

ESCAPE FROM EGYPT

A Novel

by George Loukas

CHAPTERS:

FARID

DJAMILA

SAMIR

ANTOUN

ROSIE

FARID

In those days I still lived at home with my parents. They were days of sloth and aimlessness. I had finished a BSc. course in Geology at Ein Shams University a few years back and after knocking about in a few government jobs, I settled down as a researcher at the National Research Institute. It was a lovely, spanking new building in one of the higher-class suburbs that were snaking out at an incredible pace on every side of an expanding Cairo: a typical project of socialist Egypt, all show and no substance. Marble staircases, well painted, unending corridors, and hundreds of offices devoid of equipment, which were staffed by unmotivated, underpaid, time wasters like me. As the saying was, the government pretended to pay us and we pretended to work. My specialty, my expertise, was supposedly soil analysis. A soil analyst was required at the Institute at the time; I applied for the post and got the job probably due to the lack of other candidates. I was given my own office with a desk, a single chair and a bench equipped with a number of glass saucers and a sink with a cold water tap.

A few months went by before the first soil samples arrived in small, numbered plastic bags and at the beginning I fretted and wondered how to go about the analysis. I bought out of my own hard-up pocket a large, splendid magnifying glass, a few basic chemicals and wrote my first reports with their help, the help of my nose and sense of touch of thumb and index finger. The reports were never claimed and as far as I know, they might still be in one of the desk drawers I shoved them in at the time. More soil samples came in by and by and I arranged them on the bench very neatly. Now and then, I dusted them and cleaned my bench. I did not bother to write any more reports. My lovely magnifying glass was the only serious thing in my office.

I was lucky to be living at home and to have my living expenses taken care of by my parents, for the twenty-seven pounds I earned doing nothing did not go very far. I had to amuse myself somehow and even with the penny pinching I still had to borrow a few pounds at the end of the month from my mother. After all I had so much time on my hands and idleness generates overheads. I went to the Institute about three times a week to show my face, collect my occasional soil samples, sign the register and chew the fat with the few friends I made and one or two I knew from University.

I went there by bus after the morning rush hour which did not mean in comfort but at least inside the bus instead of dangling halfway out at the door or squeezed like a sardine, and left a couple of hours later to go to the club. Oh yes, despite my penury I was a member at the most exclusive sporting club in town. With the rich boys and pretty girls and the huge American cars going in and out, pretending I was one of them. I joined other little groups of wastrels with unlimited time on their hands, swimming in the pool in summer and playing a game of tennis and, by God, yes, quite a bit of golf as well with borrowed clubs. I was a fine golfer, was available, and much sought after as a partner. The golfers were, in a sense, the elite of the club.

It was a time of great social upheaval. The rich were being demolished, their fortunes and land expropriated and nationalized. A new class of privilege and clout was emerging mainly from the ranks of the army and the police. Power-hungry, greedy, and arrogant they were, but not golf players. They had too much inferiority to espouse a leisurely elitist game and too little time for the many emerging pecuniary opportunities they had to cope with. Luckily, there were not too many around in our club. The government provided them with their own flashy clubs and courts and swimming pools. It could not provide them with class. Pig's hair cannot be turned to

silk. For all the showy luxury of their establishments and the arrogance of the members, the aura of the second-rate was palpable. It was manifest in the officers' plump, vulgar, cantankerous wives and noisy, ill-mannered children accompanied by girl child-servants. Little girls of ten to thirteen years of age, badly dressed, badly treated with the trademark white kerchief covering their hair. The little *bonniches*, forgotten even by God.

The golf players were the old-money, leisured few. The very few who managed to hold on to their wealth and the many that had been stripped of it but kept up the show, kept up hope, and their old habits. I was simply leisured, educated, and adrift, rubbing shoulders with this fading elite in the golf pavilion, where they socialized, drank their cocktails, and exchanged their low-voiced hate and derision for the regime. Due to my golfing prowess I was accepted and befriended though I could not share the lifestyle of my friends. I could not share the outings at the nightclubs, the girls they courted, their excursions and escapades. Even at the club I pretended I did not drink so I would not be offered a drink and have to offer in return.

