

Eyes on the suitcase
By Eleonora Fornasari

COFFEE GROUNDS

“Habibi, time to get up!” Mum’s voice is an alarm clock that makes me jump out of bed. Today’s the day, yay! It’s summer, my favourite season of the year, school is over and the next time I open my eyes I will be in Cairo, Egypt.

You know, I am half Egyptian, because my mother was born in Egypt, although she has always lived in Italy. Egypt, then, is my second home, the place where everything is bigger, louder and most importantly way more fun.

I have a lot of friends there and my cousins — twelve of them, to be precise — are a real blast.

Every year I go there with Mum, Dad and... oh no!

I suddenly remember that this year will be different. This year I’m going alone with....

“Aunt Amina!”

“Huh?”

“Aunt Amina! She’s already in the kitchen waiting for you!”

End of the excitement. I follow Mum. And there she is, in her long black dress, her hair hidden by the hijab. Meet Aunt Amina, number one expert in fears and heavy suitcases. She is sitting at the kitchen table, with her usual cup of coffee. I watch her stare into it as if she’s reading a book.

“Hi Auntie.”

She doesn’t even greet me, just waves me closer.

“What are you doing?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

“I’m reading coffee grounds, Sami” she says seriously. “And I don’t like what I see.”

Of course.

I look at Mum, who smiles at me and shrugs.

I roll my eyes: “Why, what do you see?” I ask politely.

Her eyes narrow into two slits: “I see... an unexpected meeting. And a fork in the road” she says in a low tone, as if reciting an ancient magic formula.

Then her voice turns even more serious as she mutters worriedly: “And... a watchful eye.”

“A watchful eye?” I repeat, trying not to laugh.

“But Auntie, it’s just a trip! Not some secret mission.”

She shakes her head, deadly serious. “You shouldn’t joke, Sami. The signs should never be ignored.”

Yep. Aunt Amina’s famous ‘*signs*’. Terrible prophecies that never come true. Luckily.

“Your grandfather used to say...”

“Eyes open!” Mum and I both exclaim and burst out laughing, looking at each other. We’ve heard this story a billion times.

Actually, Grandpa used to say that when we went to the market in Cairo. Eyes open so we don’t lose each other, or else it would be chaos! The market is a real labyrinth. But Aunt Amina interpreted it in her own way. And so her life is a string of “watch where you’re going!”, “watch what you’re doing!”, watch out for that, watch out for this.... In short, she never lets her guard down.

She is always waiting for a disaster.

“I don’t see what’s so funny” she says, offended.

“Nothing, we just love you” Mum tells her affectionately, planting a kiss on her cheek.

At that moment Dad arrives, returning from the café down the street. “Good morning family! Hot croissants for everyone!” he says cheerfully, placing a warm, fragrant bag on the table. But he quickly notices that something is wrong: “Hey, what’s going on? Let me guess... Amina doesn’t want to leave because it’s Friday the 17th”.

Oh no, new super mega drama coming up.

Aunt Amina’s eyes widen, she says something unintelligible in Arabic and then mutters in a horror-movie-tone: “Friday the seventeenth. A day that brings bad luck”.

There. Just what we needed—Dad making things worse.

“There’s no such thing as bad luck” says Mum.

“And today is a day like any other” I add. I really mean it. I’m definitely not superstitious.

“Yes, Amina. If that’s the case, there’s a proverb that says you shouldn’t get married or travel on either Friday or Tuesday” chuckles Dad.

But Auntie isn’t laughing one bit.

Mum glares at Dad. Trouble in sight.

Maybe he realises it too, because he tries to recover:

“But that’s nonsense, isn’t it? I mean, Farida and I got married on a Friday, remember? And look at us... perfect couple!” and with a nervous giggle, he hugs Mum. Perfect or not, I don’t think Dad’s getting away with it.

But Auntie doesn’t seem to care: “Don’t you understand? Two signs are no longer a coincidence—they’re a certainty! We can’t leave today” she declares deadly serious.

“What?” I say concerned. Let’s not joke around. Tonight is the soccer tournament with my cousins. I must leave today.

