

“The Martyr”

(Chapter One From Lawrence Wright’s *The Looming Tower*)

In a first-class stateroom on a cruise ship bound for New York from Alexandria, Egypt, a frail, middle-aged writer and educator named Sayyid Qutb experienced a crisis of faith. “Should I go to America as any normal student on a scholarship, who only eats and sleeps, or should I be special?” he wondered. “Should I hold on to my Islamic beliefs, facing the many sinful temptations, or should I indulge those temptations all around me?” It was November 1948. The new world loomed over the horizon, victorious, rich, and free. Behind him was Egypt, in rags and tears. The traveler had never been out of his native country. Nor had he willingly left now.

The stern bachelor was slight and dark, with a high, sloping forehead and a paintbrush moustache somewhat narrower than the width of his nose. His eyes betrayed an imperious and easily slighted nature. He always evoked an air of formality, favoring dark three-piece suits despite the searing Egyptian sun. For a man who held his dignity so close, the prospect of returning to the classroom at the age of forty-two may have seemed demeaning. And yet, as a child from a mud-walled village in Upper Egypt, he had already surpassed the modest goal he had set for himself of becoming a respectable member of the civil service. His literary and social criticism had made him one of his country’s most popular writers. It had also earned the fury of King Farouk, Egypt’s dissolute monarch, who had signed an order for his arrest. Powerful and sympathetic friends hastily arranged his departure.

At the time, Qutb (his name is pronounced kuh-tub) held a comfortable post as a supervisor in the Ministry of Education. Politically, he was a fervent Egyptian nationalist and anti-communist, a stance that placed him in the mainstream of the vast bureaucratic middle class. The ideas that would give birth to what would be called Islamic fundamentalism were not yet completely formed in his mind; indeed, he would later say that he was not even a very religious man before he began this journey, although he had memorized the Quran by the age of ten, and his writing had recently taken a turn toward more conservative themes. Like many of his compatriots, he was radicalized by the British occupation and contemptuous of the jaded King Farouk’s complicity. Egypt was racked by anti-British protests and seditious political factions bent on running the foreign troops out of the country—and perhaps the king as well. What made this unimposing, midlevel government clerk particularly dangerous was his blunt and potent commentary. He had never gotten to the front rank of the contemporary Arab literary scene, a fact that galled him throughout his career; and yet from the government’s point of view, he was becoming an annoyingly important enemy.

He was Western in so many ways—his dress, his love of classical music and Hollywood movies. He had read, in translation, the works of Darwin and Einstein, Byron and Shelley, and had immersed himself in French literature, especially Victor Hugo. Even before his journey, however, he worried about the advance of an all-engulfing Western civilization. Despite his erudition, he

saw the West as a single cultural entity. The distinctions between capitalism and Marxism, Christianity and Judaism, fascism and democracy were insignificant by comparison with the single great divide in Qutb's mind: Islam and the East on the one side, and the Christian West on the other.

America, however, stood apart from the colonialist adventures that had characterized Europe's relations with the Arab world. America, at the end of the Second World War, straddled the political chasm between the colonizers and the colonized. Indeed, it was tempting to imagine America as the anticolonial paragon: a subjugated nation that had broken free and triumphantly outstripped its former masters. America's power seemed to lie in its values, not in European notions of cultural superiority or privileged races and classes. And because America advertised itself as an immigrant nation, it had a permeable relationship with the rest of the world. Arabs, like most other peoples, had established their own colonies inside America, and the ropes of kinship drew them closer to the ideals that the country claimed to stand for.

And so, Qutb, like many Arabs, felt shocked and betrayed by the support that the U.S. government had given to the Zionist cause after the war. Even as Qutb was sailing out of Alexandria's harbor, Egypt, along with five other Arab armies, was in the final stages of losing the war that established Israel as a Jewish state within the Arab world. The Arabs were stunned, not only by the determination and skill of the Israeli fighters but by the incompetence of their own troops and the disastrous decisions of their leaders. The shame of that experience would shape the Arab intellectual universe more profoundly than any other event in modern history. "I hate those Westerners and despise them!" Qutb wrote after President Harry Truman endorsed the transfer of a hundred thousand Jewish refugees into Palestine. "All of them, without any exception: the English, the French, the Dutch, and finally the Americans, who have been trusted by many."

The man in the stateroom had known romantic love, but mainly the pain of it. He had written a thinly disguised account of a failed relationship in a novel; after that, he turned his back on marriage. He said that he had been unable to find a suitable bride from the "dishonorable" women who allowed themselves to be seen in public, a stance that left him alone and unconsolated in middle age. He still enjoyed women—he was close to his three sisters—but sexuality threatened him, and he had withdrawn into a shell of disapproval, seeing sex as the main enemy of salvation.

The dearest relationship he had ever enjoyed was that with his mother, Fatima, an illiterate but pious woman, who had sent her precocious son to Cairo to study. His father died in 1933, when Qutb was twenty-seven. For the next three years he taught in various provincial posts until he was transferred to Helwan, a prosperous suburb of Cairo, and he brought the rest of his family to live with him there. His intensely conservative mother never entirely settled in; she was always on guard against the creeping foreign influences that were far more apparent in Helwan than in the little village she came from. These influences must have been evident in her sophisticated son as well.

As he prayed in his stateroom, Sayyid Qutb was still uncertain of his own identity. Should he be “normal” or “special”? Should he resist temptations or indulge them? Should he hang on tightly to his Islamic beliefs or cast them aside for the materialism and sinfulness of the West? Like all pilgrims, he was making two journeys: one outward, into the larger world, and another inward, into his own soul. “I have decided to be a true Muslim!” he resolved. But almost immediately he second-guessed himself. “Am I being truthful or was that just a whim?”

His deliberations were interrupted by a knock on the door. Standing outside his stateroom was a young girl, whom he described as thin and tall and “half-naked.” She asked him in English, “Is it okay for me to be your guest tonight?”