Do not imagine I was complacent with this state of affairs. It was all I had in front of me. I knew I was wasting my life. I wanted to get out of the rut and was waiting for the opportunity. What opportunity? I had no idea. I was waiting for a miracle. Are not the idle, the lax, and those lacking in ambition always waiting for a miracle? I was twenty seven, already almost three years at the Institute, wondering when the time of reckoning would come. When a Senior Director or an Under-Secretary of something or other would call me and ask me what I had been doing these last three years. Ask to see my reports and send me to jail for wasting the country's money. For all the thieving and hustling that was going on in the country, surely a pip-squeak like me would be the perfect scapegoat. In my saner moments I did not think it likely. But a diffused worry and guilt was forever hovering in my thoughts keeping alive a minuscule, implausible hope that one day I would leave this comedy behind for something more worthwhile. So many years had gone by so fast. Where was I heading? Would I stay in Egypt? To do what? Take over my father's grocery? Marry? Live in boredom and dejection; to wallow in mediocrity? Add more children to the overpopulation?

My short and long term worries, the serious and less serious, were overshadowed by a worry of no real consequence but one that consumed me and at times drove me close to madness. My human nature and age of twenty seven. My sexual virility and sexual starvation. I was in the prison of my penury. I did not accept my station, my prospects and I could not rise above them even though I lived as if I did. It was an empty bit of make believe that made me dream a little, kept my ambitions smoldering but ultimately frustrated me. Oh, the frustration of my empty pockets, my empty life, my absent love and the shameless female bodies of my fantasies that I could not embrace. The lovely girls at the club I would never kiss, hold in my arms and feel the tremor of their passion. So many times I insincerely wished I were ugly and unattractive so I would give up hope of being accepted, desired, but the fact was that they were not indifferent to my looks those boldly staring girls and it was I who had to feign indifference. For how would I tackle them? Where would I love them? Kiss them? Smell them? Do all the crazy things I dreamed about? Things to excite them and enslave them. Things born of a feverish mind and galloping imagination. Where, without a flat? Without a car for a drive away from prying eyes and the welcome discomfort and privacy of its back seat. I never craved to become rich. There are more important things in life. But I learnt early on, the pain of an empty pocket.

I played tennis with Antoun Alekian for years, even before it became a regular weekly routine at the club. Ever since we were at school together. We were good friends as well and in a sense extended the saying, opposites attract, to persons of the same sex. No, we were not gay, just very good friends. But so symmetrically opposite that we almost made a perfect fit. Again the allusion to homosexuality is misleading. The perfect fit was our friendship and though some of the opposites helped it, some were just surprising. His father was Armenian and his mother Lebanese while my father was Lebanese and my mother Armenian. His father was a jeweler and his mother owned a fashionable *Maison de Couture*. My father had a grocery and my mother did not work. Where are the opposites? Obviously, they were rich, we were poor. Well, not exactly indigent but by comparison. And another thing, they were divorced while my parents were a pair of cooing pigeons.

Antoun whom I called Tony was short and fat and funny looking while I was well built, on the tall side and, if I may say so, reasonably presentable. Whereas I am introverted and rather quiet, Tony was a boisterous extrovert, funny and garrulous. At school I was liked by our fellow students, he was loved. I was a good student and a fine athlete; he was hopeless on both counts. I went to university; I doubt he would have been admitted to kindergarten again, which does not mean a thing because in life I was a near failure while he turned out to be a very successful businessman. He entered his father's jewelry business and branched out into diamond trading traveling in and out of Egypt reputedly with the precious merchandise illegally in his pockets. People called him a smuggler but I say their accusations were sour grapes for he was not ever caught out. Finally, that funny little ball of a man had all the women he could manage while I pined away with daydreams.

