and I were together in our neighborhood, polite men often addressed all conversation to me, carefully avoiding eye contact with my wife. But there wasn't any such bias with Rifat, who had taught many foreigners; in the late nineteen-eighties he had even served as a private tutor to the actress Emma Thompson, who was filming a movie in Cairo. For our classes, Rifat prepared lessons that often reflected his social criticisms, to the degree that boorish men could be denied names.

Huda: What are you tired about? You don't do a single thing at home.
Her Husband: What do you mean?
Huda: I mean that you should help me a little with the housework.
Her Husband: Look, your work isn't necessary, and you spend half your salary on transportation and the other half on makeup.

Several times, Rifat mentioned that Um Muthum, who had married late in life and never had children, had probably been a lesbian. He admired such iconoclasts, and he deeply valued personal freedom, but he also idolized Nasser, who had thrown dissidents and intellectuals into prison. Rifat supported the Tahrir movement, and he believed that Egypt needed serious social change, but he drizzled us on the "Arabic Expressions of Social Etiquette." Over time, I came to see the complexities of his character as quintessentially Egyptian. The country has a dominant religion, a powerful nationalism, and family structures that tend to be close to the point of claustrophobia. But there's also a counter-strain of individualism, and many people are simply natural-born characters. Rifat's quirks and inconsistencies seemed so innate that his siblings had wisely chosen to embrace them.

He took great pleasure in Egyptian Arabic, which shares the national tendency to combine opposites: tradition and novelty, order and chaos. Before moving to Egypt, Leslie and I had enrolled in the Middlebury College summer program, where we spent two months studying fusha, the classical Arabic that is used as a literary and formal language across the Arab world. In Cairo we switched to Egyptian colloquial, which has a weak literary tradition but a vibrant character. Whereas scholars of fusha have always taken pride in its purity, Egyptian Arabic is nudged by many tributaries. Some words come from Coptic, the language that descended from Pharmonic Egyptian, and there are many imports from Greek, Persian, Turkish, French, and English. Rifat loved neologisms like yeshayar, which took the "share" from Facebook and conjugated it as an Arabic verb. But he could also apply lessons from the classical language to what I heard on Tahrir. He told us that the word for "tank," deeba, derives from an Arabic root that means "to step heavily." The terms for "west" and "strange" share another root. "It's not because Westerners are weird," Rifat said, and gave his own theory. "It's because that's where the sun sets, and it's a mystery where it goes."

The language is wonderful for Wanderwort. Arabic imported "shab" from the Persians, and then the phrase al-shab mat—the king died—was introduced to English as "checkmate." One morning in class, Rifat taught the word for "mud brick." In ancient hieroglyphs it was al-tuba, which became tobi in Coptic, and then the Arabs added a definite article, made it al-tuba, which was brought to Spain as adobar, and then to the American Southwest, where this heavy thing, having been haggled across four millennia and seven thousand miles, finally landed as "adobe."

Surprisingly few Coptic words survive in Egyptian, a fact that reflects how quickly the natives adopted Arabic, despite a reputation for resisting outside cultures. Egyptians began to convert to Christianity not long after the time of Christ, but most people never learned the languages of their successive foreign rulers: the Ptolemies, the Romans, the Byzantines. In 640 C.E., the first Arab army arrived in Egypt, which was a province of the Byzantine Empire. The Arabs had only four thousand soldiers, but within two years they had conquered the country. By 700, Egyptian state archives were using Arabic. After another hundred and fifty years, Egyptian had essentially vanished as a daily language in Lower Egypt. By the tenth century, a bishop named Severus complained that even Egyptian Christians could communicate only in Arabic.

Across North Africa, language, rather than religion or military force, created the most powerful bond of the new empire. Natives recognized the benefits of speaking the tongue of the Arabs, who rarely learned other languages, and who were more tolerant than previous overlords. "For the people in the provinces in the Near East, the Byzantine emperor was somebody who did taxation and persecuted heretics," Kee Versteegh, a Dutch Arabist and the author of "The Arabic Language," told me recently. "There was no love lost between them and Byzantium." He continued, "And the Arabs had the advantage of not caring about the exact faith the Christians had. They didn't care whether they were Nestorians or Arians or what have you—as long as they paid their taxes, they were left in peace."