Qutb responded that his room was equipped with only one bed. “A single bed can hold two people,” she said. Appalled, he closed the door in her face. “I heard her fall on the wooden floor outside and realized that she was drunk,” he recalled. “I instantly thanked God for defeating my temptation and allowing me to stick to my morals.”

This is the man, then—decent, proud, tormented, self-righteous, and resentful—whose lonely genius would unsettle Islam, threaten regimes across the Muslim world, and beckon to a generation of rootless young Arabs who were looking for meaning and purpose in their lives and would find it in jihad.

Qutb arrived in New York Harbor in the middle of the most prosperous holiday season the country had ever known. In the postwar boom, everybody was making money—Idaho potato farmers, Detroit automakers, Wall Street bankers—and all this wealth spurred confidence in the capitalist model, which had been so brutally tested during the recent Depression. Unemployment seemed practically un-American; officially, the rate of joblessness was under 4 percent, and practically speaking, anyone who wanted a job could get one. Half of the world’s total wealth was now in American hands.

The contrast with Cairo must have been especially bitter as Qutb wandered through the New York City streets, festively lit with holiday lights, the luxurious shop windows laden with appliances that he had only heard about—television sets, washing machines—technological miracles spilling out of every department store in stupefying abundance. Brand-new office towers and apartments were shouldering into the gaps in the Manhattan skyline between the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building. Downtown and in the outer boroughs, vast projects were under way to house the immigrant masses.

It was fitting, in such a buoyant and confident environment, unprecedented in its mix of cultures, that the visible symbol of a changed world order was arising: the new United Nations complex overlooking the East River. The United Nations was the most powerful expression of the determined internationalism that was the legacy of the war, and yet the city itself already embodied the dreams of universal harmony far more powerfully than did any single idea or

institution. The world was pouring into New York because that was where the power was, and the money, and the transforming cultural energy. Nearly a million Russians were in the city, half a million Irish, and an equal number of Germans—not to mention the Puerto Ricans, the Dominicans, the Poles, and the largely uncounted and often illegal Chinese laborers who had also found refuge in the welcoming city. The black population of the city had grown by 50 percent in only eight years, to 700,000, and they were refugees as well, from the racism of the American South. Fully a fourth of the 8 million New Yorkers were Jewish, many of whom had fled the latest European catastrophe. Hebrew letters covered the signs for the shops and factories on the Lower East Side, and Yiddish was commonly heard on the streets. That would have been a challenge for the middle-aged Egyptian who hated the Jews but, until he left his country, had never met one. For many New Yorkers, perhaps for most of them, political and economic oppression was a part of their heritage, and the city had given them sanctuary, a place to earn a living, to raise a family, to begin again. Because of that, the great emotion that fueled the exuberant city was hopefulness, whereas Cairo was one of the capitals of despair.

At the same time, New York was miserable—overfull, grouchy, competitive, frivolous, picketed with No Vacancy signs. Snoring alcoholics blocked the doorways. Pimps and pickpockets prowled the midtown squares in the ghoulish neon glow of burlesque houses. In the Bowery, flophouses offered cots for twenty cents a night. The gloomy side streets were crisscrossed with clotheslines. Gangs of snarling delinquents roamed the margins like wild dogs. For a man whose English was rudimentary, the city posed unfamiliar hazards, and Qutb's natural reticence made communication all the more difficult. He was desperately homesick. "Here in this strange place, this huge workshop they call 'the new world,' I feel as though my spirit, thoughts, and body live in loneliness," he wrote to a friend in Cairo. "What I need most here is someone to talk to," he wrote another friend, "to talk about topics other than dollars, movie stars, brands of cars—a real conversation on the issues of man, philosophy, and soul." Two days after Qutb arrived in America, he and an Egyptian acquaintance checked into a hotel. "The black elevator operator liked us because we were closer to his color," Qutb reported. The operator offered to help the travelers find "entertainment." "He mentioned examples of this 'entertainment,' which included perversions. He also told us what happens in some of these rooms, which may have pairs of boys or girls. They asked him to bring them some bottles of Coca-Cola, and didn't even change their positions when he entered! 'Don't they feel ashamed?' we asked. He was surprised. 'Why? They are just enjoying themselves, satisfying their particular desires.'"

This experience, among many others, confirmed Qutb's view that sexual mixing led inevitably to perversion. America itself had just been shaken by a lengthy scholarly report titled "Sexual Behavior in the Human Male" by Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues at the University of Indiana. Their eight-hundred-page treatise, filled with startling statistics and droll commentary, shattered the country's leftover Victorian prudishness like a brick through a stained-glass window. Kinsey reported that 37 percent of the American men he sampled had experienced homosexual activity to the point of orgasm, nearly half had engaged in extramarital sex, and 69 percent had paid for sex with prostitutes. The mirror that Kinsey held up to America showed a country that was frantically lustful but also confused, ashamed, incompetent, and astoundingly ignorant. Despite

the evidence of the diversity and frequency of sexual activity, this was a time in America when sexual matters were practically never discussed, not even by doctors. One Kinsey researcher interviewed a thousand childless American couples who had no idea why they failed to conceive, even though the wives were virgins.

Qutb was familiar with the Kinsey Report, and referenced it in his later writings to illustrate his view of Americans as little different from beasts—"a reckless, deluded herd that only knows lust and money." A staggering rate of divorce was to be expected in such a society, since "Every time a husband or wife notices a new sparkling personality, they lunge for it as if it were a new fashion in the world of desires." The turbulent overtones of his own internal struggles can be heard in his diatribe: "A girl looks at you, appearing as if she were an enchanting nymph or an escaped mermaid, but as she approaches, you sense only the screaming instinct inside her, and you can smell her burning body, not the scent of perfume but flesh, only flesh. Tasty flesh, truly, but flesh nonetheless."

The end of the world war had brought America victory but not security. Many Americans felt that they had defeated one totalitarian enemy only to encounter another far stronger and more insidious than European fascism. "Communism is creeping inexorably into these destitute lands," the young evangelist Billy Graham warned, "into war-torn China, into restless South America, and unless the Christian religion rescues these nations from the clutch of the unbelieving, America will stand alone and isolated in the world."