Mum and Dad give me a look that says *Leave it to us* and I don’t insist. I grab a croissant on the go and sneak out of the kitchen, before Auntie gets a new, ridiculous fear. Speaking of sayings, if the morning sets the tone for the day... I’m really screwed!



OFF WE GO

In the end, somehow, Mum and Dad managed to convince Aunt Amina.

So, here we are at the airport. Us and a trolley full of suitcases, all belonging to Auntie. I only have a small trolley, which I drag by hand because it doesn't really fit on that pile of stuff!

Mum and Dad squeezed me in a giant hug: "See you in fifteen days". And Dad jokingly waved me off with a nice: "Eyes open, remember!" That really made me laugh.

Yeah, eyes open... I can't find Auntie anymore. Where has she gone?

I look around quickly and I finally see her, running at full speed towards the check-in desk. All around us people are pushing and dragging suitcases, while I try not to lose Auntie and her cart loaded like a cargo train.

"Wait for me!" I yell after her.

I don't know if it's my voice or if it's something else, but Auntie suddenly stops in the middle of a busy walkway. Those behind her don't take it well.

"Um... what are you doing Auntie?" I ask embarrassed.

"Two minutes, Sami" she replies distractedly, as she starts rummaging through her bag looking for something. "There are too many eyes, too many weird signs today, you know... where did I put my *ain* to protect me from the evil eye?" she continues, speaking to herself. If you are wondering, *ain* means eye in Arabic.

Finally, Auntie happily pulls out of her bag a small amulet, a blue eye tied to a string, and clasps it as if it were a precious stone. It is a kind of lucky charm, to keep envious stares and misfortunes away. Not that I believe in it, but a lot of people do. Maybe that's why they sell a lot of such amulets in Cairo.

"There" she sighs "now we can check-in" she declares, relieved, as if her ceramic *ain* was a protective shield, like the ones superheroes have.

When we arrive at the counter to hand over our bags, the attendant looks at us with a slightly weird face. Maybe he has never seen suitcases so full. We load the first one onto the conveyor belt.

"Madam, the maximum weight allowed is twenty-three kilos" says the bored-looking attendant, pointing at the scale.

"This one weighs thirty."

There.

Aunt Amina gives an embarrassed smile: "Oh, what's a few extra kilos! Can't you turn a blind eye, just this once?"

But the attendant has his eyes wide open and points to the screen, on which an astronomical price for extra weight is flashing.

"OK, Sami, I guess we need to lighten up a bit..." says Auntie, as she opens the suitcase right there, in front of everyone.

It was just as I feared. Everyone around us looks busy with their own luggage, but I feel they're watching us. So, I put on my sphinx face, as Dad jokingly calls it. That means I don't let anyone see what I'm thinking or feeling. Basically, I look like I've got a face made of stone. But oh, I *definitely* notice all the curious glances coming our way.

And sure enough...

"Excuse me, ma'am, but... is that a whole wheel of parmesan cheese?" a man asks, looking completely stunned. For a second, I lose my sphinx face and my eyes go wide. Poking out from Auntie's mountain of clothes and shoes is an enormous wheel of cheese. "Of course! My cousin Hamza loves it. If I don't bring him one every year, I'll never hear the end of it!"

I quickly hide behind my sphinx face again, but honestly, I wish the ground would just swallow me up. Why do we always have to be so noticeable? And as if that wasn't enough, guess who I spot in the crowd? My classmate Giulia.

Not just any Giulia. The most annoying girl in my class, *Miss Know-It-All*. Please, don't let her be on our flight. But she's also seen me. And she's staring like I'm some kind of math test. And guess what? She hates math tests. I pretend I didn't see her, and I don't say a word. Fingers crossed she forgets this whole embarrassing scene by the time school starts again. I can already picture her telling all her friends and making fun of me.

Meanwhile, Auntie has moved the cheese to another suitcase. I help her close it. "That should do it" she says, panting.

"Twenty-five kilos."

The airport guy lets it slide, and the suitcase rolls onto the conveyor belt. Phew. One down. But when we weigh the second bag...

"Thirty-two kilos."

What?!

We're never going to make it.