We both loved our games of tennis. For his size and build, Tony did not play too badly. That is not to say he played well. He played a fun game and in doubles I was always his partner. His shouts and jokes and curses, his funny shots and labored efforts kept us in stitches and a crowd of spectators never failed to gather to watch us playing. After the game we would go to the club bar for ice-cold beers and it was the only time I ever drank at the club. The good humor and laughing never stopped. And he was generous with me my little funny Tony. He knew my situation and did not expect reciprocity for drinks and lunch invitations and occasional forays in the Cairo nightlife. On the contrary he was forever telling me he was not doing enough for me. Do you need money Freddy? If you need the *garconnière* or a car for a chick you will let me know, won't you? *Je t'aime bien mon vieux*. Why don't you like me as much? Why won't you do me the favor of using me a little just so I can feel you love me too? Your detachment kills me. So what do you do for dames? I have plenty. I can introduce you to some or have you tied your *pipi* in a knot? But I had my self-respect. I could not let him know of my abjectness. I just smiled and kept quiet.

I knew both his parents well. In our junior school days I was constantly in and out of their house. In fact it was Mr. Alekian that proposed me for membership at the club and paid the quite substantial initial fee. He liked me and was happy his crazy, bubbling son had a calm and serious friend. His mother Mona Namour, ex-Alekian, was a large, handsome woman, taller than her husband, who passed on to Tony most of her temperamental characteristics but, alas, not her physical ones. Tony lived with her after his father left the house but he was affectionate with both his parents. This was another contrast, for I was rather remote with mine. I always asked him about them and one day, after our game, he told me he was going to the atelier and would I like to go with him to see his mother. It was a good opportunity for I had not seen her for months.

A statuesque artificial blonde, she was exuberant and sociable and her large breasts fascinated me. Lebanese women of her class tended to be liberated and her conversation was lively, earthy, and pregnant with innuendos delivered with a smile. I half expected her to make a pass at me every time I saw her but that never happened. She seemed a teaser rather than a seducer of young men though she had a reputation of frivolity and a married lover who was devoted to her.

In the diagrams of life, triangles are much more complicated and interesting and perhaps more numerous than straight lines. Tony never failed to confirm this though the triangles he drew faded away rapidly for he was forever initiating new ones.

Listen, he told me on the way to the atelier, if you see a girl you like let me know. I'll bring her to you on a platter. His mother employed perhaps a dozen girls. I have been through all of them, he continued. Most of them are married. You may wonder at this dissipation, depravity, call it what you like, but it is understandable if you realize the misery of their lives: the unruly children, the callous husbands spending most of their time at the coffee house, the struggle to make ends meet, the unlikelihood of an improvement in their lives, their non-existent self respect. I am a break in their drudgery. I do not take them seriously and they don't take me seriously either. They know it shall not last. But they like the fun. I make them laugh and this is their medicine. Believe me it has almost nothing to do with sex. In any case I rarely bother to satisfy them sexually. If you have many women you are like a cock in a hencoop. A quick poke and it's over. Anyway, one can never satisfy a woman. They are insatiable. So you become selfish and look only after yourself. Then you give them a few pounds and they are happy. I bet most of the times it is also a sort of revenge for the treatment they get from their spouses, for having to work all day for a miserable wage and then to be saddled with the unending household chores. So I see them a few times and then I move on. I get bored. I need a change.

Quite a Casanova! I wonder if he, too, was a Speedy Gonzales. Tony laughed. I bet he was, he said. And, you know, all I have to do is give them a nod and they'll come running for more.

For the quickies or the few pounds? I asked.

For both. And the laughs and jokes and my crazy antics, my vulgar games and language.

You are educating me, my friend, in the female mentality.

Perhaps I am wrong, he said and laughed. You can never be sure about women. Sacha Guitry once said that most women are whores and even the ones that are not would like to be.

Why, Tony, you're turning into an intellectual!