The fight against communism was being waged inside America as well. J. Edgar Hoover, the Machiavellian head of the FBI, claimed that one of every 1,814 people in America was a communist. Under his supervision, the bureau began to devote itself almost entirely to uncovering evidence of subversion. When Qutb arrived in New York, the House Un-American Activities Committee had begun hearing testimony from a *Time* magazine senior editor named Whittaker Chambers. Chambers testified that he had been part of a communist cell headed by Alger Hiss, a former Truman administration official, who was one of the organizers of the United Nations and was then president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The country was riveted by the hearings, which gave substance to the fears that communists were lurking in the cities and the suburbs, in sleeper cells. "They are everywhere," U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark asserted, "in factories, offices, butcher shops, on street corners, in private businesses—and each carries with him the germs of death for society." America felt itself to be in danger of losing not only its political system but also its religious heritage. "Godlessness" was an essential feature of the communist menace, and the country reacted viscerally to the sense that Christianity was under attack. "Either Communism must die, or Christianity must die, because it is actually a battle between Christ and the anti-Christ," Billy Graham would write a few years later—a sentiment that was very much a part of the main-stream Christian American consensus at the time.

Qutb took note of the obsession that was beginning to dominate American politics. He was himself a resolute anti-communist for similar reasons; indeed, the communists were far more active and influential in Egypt than in America. "Either we shall walk the path of Islam or we

shall walk the path of Communism," Qutb wrote the year before he came to America, anticipating the same stark formulation as Billy Graham. At the same time, he saw in the party of Lenin a template for the Islamic politics of the future—the politics that he would invent.

In Qutb's passionate analysis, there was little difference between the communist and capitalist systems; both, he believed, attended only the material needs of humanity, leaving the spirit unsatisfied. He predicted that once the average worker lost his dreamy expectations of becoming rich, America would inevitably turn toward communism. Christianity would be powerless to block this trend because it exists only in the realm of the spirit—"like a vision in a pure ideal world." Islam, on the other hand, is "a complete system" with laws, social codes, economic rules, and its own method of government. Only Islam offered a formula for creating a just and godly society. Thus the real struggle would eventually show itself: It was not a battle between capitalism and communism; it was between Islam and materialism. And inevitably Islam would prevail.

No doubt the clash between Islam and the West was remote in the minds of most New Yorkers during the holiday season of 1948. But, despite the new wealth that was flooding into the city, and the self-confidence that victory naturally brought, there was a generalized sense of anxiety about the future. "The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible," the essayist E. B. White had observed that summer. "A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions." White was writing at the dawn of the nuclear age, and the feeling of vulnerability was quite new. "In the mind of whatever perverted dreamer might loose the lightning," he observed, "New York must hold a steady, irresistible charm."

SOON AFTER THE NEW YEAR BEGAN, Qutb moved to Washington, where he studied English at Wilson Teachers College (Wilson Teachers College merged with three other schools to form the University of the District of Columbia in 1977). "Life in Washington is good," he admitted in one letter, "especially as I live in close proximity to the library and my friends." He enjoyed a generous stipend from the Egyptian government. "A regular student can live well on \$180 a month," he wrote. "I, however, spend between \$250 and \$280 monthly."

Although Qutb came from a little village in Upper Egypt, it was in America that he found "a primitiveness that reminds us of the ages of jungles and caves." Social gatherings were full of superficial chatter. Though people filled the museums and symphonies, they were there not to see or hear but rather out of a frantic, narcissistic need to be seen and heard. The Americans were altogether too informal, Qutb concluded. "I'm here at a restaurant," he wrote a friend in Cairo, "and in front of me is this young American. On his shirt, instead of a necktie, there is a picture of an orange hyena, and on his back, instead of a vest, there is a charcoal picture of an elephant. This is the American taste in colors. And music! Let's leave that till later." The food, he complained, "is also weird." He reports an incident at a college cafeteria when he saw an American woman putting salt on a melon. He slyly told her that Egyptians preferred pepper. "She tried it, and said it was delicious!" he wrote. "The next day, I told her that some Egyptians use

sugar on their melons instead, and she found that tasty as well." He even grouched about the haircuts: "Whenever I go to a barber I return home and redo my hair with my own hands."

In February 1949 Qutb checked into the George Washington University Hospital to have his tonsils removed. There, a nurse scandalized him by itemizing the qualities she sought in a lover. He was already on guard against the forward behavior of the American woman, "who knows full well the beauties of her body, her face, her exciting eyes, her full lips, her bulging breasts, her full buttocks and her smooth legs. She wears bright colors that awaken the primitive sexual instincts, hiding nothing, but adding to that the thrilling laugh and the bold look." One can imagine what an irresistible object of sexual teasing he must have been.

News came of the assassination of Hasan al-Banna, the Supreme Guide of the Society of the Muslim Brothers, on February 12, in Cairo. Qutb relates that there was a hubbub in the street outside his hospital window. He inquired about the reason for the festivities. "Today the enemy of Christianity in the East was killed," he says the doctors told him. "Today, Hasan al-Banna was murdered." It is difficult to credit that Americans, in 1949, were sufficiently invested in Egyptian politics to rejoice at the news of Banna's death. The *New York Times* did report his murder. "Sheikh Hasan's followers were fanatically devoted to him, and many of them proclaimed that he alone would be able to save the Arab and Islamic worlds" the paper noted. But for Qutb, lying in his hospital bed in a strange and distant country, the news came as a profound shock. Although they had never met, Qutb and Banna had known each other by reputation. They had been born within days of each other, in October 1906, and attended the same school, Dar al-Ulum, a teacher-training school in Cairo, although at different times. Like Qutb, Banna was precocious and charismatic, but he was also a man of action. He founded the Muslim Brothers in 1928, with the goal of turning Egypt into an Islamic state. Within a few years, the Brothers had spread across the country, and then throughout the Arab world, planting the seeds of the coming Islamic insurgence.