Because of this dynamic, Arabic spread much faster than Islam, and the language played a crucial role in Western scholarship. During the early ninth century, the Mutazila school of Islamic theology promoted a rationalist exploration of faith and other subjects, and Arabs searched out the works of the ancient Greeks. These were hard to find in the West, because the Romans, who read
Greeks easily, had never translated most books into Latin. After the Roman Empire collapsed, the ability to speak Greek disappeared rapidly in Western Europe, and knowledge of the classics was essentially lost for centuries.

Even in Byzantium such works weren't highly valued. The Arabs reported that they found Greek books in poor condition—in their view, the Byzantines didn't respect their own heritage. The Muslims had the classics translated into Arabic editions, which became accessible in Western Europe in the late eleventh century, after Christians began to reconquer the Iberian Peninsula. Soon Arabic became the language through which Westerners rediscovered Greek works on medicine, science, and philosophy. At the University of Paris, medical scholars called themselves *arabicantes*, and some of our modern terms were originally filtered through the language. "Retina" and "cornea" come from Latin translations of *shabakiyya* and *garniyya*, Arabic words that were themselves translated from Greek texts.

When complex ideas pass through so many lenses of language, distortions are inevitable. Eventually, Western scholars rediscovered the original classics in Byzantium, learned Greek, and claimed that many translations were flawed. By then, the rationalism of the Mu'tazila school had been superseded by more dogmatic interpretations of Islam. And Renaissance scholars came to view the Arabs as the defilers of classical texts, not their preservers. The motivation for learning Arabic also changed—now Westerners did so primarily to argue with Muslims, and to try to convert them to Christianity.

On many mornings, Leslie and I were the only students at Kalimat. After the Arab Spring, there was a flurry of foreign interest in Arabic, and the school was busy for our first year. But then the Egyptian political climate worsened, and foreign-exchange programs were cancelled. By the spring of 2013, Rifaat was often upset. He had founded Kalimat with one of his siblings, and he loathed the Muslim Brotherhood, whose candidate, Mohamed Morsi, had won the first democratic Presidential election in Egyptian history. As a Nasserite, Rifaat blamed the rise of Islamism on Anwar Sadat, the President who had succeeded Nasser.

"Under Nasser, very few women wore the hijab," Rifaat often told us. He was endlessly nostalgic about the cosmopolitanism of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, and he approved of Nasser's harsh repression of Islamists. Under Nasser, the government had executed Sayyid Qutb, a Brotherhood member and theorist of jihad, whose death inspired generations of radicals. After Sadat came to power, in 1970, he tried the opposite approach, seeking to accommodate the Brotherhood and other Islamists. According to Rifaat, this had only encouraged Egyptians to become more narrowly religious. During the spring of 2013, when President Morsi was clashing with many of the country's institutions, Rifaat often arrived at class with lists of bitter phrases for us to translate:

I'm not in a good mood.
He put me in a bad mood.
Show me the new bag which you bought yesterday.
Are you really stupid or just acting stupid?

Rifaat preferred to create materials for class, but I had insisted that we finish "Dardasha" first. I've always liked language books—one of the joys of studying as an adult is that you can appreciate their subtext. In the mid-nineties, when China's economic reforms were starting to take hold, I had worked in Sichuan province, where I studied a government-produced book called "Speaking Chinese About China." In the text, a basic sentence that appeared in Chapter 3 ("He works very hard at his job") became more complex in Chapter 4 ("Everyone is working very hard; as a result, the output has been doubled") and then reached new heights of sophistication in Chapter 5 ("We have realized that only by developing production can we raise the people's living standard"). This was one of my most useful Chinese lessons: it's possible to speak with increasing complexity while repeating the same simple ideas over and over. Grammar functions as a kind of spice, similar to the way that Sichuanese cuisine uses strong flavors to create satisfying meals that actually contain little meat.