Yes, yes, he said smiling. I told you I had all of my mother's girls. Well, not exactly. One or two are too old to bother with and there is one woman who is driving me mad. She refuses to go out with me. She is a widow and the more I see her, the more she attracts me. Her name is Gamila but she is Lebanese and insists on being called by the Lebanese pronunciation, Djamila.

Perhaps she has a man, I ventured.

Yes, but so what?

Well, every rule has an exception.

Shit. Does it have to be Djamila?

I had not been at the atelier before. It was a flat at the Khedive buildings of Emad el Dine Street. Old, imposing constructions past their prime and run down from socialist maltreatment and the diminution of rents, with big rooms high ceilings and

wide corridors. The girls were gathered in two very large connecting rooms where a separating wall had been obviously removed. A large rectangular table in the middle with fashion periodicals, lengths of cloth, large pairs of scissors, boxes of pins, spools of multi-colored threads and buttons. A few mannequin torsos without heads, with dresses on them were stacked next to a wall together with three Singer manual sewing-machines and two ironing tables, each with an electric iron.

When we entered the atelier, pandemonium broke loose. There was a chorus of cheerful greetings welcoming Touny. So many faces I could not take them all in. Young, old, pretty, ugly, with smiles, with a jumble of words for Tony, and Tony going round kissing left and right. He babbled right back twenty to the dozen, joking, teasing, caressing, and showing genuine affection. Monette strode up to me, sticking her lovely tits to my breast kissing me three times, one cheek luckier than the other. A lone woman in black, sitting cross-legged, calmly continued her stitching hardly looking up at the commotion. The exception to the rule, I guessed.

Freddy, you naughty boy, I haven't seen you in years. I am very angry. How you neglect me!

Madame Mona, I think of you all the time.

Monette, my boy. Monette. Everybody calls me Monette. And don't give me that crap. Touny tells me you are at the club every day. *La dolce vita*, yes? And plenty of girls? No time for old hags like me.

Oh please, you don't have to fish for compliments. You look younger and more attractive every time I see you.

She laughed. Thank you, my dear. You are a very sweet liar. You are also a terrific golfer, I hear. I wish I had the time so you would teach me a thing or two.

About golf?

Yes, and anything else you think might interest me.

A smile.

I can teach you golf but as for the rest, I think you can teach me much more than I can teach you.

She laughed again.

Okay, it's a deal. You teach me golf and I'll teach you the secret of happiness.

Buddha said the secret of happiness is giving up all earthly desires, pleasures, and possessions.

He seemed to have enjoyed his food, though. In all his statues he is nice and chubby and his serene facial expression attests to a full stomach. I am afraid my secret of happiness is quite the opposite. It is the acquiring of healthy, pleasurable vices.

Like exercising your body regularly?

She laughed heartily. Something like that, she said.

Tony came up to us.

Mother, stop flirting with Freddy.

Mind your own business, Touny. But come along with me for a moment I need to talk to you.

I was left alone a few minutes. Standing awkwardly and stared at by a dozen pairs of eyes. One pair was calmly engaged guiding a pair of hands in the stitching of a dress. The head was bent, shoulder length black hair drawn and tied behind; a milky white complexion and features partially revealed: forehead, a cheekbone, a chin, a nose, an eye. There was an indefinable something that made for beauty. You could not put your finger on it. You knew it without understanding it. After some whispers and giggles the girls went back to work.

I looked at Djamila. One day science will be able to measure the energy of an intense look. It is palpable. It is felt. She looked up, met my eye, and turned to her work. Almost immediately she looked up again, looked at me and smiled a half-smile and I half-smiled back. I saw an empty chair and sat on it. I picked up a magazine and leafed through it. It was full of sketches and pictures of dresses and skinny models on the catwalk. Dresses I did not understand. Frills that meant nothing to me. Artificiality to embellish. Sometimes it does if it is simple. Mostly, it is an exhibition of bad taste, food for gossip and malice for the rich. But then taste is subjective. It does not bear discussion. It is locked up in our trillion brain cells. I put the magazine back on the table.