Banna's voice was stilled just as Qutb's book *Social Justice in Islam* was being published—the book that would make his reputation as an important Islamic thinker. Qutb had held himself pointedly apart from the organization that Banna created, even though he inclined to similar views about the political uses of Islam; the death of his contemporary and intellectual rival, however, cleared the way for his conversion to the Muslim Brothers. This was a turning point, both in Qutb's life and in the destiny of the organization. But at this pregnant moment, the heir apparent to the leadership of the Islamic revival was alone, ill, unrecognized, and very far from home.

As it happened, Qutb's presence in Washington was not completely overlooked. One evening he was entertained in the home of James Heyworth-Dunne, a British Orientalist and a convert to Islam, who spoke to Qutb about the danger of the Muslim Brothers, which he said was blocking the modernization of Muslim world. "If the Brothers succeed in coming to power, Egypt will never progress and will stand as an obstacle to civilization," he reportedly told Qutb. Then he offered to translate Qutb's new book into English and pay him a fee of ten thousand dollars, a fantastic sum for such an obscure book. Qutb refused. He later speculated that Heyworth-Dunne

was attempting to recruit him to the CIA. In any case, he said, "I decided to enter the Brotherhood even before I left the house."

GREELEY, COLORADO, was a flourishing agricultural community northeast of Denver when the recuperating Qutb arrived in the summer of 1949 to attend classes at the Colorado State College of Education (now the University of Northern Colorado) At the time, the college enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most progressive teaching institutions in America. Summer courses were always swollen with teachers from around the country who came to take advanced degrees and enjoy the cool weather and the splendid mountains nearby. In the evenings, there were symphonies, lectures, Chautauqua programs, and outdoor theatrical presentations on the leafy commons of the college. The college set up circus tents to house the spillover classes.

Qutb spent six months in Greeley, the longest period he stayed in any one American town. Greeley offered an extreme contrast to his disagreeable experiences in the fast-paced cities of New York and Washington. Indeed, there were few places in the country that should have seemed more congenial to Qutb's sharpened moral sensibilities. Greeley had been founded in 1870 as a temperance colony by Nathan Meeker, the agricultural editor of the *New York Tribune*. Meeker had formerly lived in southern Illinois, near Cairo, above the convergence of the Ohio and the Mississippi, in the "Little Egypt" portion of that state. He had come to believe that the greatest civilizations were founded in river valleys, and so he established his colony in the rich delta between the Cache la Poudre and the South Platte rivers. Through irrigation, Meeker hoped to transform the "Great American Desert" into an agricultural paradise—just as Egyptians had done since the beginning of civilization. Meeker's editor at the *Tribune*, Horace Greeley, vigorously supported the idea, and his namesake city soon became one of the most highly publicized planned communities in the nation.

Greeley's early settlers were not youthful pioneers; they were middle class and middle-aged. They traveled by train, not by wagon or stagecoach, and they brought their values and their standards with them. They intended to establish a community that would serve as a model for the cities of the future, one that drew upon the mandatory virtues required of every settler: industry, moral rectitude, and temperance. Surely, on such a foundation, a purified and prosperous civilization would emerge. Indeed, by the time Sayyid Qutb stepped off the train, Greeley was the most substantial settlement between Denver and Cheyenne.

Family life was the center of Greeley society; there were no bars or liquor stores, and there seemed to be a church on every corner. The college boasted one of the finest music departments in the country, with frequent concerts that the music-loving Qutb must have enjoyed. In the evenings, illustrious educators spoke at the lyceum. James Michener, who had recently won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Tales of the South Pacific*, returned to teach a writing workshop at the school where he had studied and taught from 1936 to 1941. At last Qutb had stumbled into a community that exalted the same pursuits that he held so dear: education, music, art, literature, and religion. "The small city of Greeley that I now reside in is beautiful, beautiful," he wrote soon after he arrived. "Every house is like a flowering plant and the streets are like garden pathways. One observes the owners of these homes toiling away in their leisure time, watering their yards and manicuring their gardens. This is all they appear to do. The frantic pace of life

that Qutb objected to in New York was far away. There was a front-page article in the *Greeley Tribune* that summer chronicling a turtle's successful crossing of a downtown street.

And yet even in Greeley there were disturbing currents under the surface, which Qutb soon detected. A mile south of campus there was a small community of saloons and liquor stores named Garden City. Here the teetotalers of Greeley held no sway. The town got its name during the Prohibition era, when local rumrunners hid bottles of liquor inside watermelons, which they sold to students at the college. Whenever there was a party, the students would visit "the garden" to stock up on supplies. Qutb would have been struck by the disparity between Greeley's sober face and the demimonde of Garden City. Indeed, the downfall of America's temperance movement earned Qutb's disdain because he believed that the country had failed to make a spiritual commitment to sobriety, which only an all-encompassing system such as Islam could hope to enforce.

America made him sharply aware of himself as a man of color. In one of the cities he visited (he doesn't say where) he witnessed a black man being beaten by a white mob: "They were kicking him with their shoes until his blood and flesh mixed in the public road." One can imagine how threatened this dark-skinned traveler must have felt. Even the liberal settlement of Greeley was on edge because of racial fears. There were very few black families in the town. Most of the Ute Indian population had been run out of the state after a battle that left fourteen cavalymen dead and Nathan Meeker, the founder of Greeley, without his scalp. In the twenties, Mexican labor was brought in to work in the fields and slaughterhouses. Although the signs forbidding Mexicans to remain in town after dark had been taken down, the Catholic church still had a separate entrance for nonwhites, who were supposed to sit upstairs. In the handsome park behind the courthouse, Anglos kept to the south side and Hispanics to the north.

The international students at the college occupied an uneasy place in this charged racial environment. Students from Africa, Latin America, and Asia, as well as a number of Hawaiians, formed the core of the International Club, which Qutb joined. The college also hosted a small Middle Eastern community, including recent Palestinian refugees and several members of the Iraqi royal family. For the most part, they were well treated by the citizens of Greeley, who often invited them into their homes for meals and holidays. Once, Qutb and several friends were turned away from a movie theater because the owner thought they were black. "But we're Egyptians," one of the group explained. The owner apologized and offered to let them in, but Qutb refused, galled by the fact that black Egyptians could be admitted but black Americans could not.