Fifteen years later, I entered the world of "Dardasha," which had been written by Mustafa Mughazy, an Egyptian linguist at Western Michigan University. After the Chinese, textbook Egyptians seemed remarkably uninspired by development. There were no production quotas, no economic plans, no infrastructure projects. The word "factory" did not appear in the book. People said things like "Ya bag, I'm an engineer and after five years of university, I'm working as a waiter in a restaurant." The Chinese book had been cagier toward its foreign readers, expressing nothing negative about China, but the Egyptian text wasn't shy about...
bad behavior. It even included a sample dialogue of a bizarrely tenacious wrong-number conversation. From my perspective, phone etiquette was one of the eternal mysteries of Egyptian civilization—Leslie and I fielded countless calls from people asking for strangers, or demanding weird things, or saying nothing at all. Mostly, "Dardasha" was full of families, talking and laughing, bickering and joking, being generous and being ridiculous. Husbands could act worse than children:

Ali: What’s for lunch today?
Fatma: Stuffed chicken, just the way you like it.
Ali: I don’t want chicken. Every day, we have chicken.
Fatma: Fine, what do you want, Ali?
Ali: I don’t know. But I don’t want chicken.
Fatma: Tomorrow, God willing, I’ll make whatever you like.

The book was also shy about the challenges of Cairo life. It introduced the conditional tense with open-ended sample sentences:

If only I knew who was calling the telephone every day . . .
If only I could see the child who rings the doorbell and runs . . .
If only I knew which of the neighbors listens to loud music all night long . . .

One exercise was entitled "You Are Irritable": "Work in pairs and ask your partner the following questions to find out whether he/she has an irritable personality or not."

You have an appointment with a friend at five o’clock. At six o’clock your friend is still not there. Do you get angry and leave?

One morning in May, 2013, we studied suicide. By then, protests against Morsi had crystallized into a movement that called itself Tamarrod, or "rebellion." The following month, Tamarrod organized a massive protest that resulted in a military coup led by Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the Minister of Defense. In class, we compiled a sunny vocab list—"poison," "gunfire," "frustration," "depression," "repression"—and Rifaaat explained that suicide had never been common in Egypt, but now it seemed to happen more than it did in the days of Nasser. He claimed that it is physically impossible to commit suicide after listening to Umm Kulthum. In any case, Rifaaat would never do it. "Because death is coming anyway," he said, smiling. "It’s coming soon enough."

He disapproved of the cowardice of carbon monoxide. If he absolutely had to kill himself, he would do it like Cleopatra, with the bite of a kobra—this, he noted, sounds the same in Arabic and English, with a shared Latin root. He ended class by handing us a new series of sketches, entitled "Victims of the System."

When Ibrahim was a 16-year-old high school student doing well in school he enjoyed the full confidence of his family and the freedom to come and go as he pleased. His friendship with a teacher only increased his family’s confidence in him. And Ibrahim was so proud of his friendship that when his teacher asked him to help to rob the flat of a girl who had refused to marry him, he did not hesitate. . . .

There has never been a great variety of materials for teaching Egyptian Arabic, whose status is best conveyed by its name: ammiyya, a word that means "common." In contrast, the traditional written form of Arabic is called al-lugha al-‘arabiyya al-fusha, "the eloquent Arabic language," or, for short, al-fusha: the eloquent. Western academics call it modern standard Arabic, although the language retains strong links to the time of Muhammed. Back then, Arabic lacked a strong written literary tradition, and, in the eyes of believers, the Prophet’s illiteracy is evidence of the divine nature of the Quran. Even a skeptic like Rifaaat told us that the Quran is so beautiful that it could only have come from God.

After Islam began to spread, scholars established rules for the written
language. Such a project isn’t uncommon for a new empire. In China, the Han dynasty, which was founded in 206 B.C.E., codified and standardized the Confucian, or Ruist, classics, a process that helped set the terms for the writing system. By taking these centuries-old texts as their model of proper Chinese writing, the Han prescribed an idealized language—classical Chinese—that was probably never spoken in day-to-day life.

Early scholars of Islam had a similar instinct to draw on the past, but they lacked an equivalent wealth of historical material. So the Arabs went to the desert instead. They sought out Bedouins, who were believed to speak a purer form of Arabic than people in cities, where language had been corrupted by contact with outsiders. Grammarians employed Bedouins as referees in language disputes, and the elite sent their sons to live with nomads so that they would learn to speak correctly. During the tenth century, a lexicographer named al-Azhari was so blessed—al-bamudutubab—that he was kidnapped by a Bedouin tribe. This experience allowed him to produce a dictionary, “The Reparation of Speech,” whose introduction, in a kind of grammatical Stockholm syndrome, effectively praises the kidnappers: “They speak according to their desert nature and their ingrained instincts. In their speech you hardly ever hear a linguistic error or a terrible mistake.”