The energy was coming on strong. I glanced at her and she looked back at her work. I looked at the girls without interest. Just dowdy hens in Tony's coop. There was nobody there but Djamila. No, she was not beautiful. A face with a prominent bone structure, a wide forehead, a slightly large but thin nose and small, exposed ears. It was her large eyes and eyebrows, her mouth that defined and gave that special appeal to her face. Eyes both strong and soulful that softened with the half-smile she gave me. The rest of her, for all I could make out from her sitting position: a normal body of medium height and slender build and the gloom of her black attire. Was it mourning? Did her husband die recently?

Monette and Tony came in following their footsteps and voices, stirring the atmosphere, and starting a babble of conversation, jokes and giggles between Tony and the girls.

Will you have a coffee, Freddy?

No need.

Oh, yes, said Monette. Sweet, of course. She smiled. Like you, she added.

She sent a girl to the kitchen to prepare two coffees, pulled a chair and sat next to me. She was aging well, Monette. Those lovely tits. I wondered how they would look unfettered. I wondered if she was happy sharing a man. But at her age things are not easy. Everybody has a secret wish if one could change one's life. What was hers?

My compliment was not a lie, Monette. You look terrific.

She smiled happily. Who can resist a compliment especially if one believes it is true?

Oh Freddy, you must come here every day to lift up my spirits. Forget Tony. Come on your own. We can flirt without his interference. Now tell me about yourself. Still at the Institute analyzing soils? How dull!

Deadly. I hardly do any work at all. I feel I'm at a dead end and I don't know how to get out of it.

But you have the club.

Yes, thank God for that.

And a girl?

No.

No? Why not?

Many reasons.

Why don't you stick around with my womanizer son?

I play tennis with him two or three times a week. I love him but we are different.

The coffees arrived. One for Tony, one for me. Sweet and strong. Like Monette. Like Djamila.

And you? I asked. It was the first time I was that intimate and serious with Monette. She looked at me as if she cared. As if I was important. Not anymore a youngster, Tony's friend.

Oh dear, you do bring out the confessional mood with your seriousness. What shall I say? That I have the same vague dissatisfaction? Work, work, work. Enough money but so what? A little distraction with parties and the occasional night out. A little body exercise. She smiled. And, she continued, the awful feeling that time is running out. A feeling in my bones that I am losing my youth, my energy. Something is missing. I suppose it comes at my age, you know. With the menopause and the lack of a stable relationship. She laughed. If Hagop would only put up with my infidelities, I would be very happy living with him. I still love him. I still call him daddy. It is not a question of money, of security. It is the family bonding that I miss. But he cannot accept this even now with his vanishing virility. He is as macho as a twenty year-old.

Tony came up to us.

What's all this solemn whispering about? he asked.

We don't need to yell like you do, you silly boy, Monette answered. Time to go Touny. We have work to do. You have brought the atelier to a standstill, as usual.

I took the cue, got up and we kissed. I felt a special tenderness. Her breasts on my chest, again. Her body touching mine. It was very nice. I would be dreaming about it.

Come and see me, Freddy. Don't take another year.

Okay.

Promise?

I looked at her, surprised. She bent her head to one side smiling, emphasizing the question, waiting for an answer.

Yes.

Tony waving to a chorus of good buys. I looked at Djamila and she looked at me. She did not smile. Was that a question in her eyes?

What did you think of her? Tony asked in the car.

Not beautiful, not even obviously pretty; she is attractive in an undefined way.

She grows on you, the bloody bitch. She does not even look at me. The funny thing is, there's something between her and my mother. An understanding. My mother scolds all of the girls but never Djamila. Even if she makes a mistake. One day I sort of asked her about it and she said, just leave Djamila alone. Why? I never understood.