Despite the tensions of the town, the college maintained a progressive attitude toward race. During the summer sessions students from the Negro teachers colleges of the South came to Greeley in abundance, but there were only a couple of black students during the regular school year. One of them was Jaime McClendon, the school's star football player, who was a member of the International Club and roomed with one of the Palestinians. Because the barbers in Greeley refused to serve him, he had to drive to Denver every month to get his haircut. Finally, several of the Arab students escorted him to the local barbershop and refused to leave until McClendon was

served. Qutb would later write that "racism had brought America down from the summit to the foot of the mountain—taking the rest of humanity down with it."

The 1949 football season was a dismal one for the Colorado State College of Education. McClendon sat out the season with an injury, and the team lost every game, including a memorable defeat (103-0) to the University of Wyoming. The spectacle of American football simply confirmed Qutb's view of its primitiveness. "The foot does not play any role in the game," he reported. "Instead, each player attempts to take the ball in his hands, run with it or throw it to the goal, while the players on the other team hinder him by any means, including kicking in the stomach, or violently breaking his arms or legs.... Meantime, the fans cry out, 'Break his neck! Crack his head!' "

It was the women, however, who posed the real threat to this lonely Egyptian bachelor. Far more than most settlements in the American West, Greeley expressed a powerfully feminine aesthetic. The city had not been settled by miners or trappers or railroad workers who lived in a world largely without women; from the beginning, Greeley had been populated by well-educated families. The female influence was evident in the cozy houses with their ample front porches, the convenient and well-ordered shops, the handsome public schools, the low-slung architecture, and the comparatively liberal political climate, but nowhere was it more powerfully expressed than in the college itself. Forty-two percent of the 2,135 students enrolled during the fall semester were women, at a time when the national average of female enrollment was about 30 percent. There were no departments of business or engineering; instead, three great schools dominated the college: education, music, and theater. City girls from Denver and Phoenix, country girls from the farms and ranches of the plains, and girls from the little mountain towns—all of them were drawn to the college because of its national reputation and the sense of entitlement that women were awarded on its campus. Here, among the yellow-brick buildings that embraced the great commons, the girls of the West could sample the freedom that most American women would not fully enjoy for decades to come.

In this remote Western town, Sayyid Qutb had moved ahead of his time. He was experiencing women who were living beyond most of their contemporaries in terms of their assumptions about themselves and their place in society—and consequently in their relations with men. "The issue of sexual relationships is simply biological," one of the college women explained to Qutb. "You Orientals complicate this simple matter by introducing a moral element to it. The stallion and the mare, the bull and the cow, the ram and the ewe, the rooster and the hen—none of them consider moral consequences when they have intercourse. And therefore life goes on, simple, easy and carefree." The fact that the woman was a teacher made this statement all the more subversive, in Qutb's opinion, since she would be polluting generations of young people with her amoral philosophy.

Qutb began his studies in the summer, auditing a course in elementary English composition. By fall, he was sufficiently confident of his English to attempt three graduate courses in education and a course in elocution. He was determined to master the language, since he harbored the secret goal of writing a book in English. One can appreciate the level of his achievement by examining an odd and rather disturbing essay he wrote, titled "The World Is an Undutiful

Boy!", which appeared in the student literary magazine, *Fulcrum*, in the fall of 1949, only a year after he arrived in America. "There was an ancient legend in Egypt," he wrote. "When the god of wisdom and knowledge created History, he gave him a great writing book and a big pen, and said to him, 'Go walking on this earth, and write notes about everything you see or hear.' History did as the god suggested. He came upon a wise and beautiful woman who was gently teaching a young boy:

History looked at her with great astonishment and cried, "Who is it?" raising his face to the sky.

"She is Egypt," his god answered. "She is Egypt and that little boy is the world..."

Why did those ancient Egyptians hold this belief? Because they were very advanced and possessed a great civilization before any other country. Egypt was a civilized country when other peoples were living in forests. Egypt taught Greece, and Greece taught Europe.

What happened when the little boy grew up?

When he grew up, he had thrown out his nurse, his kind nurse! He struck her, trying to kill her. I am sorry. This is not a figure of speech. This is a fact. This is what actually happened.

When we came here [presumably, to the United Nations] to appeal to England for our rights, the world helped England against the justice. When we came here to appeal against Jews, the world helped the Jews against the justice. During the war between Arab and Jews, the world helped the Jews, too.

Oh! What an undutiful world! What an undutiful boy!

Qutb was quite a bit older than most of the other students at the school, and he naturally held himself somewhat apart. There is a photograph of him in the campus bulletin showing a copy of one of his books to Dr. William Ross, the president of the college. Qutb is identified as "a famous Egyptian author" and "a noted educator," so he must have been accorded some respectful notice by his peers on the faculty, but he socialized mainly with the foreign students. One evening, the Arab students held an International Night, where they prepared traditional Arabian meals, and Qutb acted as host, explaining each dish. Otherwise, he spent most of his time in his room listening to classical records on his turntable.

There were polkas and square dances in town several times a week, and the college brought in well-known jazz bands. Two of the most popular songs that year were "Some Enchanted Evening" and "Bali Hai," both from the musical *South Pacific*, based on Michener's novel, and they must have been in the air constantly in Greeley. It was the end of the big band era; rock and roll was still over the horizon. "Jazz is the American music, created by Negroes to satisfy their primitive instincts—their love of noise and their appetite for sexual arousal," Qutb wrote, showing he was not immune to racial pronouncements. "The American is not satisfied with jazz music unless it is accompanied by noisy singing. As the volume increases, accompanied by unbearable pain to the ears, so does the excitement of the audience, their voices rising, their hands clapping, till one can hear nothing at all."