To some degree, this standardization of written Arabic worked at cross purposes with the spread of the spoken language. In provincial places like Egypt, natives learned Arabic in informal ways, and in the process they simplified the grammar. In response, scholars moved in the opposite direction, developing a beautifully logical but extremely difficult version of the language. Charles Ferguson, an influential linguist who taught at Stanford, argued that there’s no evidence that the language of the Quran was ever anybody’s mother tongue.

Over the centuries, fusha remained separate from daily speech, which kept it remarkably stable—a river that stopped flowing. But, in the nineteenth century, when the pressures of colonialism and modernization intensified, some Egyptians felt that fusha was inadequate. There had always been some writing in colloquial Egyptian, and a number of intellectuals advocated for expanding this practice. But traditionalists feared further cultural damage. It will not be long before our ancestral language loses its form, God forbid,” an editor at the newspaper Al-Ahram wrote, in 1882. “How can we support a weak spoken language which will eliminate the sacred original language?”

Such debates occurred in other parts of the world that also struggled with the transition to modernity. In China, political movements in the nineteenth and twentieth helped end the practice of using classical Chinese, replacing it with the northern vernacular now known as Mandarin. But this change was easier for the Chinese, whose language was effectively limited to a single political entity. Most important, classical Chinese wasn’t tied to a religion or a divine text.

During the late nineteenth century, the leaders of the Nahda, or “Arabic Renaissance,” decided to modernize fusha without radically changing its grammar or essential vocabulary. New terms were coined using traditional roots—telegram, for example, comes from “lightning.” (“Isn’t that cute?” Rifaaṫ said in class.) Qitar, the word for “train,” originally was used for “caravan.” Other neologisms were even more imaginative. “Lead camel” was an inspired choice for “locomotive,” as was “sound of thunder” for “telephone”—the ideal image for Egyptian phone etiquette. Sadly, these words failed to stick, and nowadays one is forced to answer wrong numbers on a loanword: tilifan.

In Algerian schools, the French had at one point tried to replace fusha with the national dialect. British authorities never attempted this in Egypt, but some Englishmen proposed that vernacular writing might improve literacy rates. Over time, Arabs came to associate any encouragement of vernacular writing with colonialism. By the nineteen-fifties, allegiance to fusha was critical to pan-Arabism, because the language created a bond across the Arab world. But Nasser, the greatest pan-Arab of all, also understood the power of Egyptian Arabic. He often began a speech in fusha, and then sprinkled in Egyptian, until, by the climax, he was declaring entirely in the language of the people. Such speeches, though, had to be heard in order to be appreciated. In Egypt, statements by political figures are often translated into fusha before they’re printed in a newspaper. There are some exceptions, like the interview with Suzanne Mubarak, which used Egyptian to portray the President’s wife as accessible and humble. (“I just eat a small plate of fruit.”)

Translation into fusha can clean up a politician’s words. For example, in April, 2016, President Sisi discussed political reform with representatives of different sectors of society. Speaking Egyptian, he stumbled: “The ideal shape that you are calling for, that idealism is in books, but we cannot take everything you think about with paper and pen and then ask the state for it, no, it won’t happen...but we are going to walk a path in which we are succeeding each day more than the day before.” In Al-Ahram, the quote appeared in fusha as: “Idealism exists in books, but we’re walking the pathway of success, and we will succeed day by day.” Any Egyptian would know that Sisi hadn’t actually been using fusha. “Few people can really maintain speaking modern standard Arabic all the way through,” Mahmoud Abdalla, the director of Middlebury College’s summer Arabic program, told me. He said that even linguists like himself, or well-trained imams who have memorized the Quran, will make occasional grammatical errors if called upon to speak the language spontaneously. “This is why they slow down when they speak fusha,” he said. “They’re afraid to make mistakes.”

After the coup, Rifaaṫ wanted to have faith in Sisi. In January of 2014, when it was rumored that Sisi would run for President, Rifaaṫ had Leslie and me study a pop song entitled “All of Us Love Sisi”:

The world says you remind us of Mandela, and of the leader of the nation, Gamal [Abdel Nasser]... That spring, Sisi ran, and Rifaaṫ voted for him. But the new President’s anti-terrorism campaign included a crackdown on every sort of potential opposition, and tens of thousands of people
1.
After the accident, when summer brings slow afternoons with nothing left to do, I take what used to be your garden chair and park it underneath the wayward ash that sidles forward where the garden swerves and hides the house from view. In secret then I conjure up the notebook I have found among your bedside things and open it.