Two things kept me awake that night. Monette's parting kiss and Djamila's half-smile. What was Monette trying to tell me with her suggestiveness, her gratuitous confession of infidelities, her insistence to see me again? What about Djamila's furtive glances, her questioning last look? Sometimes, what seemed like opportunities, invitations, intimations of interest were just traps to keep my poor brain hallucinating and troubled for days on end until the memory faded, little by little, and a sense of unreality caused me to suppress what little longing remained. I kept thinking that this was another routine dead-end predicament. But I could not get it out of my mind. I kept visualizing Monette's good looking, sensual face with her large mouth and mischievous eyes. Mulled over her sudden unexpected candor and inviting manner wondering if it was as genuine as it was obvious. Speculating on her intentions and my chances. She had known me for ten, fifteen years. Had I suddenly become eligible as a lover? And what would Tony say if the unlikely happened between us and he found out? Hell, he would probably laugh his head off.

As for Djamila, that was another thing: a wild card. I could not really fathom why this woman so decisively captured my thoughts. Was it the implied availability of the widow, her rejection of Tony or her social class that was closer to mine than the girls at the club? Was it that look of strength and suffering? A half-smile and a few furtive glances set me dreaming. A dream many times as chancy and hazy as Monette's but just as insistent. In that half smile I saw an interest, an opening that was not there for Tony. She judged correctly that I did not have a list of paramours on which to add her name. In those furtive glances she sized me up and because they were more than one I guessed she found something of herself in me. A reticence that was acceptable and reassuring. But I was not her age. Not a marriage prospect. Women are practical and down to earth. What was it then? Or did I read too much in a few curious glances?

That afternoon, in the arid Sahara of my life, the spark, or was it sparkle, of two women fired a conflagration of thoughts, suppositions and lascivious scenarios of passionate jousts. As usual the blaze raged, lit, and warmed me for a few days. In my bed, on the bus, at the research center and then, unable to reach a conclusion, a decision, with interminable dialogues of my two selves, the man of action and the man of sloth, the aspiring stud and the pedantic thinker, with the memory fading and the urgency dissipating, with the need for a little peace of mind, my slothful self appeared victorious. *La grande illusion* had sapped my libidinous energy and I gave up thoughts of conquests and sexual gratification. In any case, with whom?

I played tennis twice the next week with Tony. Otherwise the same tired, old routine, swimming before noon, chatting and joking with my fellow wastrels at the pool, spreading suntan lotion on lissome girlish backs and religiously performing my standard hour of easy-going laps back and forth. Then it was golf in the afternoon and, in between, a little jogging at the club's racecourse where graceful, pampered horses cantered and trotted alongside me with their wealthy leather-booted, leather-gloved riders moving up and down on the saddle like human yoyos. Keeping my body fatigued; my muscles picturesque and my mind disengaged. I tried to forget Monette and Djamila and almost wished Tony would take a holiday until I was well over them. But he came again the following week and played a funny and terrible game of tennis. Later, over beers at the bar he gave the explanation. The reason for the very bad game: a new girlfriend that drove him crazy.

I hardly sleep at night, he said. I am pooped.

What? No more Speedy Gonzales?

No, man. I am head over heels in love.

So it is serious? Or is it easy come, easy go?

He laughed. How do I know? I am not a prophet.

What about Djamila, I asked.

Djamila who? You can have her.

But will she have me?

How do I know? Consult your horoscope. By the way mother gave me an envelope for you. Here it is. What's going on with you two?

I put the envelope in my pocket.

Why don't you open it? he asked. I want to know what's inside.

Tony, what you don't know won't hurt you.

Is it as bad as that? he said laughing.

I don't know what's inside either.

I opened the envelope a little later when I was alone. It was a blank page. On the top left hand corner, a telephone number in tiny script. My heart started beating. I

walked to the club's phone boxes in the main building opposite the squash courts and called the number.

Hello, Monette. This is Farid, I said.

Freddy! How nice of you to call. I was giving up hope of hearing from you despite your promise.

I didn't have your phone number and I didn't know how to get in touch discreetly. Thank you for sending it to me.

Sending it to you? I didn't send it to you!

But Tony gave me your envelope with the phone number.