On Sundays the college did not serve food, and students had to fend for themselves. Many of the international students, including Muslims like Qutb, would visit one of the more than fifty

churches in Greeley on Sunday evening, where, after services, there were potluck dinners and sometimes a dance. "The dancing hall was decorated with yellow, red and blue lights," Qutb recalled on one occasion. "The room convulsed with the feverish music from the gramophone. Dancing naked legs filled the hall, arms draped around the waists, chests met chests, lips met lips, and the atmosphere was full of love." The minister gazed upon this sight approvingly, and even dimmed the lights to enhance the romantic atmosphere. Then he put on a song titled "Baby, It's Cold Outside," a sly ballad from an Esther Williams movie that summer, *Neptune's Daughter*. "The minister paused to watch his young charges swaying to the rhythms of this seductive song, then he left them to enjoy this pleasant, innocent night," Qutb concluded sarcastically.

In December a new tone entered his letters to his friends. He began talking about his "estrangement," in both soul and body. By then he had withdrawn from all his classes.

Sayyid Qutb spent another eight months in America, most of that time in California. The America he perceived was vastly different from the way most Americans viewed their culture. In literature and movies, and especially in the new medium of television, Americans portrayed themselves as sexually curious but inexperienced, whereas Qutb's America was more like the one sketched by the Kinsey Report. Qutb saw a spiritual wasteland, and yet belief in God was nearly unanimous in the United States at the time. It was easy to be misled by the proliferation of churches, religious books, and religious festivals, Qutb maintained; the fact remained that materialism was the real American god. "The soul has no value to Americans," he wrote to one friend. "There has been a Ph.D. dissertation about the best way to clean dishes, which seems more important to them than the Bible or religion." Many Americans were beginning to come to similar conclusions. The theme of alienation in American life was just beginning to cast a pall over the postwar party. In many respects, Qutb's analysis, though harsh, was only premature.

CERTAINLY THE TRIP HAD NOT accomplished what Qutb's friends in Egypt had hoped. Instead of becoming liberalized by his experience in America, he returned even more radicalized. Moreover, his sour impressions, when published, would profoundly shape Arab and Muslim perceptions of the new world at a time when their esteem for America and its values had been high.

He also brought home a new and abiding anger about race. "The white man in Europe or America is our number-one enemy," he declared. "The white man crushes us underfoot while we teach our children about his civilization, his universal principles and noble objectives. We are endowing our children with amazement and respect for the master who tramples our honor and enslaves us. Let us instead plant the seeds of hatred, disgust, and revenge in the souls of these children. Let us teach these children from the time their nails are soft that the white man is the enemy of humanity, and that they should destroy him at the first opportunity."

Oddly, the people who knew Qutb in America say he seemed to like the country. They remember him as shy and polite, political but not overtly religious. Once introduced, he never forgot anyone's name, and he rarely voiced any direct criticism of his host country. Perhaps he kept the slights to himself until he could safely broadcast them at home.

It is clear that he was writing not just about America. His central concern was modernity. Modern values—secularism, rationality, democracy, subjectivity, individualism, mixing of the sexes,

tolerance, materialism—had infected Islam through the agency of Western colonialism. America now stood for all that. Qutb's polemic was directed at Egyptians who wanted to bend Islam around the modern world. He intended to show that Islam and modernity were completely incompatible. His extraordinary project, which was still emerging, was to take apart the entire political and philosophical structure of modernity and return Islam to its unpolluted origins. For him, that was a state of divine oneness, the complete unity of God and humanity. Separation of the sacred and the secular, state and religion, science and theology, mind and spirit—these were the hallmarks of modernity, which had captured the West. But Islam could not abide such divisions. In Islam, he believed, divinity could not be diminished without being destroyed. Islam was total and uncompromising. It was God's final word. Muslims had forgotten this in their enchantment with the West. Only by restoring Islam to the center of their lives, their laws, and their government could Muslims hope to recapture their rightful place as the dominant culture in the world. That was their duty, not only to themselves but also to God.

QUTB RETURNED TO CAIRO on a TWA flight on August 20, 1950. Like him, the country had become more openly radical. Racked by corruption and assassination, humiliated in the 1948 war against Israel, the Egyptian government ruled without popular authority, at the whim of the occupying power. Although the British had nominally withdrawn from Cairo, concentrating their forces in the Suez Canal Zone, the hand of empire still weighed heavy on the restive capital. The British were present in the clubs and hotels, the bars and movie theaters, the European restaurants and department stores of this sophisticated, decadent city. As his people hissed, the obese Turkish king, Farouk, raced around Cairo in one of his two hundred red auto-mobiles (his were the only cars in the country allowed to be red), seducing—if one can call it that—young girls, or else sailing his fleet of yachts to the gambling ports of the Riviera, where his debauchery tested historic standards. Meanwhile, the *usual measures of despair* - poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and disease - grew recklessly out of control. Governments revolved meaninglessly as stocks fell and the smart money *fled the teetering country*.

In this rotten political environment, one organization steadily acted in the interests of the people. The Muslim Brothers created their own hospitals, schools, factories, and welfare societies; they even formed their own army and fought alongside other Arab troops in Palestine. They acted less as a countergovernment than as a countersociety, which was indeed their goal. Their founder, Hasan al-Banna, had refused to think of his organization as a mere political party; it was meant to be a challenge to the entire idea of politics. Banna completely rejected the Western model of secular, democratic government, which contradicted his notion of universal Islamic rule. "It is the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated, to impose its law on all nations, and to extend its power to the entire planet," he wrote.

The fact that the Brothers provided the only organized, effective resistance to the British occupation ensured their legitimacy in the eyes of the members of Egypt's lower-middle class, who formed the core of Brothers membership. The government officially dissolved the Muslim Brothers in 1948, following the killing of the hated police chief Salim Zaki during a riot at the medical school of Cairo University; but by that time the Brothers had more than a million members and supporters—out of a total Egyptian population of 18 million. Although the Brotherhood was a mass movement, it was also intimately organized into cooperative

"families"—cells that contained no more than five members each, giving it a spongy, clandestine quality that proved difficult to detect and impossible to eradicate.