Blank pages. Thoughts you never had, or had but could not bring yourself to say. Should I imagine them or write my own instead? I close my eyes and scrutinize the white that also lies inside me while the ash rattles its pale-green keys above my head.

2.
The milk float with its thin mosquito whine straining through larch and elder from the lane, the nervous bottles in their metal basket intent on music but without a tune, the milkman in his doctor’s stubby coat and sailor’s rakish dark-blue canvas cap

are all invisible, imagined/dreamed beyond my curtains in the early light, along with tissue footprints in the frost, our rinsed-out empties, and the rolled-up note exchanged for bottles with their silver tops the blue tits have already broken through to sip the stiffened plugs of cream before we come downstairs and bring our order in.

3.
To think the world is endless, prodigal, to part the hedgerow leaves and see the eggs like planets in a crowded galaxy, to hear my mother’s voice advising me the mother bird herself will never mind if I take only one and leave the rest,

were imprisoned. Sisi seemed to favor flashy megaprojects rather than coherent economic strategies, and by the spring of 2015, Rifaat was increasingly asabi. He was suffering from a slow-healing sore on his foot, and a couple of doctors had been unhelpful; in class, he often railed against the Egyptian medical system and the general decline of society. “Sure, Nasser was a dictator, but at least it worked,” he said. “But if you’re a dictator, and things still don’t work, then what’s the point?”

One morning, a middle-aged woman who lived in the same building as the school stopped by, and we chatted for a while. She was dressed in expensive clothes, and she complained about the young people who protested against Sisi. “They should give him a chance to fix things,” she said. Rifaat nodded, but then the woman started to gripe about the poor, and how the government subsidized their food and electricity. Rifaat’s face darkened; his eyes bulged. He managed to keep silent until she left.

“These are the people who ruined everything!” he exploded. “They grabbed everything under Sadat and Mubarak! We were never like that.”

Leslie and I often teased Rifaat about his nostalgia, but that morning he seemed too upset. In recent months, his playful pessimism had deteriorated into something more demoralized. One of the tragedies of modern Egypt is its failure to create a large, vibrant middle class, which had been the heart of Nasser’s social vision. His government built community centers to encourage theatre and other arts, and the education system was expanded on a
11. Those rootless kernels of the nibs stick to the mugwort leaves and the gritty green buds that almost bury the path. These roots are a sumptuous treat for the gardeners who work here. The smoke from the corncobs and the capered berries add a tangy flavor. I can feel the coolness of the earth as I walk on the path. The sun is setting over the horizon, and the air is filled with the sweet scent of the garden. I can't help but feel a sense of peace and contentment.

I think of my father, who taught me to appreciate the beauty of nature. He always said that the garden is a place to go to clear my head and find my center. I miss him dearly, but I know that he is watching over me from above. In his memory, I will continue to tend the garden with care and love, just as he did.

As I walk along the path, I remember the stories my father used to tell me about his own father's garden. He said that his grandfather used to tend a garden just like this one, and that it had been passed down through the generations. He said that the garden was a symbol of the family's heritage and that it was important to keep it alive.

I look out over the garden and see the beauty of nature unfolding before me. The sky is painted with hues of orange and pink, and the birds are singing their songs of joy. I take a deep breath and feel the warmth of the sun on my skin. It's a beautiful day, and I am grateful for it.

I lean on my cane and take a moment to enjoy the view. The garden is alive with the sounds of nature, and I feel a sense of peace wash over me. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, feeling the warmth of the sun on my face.

As I sit on the bench, I think of all the memories that this garden has held. It has been a place of refuge and solace for so many years. I know that it will continue to be a source of comfort for generations to come.

I open my eyes and see the beauty of the garden once again. It's a beautiful place, and I am grateful to be a part of it. I take a deep breath and feel the warmth of the sun on my face, knowing that I will always be welcome here.
in Upper Egypt. Afterward, I texted Rifaiat, hoping to schedule a class. He didn’t respond, so I called—no answer. I telephoned one of his brothers who worked at Kalimat. There was a long silence after I greeted him.

“Rifaiat,” he said at last, “itwaffa.”

The word hit me all the harder because Rifaiat was the one who had taught me what it means.