My God! That Touny is a devil. We were talking about you yesterday and I told him you had promised to come and see me but never did. Obviously there was nothing else written on the paper other than the phone number?

No nothing.

She let out a peel of laughter. So he wrote it himself, the little pimp. Well, she said, let's make the best of it. Can you come in an hour or so? By that time the girls would have left.

At the atelier?

Yes, my dear.

Thumping heart, in a cloud, I went to the changing rooms for a shower. Thorough ablutions. Elation alternating with agony. Took the microbus across the Nile to town and walked to Emad el Dine. I was slightly early and looked at the bookshops, the photo shops with the lovely expensive cameras, and the picture advertisements outside the two cinemas nearby and then walked into the courtyard of the Khedive building with the small fountain that had stopped bubbling merrily soon after the rent control laws took effect. Later, I laughed at the two weeks of agony I went through, my meekness and stupidity because, well, I did not know Monette. Not well enough, that is. I did not know many things at the time: facts and people, temperaments and attitudes, the convolutions of life and the workings of fate.

The wonderful Monette gave me no time to feel awkward or embarrassed or to consider my near total inexperience in the amatory arts. I was twenty-seven years old and practically a virgin with just a few unsavory contacts with prostitutes in cars with friends, long ago. That was all. She opened the door. Almost my height, in a *robe de chambre*, blond hair freshly brushed, lively face made up to perfection and a perfume that lingered and caressed your senses like a Chopin nocturne in the background. She did not give me time to feel intimidated by the frills of femininity. She smiled, closed the door, kissed me three times as was her custom and then put her lips to mine, her body to mine, her arms around me letting me feel the nudity beneath. We kissed tenderly to seal an understanding that was long in coming but had finally arrived. She smiled when we stopped. You smell nice, she said.

I just had a shower. You smell nice, too.

I just had a shower, too. So we are nice and clean both of us.

She put her arm in mine.

Come, I have a bedroom in the flat. You have not seen it?

No.

No, of course not. It's funny, when I saw you last time I thought, this is my next lover. After all those years! Did I make myself clear that day? I mean, did it come across I wanted you? I could not spell it out more clearly with Touny and the girls around.

Yes. I understood but I was hesitant. I know you have a friend. I was not sure you meant it.

We entered the bedroom. A nice feminine room with cream-colored furniture decorated with long dangling flowers, an ample double bed, a large mirror, and a *toilette* with the paraphernalia of female embellishment. On the wall, a Dali print of a large watch melting smoothly out of shape in a lunar landscape. I looked at it and she smiled.

To remind me that time is melting, fleeting, and soon not much will be left. So do you like my love nest?

Yes.

She turned and kissed me. I liked it when she kissed me taking the initiative without inhibitions. I felt comfortable with her friendly, matter of fact advances, her gently rising passion. Mine was rising too, pushing at my fly, pushing on her body. We kissed for a long time and I marveled that a woman her age took such pleasure in the kiss. Like a virgin teenager. As accomplished a kisser. Our lips and tongues, our hands and bodies attaining familiarity. Breaching the boundaries of age, altering the former relationship of friend and mother of the friend. Familiarity generating intimacy and sweetness and the appetite for flesh. The sweetness feeding on itself. Expanding, intoxicating, and demanding.

Let's get you undressed, she said and took off my jacket. I started undressing and she helped with a smile and calm rapidity. She caressed my straining penis, simply, tenderly, the precious instrument we shared, and took off her *robe de chambre*. I looked at the breasts of my reveries, the firm body of a young woman, the slim legs, the trimmed pubic hair, the ample but still shapely bottom on wide hips. She came to kiss me. I moved back. Let me look at you Monette. I can't believe it. She smiled and did a complete turn, showing off, arms outstretched, offering her body, for my pleasure and for hers before the clock melted in the desert.

We kissed again and again with nothing more between us but our heightened sensuality, our protuberances and entrances to our bodies, our five senses, and mounting needs. And then to bed to caress and play, explore and exploit, penetrate and engulf and so joined move to the magic of one flesh, one self, one goal, one orgasm. When hardly separated, we joined again for a second journey under the skin, a second amorous tussle and orgasm.