There was a violent underside to the Society of the Muslim Brothers, which would become deeply rooted in the Islamist movement. With Banna's approval, a "secret apparatus" formed within the organization. Although most of the Brothers' activity was directed at the British and at Egypt's quickly dwindling Jewish population, they were also behind the bombings of two Cairo movie theaters, the murder of a prominent judge, and the actual assassinations—as well as many attempts—of several members of government. By the time the government murdered Banna, in an act of self-protection, the secret apparatus posed a powerful and uncontrollable authority within the Brotherhood.

In retaliation for raids against their bases, British forces assaulted a police barracks in the canal city of Ismailia in January 1952, firing at point-blank range for twelve hours and killing fifty police conscripts. Immediately upon hearing the news, agitated mobs formed on the streets of Cairo. They burned the old British haunts of the Turf Club and the famous Shepheard's Hotel. The arsonists, led by members of the Muslim Brothers' secret apparatus, slashed the hoses of the fire engines that arrived to put out the flames, then moved on to the European quarter, burning every movie house, casino, bar, and restaurant in the center of the city. By morning, a thick black cloud of smoke lingered over the ruins. At least 30 people had been killed, 750 buildings destroyed, fifteen thousand people put out of work, and twelve thousand made homeless. Cosmopolitan Cairo was dead.

Something new was about to be born, however. In July of that year, a military junta, dominated by a charismatic young army colonel, Gamal Abdul Nasser, packed King Farouk onto his yacht and seized control of the government, which fell without resistance. For the first time in twenty-five hundred years, Egypt was ruled by Egyptians.

QUTB HAD TAKEN up his old job in the Ministry of Education and returned to his former home in the suburb of Helwan, which was once an ancient spa known for its healing sulfur waters. He occupied a two-story villa on a wide street with jacaranda trees in the front yard. He filled an entire wall of his salon with his collection of classical music albums.

Some of the planning for the revolution had taken place in this very room, where Nasser and the military plotters of the coup met to coordinate with the Muslim Brothers. Several of the officers, including Anwar al-Sadat, Nasser's eventual successor, had close ties to the Brotherhood. If the coup attempt failed, the Brothers were to help the officers escape. In the event, the government fell so easily that the Brothers had little real participation in the actual coup.

Qutb published an open letter to the leaders of the revolution, advising them that the only way to purge the moral corruption of the old regime was to impose a "just dictatorship" that would grant political standing to "the virtuous alone." Nasser then invited Qutb to become an advisor to the Revolutionary Command Council. Qutb hoped for a cabinet position in the new government, but when he was offered a choice between being the minister of education or general manager of Cairo radio, he turned both posts down. Nasser eventually appointed him head of the editorial board of the revolution, but Qutb quit the post after a few months. The prickly negotiation between the two men *reflected the initial close cooperation of the Brothers and the Free Officers*

in a social revolution that both organizations thought was theirs to control. In fact, neither faction had the popular authority to rule.

In a story that would be repeated again and again in the Middle East, the contest quickly narrowed to a choice between a military society and a religious one. Nasser had the army and the Brothers had the mosques. Nasser's political dream was of pan-Arab socialism, modern, egalitarian, secular, and industrialized, in which individual lives were dominated by the overwhelming presence of the welfare state. His dream had little to do with the theocratic Islamic government that Qutb and the Brothers espoused. The Islamists wanted to completely reshape society, from the top down, imposing Islamic values on all aspects of life, so that every Muslim could achieve his purest spiritual expression. That could be accomplished only through a strict imposition of the Sharia, the legal code drawn from the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, which governs all parts of life. Anything less than that, the Islamists argued, was not Islam; it was *jahiliyya*—the pagan world before the Prophet received his message. Qutb opposed egalitarianism because the Quran stated: "We have created you class upon class." He rejected nationalism because it warred with the ideal of Muslim unity. In retrospect, it is difficult to see how Qutb and Nasser could have misunderstood each other so profoundly. The only thing they had in common was the grandeur of their respective visions and their hostility to democratic rule.

Nasser threw Qutb in prison for the first time in 1954, but after three months he let him out and allowed him to become the editor of the Muslim Brothers magazine, *Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*. Presumably Nasser hoped his display of mercy would enhance his standing with the Islamists and keep them from turning against the increasingly secular aims of the new government; he may also have believed that Qutb had been chastened by his time in prison. Like the former king, Nasser always underestimated his adversary's intransigence.

Qutb wrote a number of sharply critical editorials calling for jihad against the British at the very time Nasser was negotiating a treaty that would nominally end the occupation. In August 1954 the government shut the magazine down. By that time, ill will between the Brothers and the military leaders had hardened into cold opposition. It was clear that Nasser had no intention of instituting an Islamic revolution, despite his highly publicized pilgrimage to Mecca that same month. Qutb was so infuriated that he formed a secret alliance with the Egyptian communists in an abortive effort to bring Nasser down.

The ideological war over Egypt's future reached a climax on the night of October 26, 1954. Nasser was addressing an immense crowd in a public square in Alexandria. The entire country was listening to the radio as a member of the Muslim Brothers stepped forward and fired eight shots at the Egyptian president, wounding a guard but missing Nasser. It was the turning point in Nasser's presidency. Over the chaos of the panicked crowd, Nasser continued speaking even as the gunshots rang out. "Let them kill Nasser! What is Nasser but one among many?" he cried. "I am alive, and even if I die, all of you are Gamal Abdul Nasser!" Had the gunman succeeded, he might have been hailed as a hero, but the failure gave Nasser a popularity he had never enjoyed until then. He immediately put that to use by having six conspirators hanged and placing thousands of others in concentration camps. Qutb was charged with being a member of the

Muslim Brothers' secret apparatus that was responsible for the assassination attempt. Nasser thought he had crushed the Brothers once and for all.

STORIES ABOUT SAYYID QUTB'S SUFFERING in prison have formed a kind of Passion play for Islamic fundamentalists. It is said that Qutb had a high fever when he was arrested; nonetheless, the state-security officers handcuffed him and forced him to walk to prison. He fainted several times along the way. For hours he was held in a cell with vicious dogs, and then, during long periods of interrogation, he was beaten. "The principles of the revolution have indeed been applied to us," he said, as he raised his shirt to show the court the marks of torture.