Language reform wasn’t an issue during the Arab Spring. Such debates were crucial to the Arabic Renaissance and to Pan-Arabism, but after that the question was effectively settled, at least in terms of policy. Egyptian textbooks are written in fiṣba, which remains the standard language for newspapers and most other publications. Still, writers and scholars occasionally point out problems, and, in 2003, Niloofar Haeri, a linguistic anthropologist at Johns Hopkins, published Sacred Language, Ordinary People. In the book, Haeri refuses to use the academic term “modern standard Arabic,” instead referring to fiṣba as “classical Arabic.”

“Modernity, in my eyes, means that it should be somebody’s mother tongue,” Haeri told me. “That’s part of how I would understand a modern language—that it’s contemporaneous with its speakers.” She noted that while places like German Switzerland also practice diglossia, the use of two languages, the difference is that both Swiss German and High German are living, spoken languages. “The majority of Arab children are put in a position that I cannot think of an equivalent for any other group of children in the world,” she said.

Haeri’s book points out the discomfort that many Egyptians feel with fiṣba. Their relationship to the language tends to be passive—most people understand it well, because they hear it frequently, but they struggle to speak it. And writing fiṣba requires a step that isn’t necessary in most languages. “You are translating yourself into a medium over which you have far less mastery,” Haeri told me.

After Haeri published her findings, she was attacked by many Western scholars of the Middle East. She believed that her background—a Muslim woman from Iran, who was trained in linguistics rather than in regional studies—may have made her more willing to tackle an issue that is politically sensitive in Middle Eastern studies. But there have always been Egyptians with a similar opinion. Leila Ahmed, a professor at the Harvard Divinity School who grew up in Cairo, described her childhood hatred of fiṣba in a memoir, “A Border Passage.” She remembers shouting at an Arab teacher, “I am not an Arab! I am Egyptian! And anyway we don’t speak like this!” Her book was attacked harshly by the critic Edward Said, who saw it as part of the Orientalist perception of Arabic. In an essay that was published posthumously, Said wrote, “Reading Ahmed’s pathetic tirade makes one feel sorry that she never bothered to learn her own language.”

Ahmed’s point, of course, is that fiṣba is not her language. It wasn’t Said’s, either. He grew up in Jerusalem and in Cairo, and, in the essay, he acknowledges that, despite having spoken Palestinian and Egyptian Arabic at home, he never became comfortable with fiṣba. He relates the experience of giving a lecture in Cairo, as a celebrated scholar, only to have a young relative express disappointment with Said’s lack of eloquence. Said describes himself as “still loitering on the fringes of the language.”

But he doesn’t address the larger question: if even educated people struggle with fiṣba, what does that mean for everybody else? More than a quarter of Egyptians are illiterate, and the rate is significantly higher among women, who are less likely than men to be in environments where fiṣba is used. Comfort hard sciences are taught in English. Centuries ago, Europeans needed Arabic to learn medicine, but nowadays even Egyptian medical students don’t use Arabic texts. “What happens is that you reserve Arabic for traditional knowledge,” Doss said. “And it becomes more conservative.”

The situation also makes for difficult transitions. After a math student enters a public university, he begins using formulas with Latin and Greek letters, and reading them from left to right, the opposite direction of what was done in his public-high school classes. Then, in his junior year, the curriculum changes to English. Hany El-Hosseini, a math professor at the university, told me that each of these shifts disorients students, whom he believes should be taught entirely in Arabic. “But this needs a lot of effort that was not made for the past hundred and fifty years,” El-Hosseini said. “We have to translate a lot, and we have to write original works in Arabic.”

Some linguists I spoke with, like Mahmoud Abdalla, of Middlebury, believe that the main problem is that fiṣba is poorly taught, and that national organizations which are supposed to regulate language policy are weak and disorganized. In any case, the end result is that educated Arabs are drifting away from their own language. Today, most Cairene children who are solidly middle or upper class are educated primarily in English or French, at private schools. Ashraf El-Sherif, a political-science professor at the American University in Cairo, told me that many of his elite students can barely use written Arabic. He believes that the political consequences are significant. “They will make public policy about a country they don’t know,” he said. “Practically speaking, they’ve become foreigners. They are Orientalists.”

Fewer people are also able to appreciate the unique cultural elements of fiṣba. Youssef Rakha, a talented young novelist, told me that there’s a special connection when a literate person can read ancient texts in a language that’s so close to contemporary writing. But he believes that there has been a high cost to maintaining this traditional form. “If you preserve something for long enough, then maybe it rots,” he said. “This metaphor of purity has a counterpart in the metaphor of decay.”

Rakha’s first novel, “Book of the Sultan’s Seal,” was praised for its innovative
fusion of _fusha_ and Egyptian Arabic. During the last century, publishers sometimes rejected books that used Egyptian, and even novels about everyday life, like Naguib Mahfouz's "Cairo Trilogy," featured _fusha_ dialogue that no Egyptian would ever speak. Egyptian Arabic still lacks a standardized orthography, but its use has become more common during the past fifteen years, in part because of the Internet and texting. Nowadays, a writer like Rakha can publish in Egyptian, but to some degree it's too late, because people rarely read Arabic books of any sort. For Rakha's third novel, he's writing in English, primarily because he wants to attract readers. "Book of the Sultan's Seal" was well received, but it sold fewer than five thousand copies. Rakha said that it's also a relief not to worry about the issue of _fusha_ versus Egyptian. "You can think about other things," he said. "It's not like this constant twenty-five per cent of your attention is going to the nature of the language in which you are expressing yourself."

_During my last months in Cairo, I felt myself becoming _asabi_. Every day, I drove my daughters across the Nile to their school, and this ordeal—the honking, the swerving, the scarched-earth parking—left me frazzled by eight o'clock in the morning. During our Arabic classes, Rifaat had recorded the vocabulary lists, and I found it calming to listen to the audio files while I drove. Some covered the language of Tahrir, which had already drifted into the past: "election," "referendum," "democracy." Others featured Rifaat's class materials, and I crossed the river to the sound of his voice:

I will never forgive you for what you did. I will explain to you everything tomorrow. Don't waste my time, please.

Are we going to spend the whole day talking about this stupid film?

A few times I stopped by Kalimat to see Rifaat's brother Raafat. Their father had named them after his two favorite soccer players, who had been on separate teams, so there was no confusion until these names joined the same family. Together they had founded Kalimat, and Raafat was shattered by his brother's death. He was having a terrible year; a few months earlier, his marriage had suddenly fallen apart, and he had been bedridden for weeks with a slipped disk. Finally he started living in the language school, where there were hardly any students. "Somebody must have given me the evil eye," he told me.

He didn't know for certain what had killed Rifaat. During the fall of 2015, doctors had given contradictory diagnoses for the sore on his foot: one said it was an ulcer; another thought it was cancer; a third put some cream on it and told him to wait. Rifaat even travelled to London, where a doctor tested him for tuberculosis, cleaned the sore, and said that it should improve. But it got worse, and a couple of physicians in Cairo refused to see him, apparently because they feared being held liable. Rifaat resisted hospitalization, and by the time his siblings finally forced him to enter a clinic he was having trouble breathing. He died the following day. The official cause of death was tuberculosis, although his family doubted that this was accurate.

Rifaat had taken a photograph of the sore near the end. In the picture, the entire instep of the foot is gone, and a hole the size of a tennis ball is ringed by dead tissue of black and brown and green. When I showed this to American physician friends, they said that even when somebody overcomes lymphoma, his immune system can be weakened, and their best guess was that Rifaat had suffered an infection that culminated in fatal septic shock. But they couldn't say for sure, because in America they had never seen something quite like that photograph. It sickened me—an educated, vibrant man dying like this, at the age of fifty-seven.

One morning, I visited the apartment building in eastern Cairo in which much of Rifaat's family lives. I met with his sister, Wardiya, and another brother, Tariq, and they talked about Rifaat's differences:

"He thought it was fine for women to go out, and to go abroad," Tariq said.

"But we didn't."

"We didn't like his way," Wardiya said.

"But he was better, actually. Recently we knew that everything he said was correct." Because of Rifaat's encouragement, her son had become a teacher of Arabic.

Of all the siblings, Wardiya most resembled Rifaat. She had the same sharp eyes and fine-boned face, although now these half-familiar features were surrounded by a black hijab. It was Ramadan, and the family was fasting; out of politeness, they offered me tea, which I declined for the same reason. "He had his own opinions, and I had my own opinions," Wardiya said. "His opinions were new, and mine were old." Every now and then, after her brother's name was spoken, she mentioned God, and I murmured the response that Rifaat had taught me. _Allah yirhamuh, allah yirhamuh, allah yirhamuh._"