Through confessions of other members of the Brotherhood, the prosecution presented a sensational scenario of a planned takeover of the government, involving the destruction of Alexandria and Cairo, blowing up all the bridges over the Nile, and numerous assassinations—an unprecedented campaign of terror, all in the service of turning Egypt into a primitive theocracy. The testimony also demonstrated, however, that the Brothers were too disorganized to accomplish any of these dreadful tasks. Three highly partisan judges, one of them Anwar al-Sadat, oversaw these proceedings. They sentenced Qutb to life in prison, but when his health deteriorated, the sentence was reduced to fifteen years.

Qutb was always frail. He had a weak heart, a delicate *stomach*, and sciatica, which gave him chronic pain. After a bout of pneumonia when he was thirty years old, he suffered from frequent bronchial problems. He experienced two heart attacks in prison, and bleeding in his lungs, which may have been an effect of torture, or tuberculosis. He moved to the prison hospital in May 1955, where he stayed for the next ten years, spending much of his time writing a lucid, highly personal, eight-volume commentary called *In the Shade of the Quran*, which by itself would have assured his place as one of the most significant modern Islamic thinkers. But his political views were darkening.

Some of the imprisoned Brothers staged a strike and refused to leave their cells. They were gunned down. Twenty-three members were killed and forty-six injured. Qutb was in the prison hospital when the wounded men were brought in. Shaken and terrified, Qutb wondered how fellow Muslims could treat each other in such a way.

Qutb came to a characteristically radical conclusion: His jailers had denied God by serving Nasser and his secular state. Therefore, they were not Muslims. In Qutb's mind, he had excommunicated them from the Islamic community. The name for this in Arabic is *takfir*. Although that is not the language he used, the principle of excommunication, which had been used to justify so much bloodshed within Islam throughout its history, had been born again in that prison hospital room.

Through family and friends, he managed to smuggle out, bit by bit, a manifesto called *Milestones (Ma'alimfi al-Tariq)*. It circulated underground for years in the form of lengthy letters to his brother and sisters, who were also Islamic activists. The voice of the letters was urgent, passionate, intimate, and despairing. When finally published in 1964, the book was quickly banned, but not before five printings had been run off. Anyone caught with a copy could be charged with sedition. Its ringing apocalyptic tone may be compared

with Rousseau's *Social Contract* and Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*—with similar bloody consequences.

"Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice/" Qutb posits at the beginning. Humanity is threatened not only by nuclear annihilation but also by the absence of values. The West has lost its vitality, and Marxism has failed. "At this crucial and bewildering juncture, the turn of Islam and the Muslim community has arrived." But before Islam can lead, it must regenerate itself.

Qutb divides the world into two camps, Islam and *jahiliyya*, the period of ignorance and barbarity that existed before the divine message of the Prophet Mohammed. Qutb uses the term to encompass all of modern life: manners, morals, art, literature, law, even much of what passed as Islamic culture. He was opposed not to modern technology but to the worship of science, which he believed had alienated humanity from natural harmony with creation. Only a complete rejection of rationalism and Western values offered the slim hope of the redemption of Islam. This was the choice: pure, primitive Islam or the doom of mankind.

His revolutionary argument placed nominally Islamic governments in the crosshairs of jihad. "The Muslim community has long ago vanished from existence/ Qutb contends. It was "crushed under the weight of those false laws and teachings which are not even remotely related to the Islamic teachings." Humanity cannot be saved unless Muslims recapture the glory of their earliest and purest expression. "We need to initiate the movement of Islamic revival in some Muslim country," he writes, in order to fashion an example that will eventually lead Islam to its destiny of world dominion. "There should be a van- guard which sets out with this determination and then keeps walking the path," Qutb declared. "I have written *Milestones* for this vanguard, which I consider to be a waiting reality about to be materialized." Those words would echo in the ears of generations of young Muslims who were looking for a role to play in history.

In 1964 President Abdul Salam Aref of Iraq personally prevailed on Nasser to grant Qutb a parole, and invited him to Iraq, promising an important government post. Qutb declined, saying that Egypt still needed him. He immediately returned to his villa in Helwan and began conspiring against the revolutionary government.

From prison, Qutb had been able to regenerate the secret apparatus. The government of Saudi Arabia, fearing the influence of Nasser's revolution, covertly supplied Qutb's group with money and arms, but the movement was riddled with informers. Two men confessed and named Qutb in a plot to overthrow the government and assassinate public figures. Only six months after Qutb left prison, the security police arrested him again at a beach resort east of Alexandria.

The trial of Sayyid Qutb and forty-two of his followers opened on April 19, 1966, and lasted nearly three months. "The time has come for a Muslim to give his head in order to proclaim the birth of the Islamic movement," Qutb defiantly declared when the trial began. He bitterly acknowledged that the anticolonialist new Egypt was more oppressive than the regime it had replaced. There was little effort on the part of the judges to appear impartial; indeed, the chief judge often took on the role of the prosecutor, and hooting spectators cheered the grand charade. The only real evidence produced against Qutb was his book, *Milestones*. He received his death sentence gratefully "Thank God," he declared. "I performed jihad for fifteen years until I earned this martyrdom."

To the very end, Nasser misjudged his flinty adversary. As demonstrators filled the Cairo streets protesting the impending execution, Nasser realized that Qutb was more dangerous to him dead than alive. He dispatched Sadat to the prison, where Qutb received him wearing the traditional red burlap pajamas of a condemned man. Sadat promised that if Qutb appealed his sentence, Nasser would show mercy; indeed, Nasser was even willing to offer him the post of minister of education once again. Qutb refused. Then Qutb's sister Hamida, who was also in prison, was brought to him. "The Islamic movement needs you," she pleaded. "Write the words." Qutb responded, "My words will be stronger if they kill me."

Sayyid Qutb was hanged after dawn prayers on August 29, 1966. The government refused to surrender his corpse to his family, fearing that his grave would become a shrine to his followers. The radical Islamist threat seemed to have come to an end. But Qutb's vanguard was already hearing the music.