Then a rest in each other's arms. A couple now, relaxed and fulfilled. Sharing warmth, smiles, and grateful, tender kisses; sharing the unique bond of naked bodies and proffered genitals.

Thank you Touny, said Monette. I feel so wonderful.

Thank you, Tony, so do I.

She laughed. Do you know why he did it?

Because he's an immoral little pimp. So many times he offered to find me girls and I refused. This time he tricked me with his mother. Unbelievable. Not that I'm complaining.

We are very close, you know, Touny and I. We are good friends because we are so much alike and, after all, we have been living together since Hagop left the house about ten years ago. He hates Fawsi, my friend. He thinks he's a pompous ass. I don't know. Perhaps he's right. That's the impression Fawsi gives. Self-confidence and excessive self-esteem. I met him at the club three, four years ago. He's about my age and he is not bad looking. He chased me assiduously at the time. He was separated from his wife who had left for Lebanon and, to tell the truth, it was not an unpleasant interlude in my life. After all, I was alone and he was a good companion. We went out a lot. Cinema, dancing, night clubbing, something to do every night. And sex, of course. Here in this room. Sorry if I put you off but I am fifty. I have a

past and you are liable to hear about it now and then. She smiled. I have a woman working for me, a widow...

Djamila?

Ha! So Touny did tell you he had the hots for her? No, not Djamila. Another woman, a little older. When her husband died her family tried to marry her off again. She had a child, a boy, but managed to survive with what she earns here and she absolutely refused to remarry. She explained to me that she had no intention of having another master to serve for the rest of her life. And, in any case, madam, she told me, I never enjoyed *coucou*. As you can guess, *coucou* was sexual intercourse. But I am different. I cannot live without *coucou*. I am a lusty old woman.

She laughed. It was wonderful the first year with Fawsi and then year by year we gradually became like a married couple. It's the age, you see. I wanted sex and he wanted to see a movie. I kissed him passionately and he flopped on an armchair. He was tired, he had a headache, he had an awful day at work etc, etc. On top of everything his wife recently returned from Lebanon and he has very little time for me. He says he does not love her and calls her, the General, but he does not want to divorce her. They have a grown son in Canada and what will he say? So it is tapering off, our relationship. Touny is very happy and I think his motive in throwing us together is to bring the final break-up. She kissed me and smiled. And I think he's done it. But...

But?

Touny wants me to get together with Hagop again. Funny boy! Despite his craziness and high spirits he is mature in his thinking and he does love us both. He wants his family reunited again. He tells me, even if I don't realize it now, it will be very important for me as I grow older. I don't know if Hagop has put him up to these maneuvers. Certainly not this involvement with you but the reconciliation with him. I think Touny has devised our love affair as an interim liaison to get Fawsi out of the way until I finally decide to go back to Hagop. What do you think of all this? You haven't said a word.

I am too exulted for words, Monette. I cannot think straight with you in my arms.

She caressed my disheveled hair. I looked at her and kissed her. The middle-aged woman fighting to hold out and retain a semblance of youth with exercise and massages, with facial creams, makeup and plucked eyebrows, with softening jowls and tiny creases on her upper lip, with a yen for sex and the heart to pursue it.

You are wonderful, Monette. I might fall in love with you. I am already half way there. We'll see how it goes.

You're a nice boy, Freddy. Forget love. It's not for us. Let's have a nice time.

I held that luscious body. I filled my hands with breasts. I kissed the lips with creases and her tongue snaked into my mouth.

Yes, she said, yes. That is what I want.

My relationship with Monette was not the most important thing in my life. Yet it loomed as though it was. I had more important things to figure out about my future. I had to think of terminating my dead-end job at the institute and think twice as hard how to achieve my objective to get out of Egypt. I had to rationalize the guilt I would feel about leaving my parents behind and solve dozens of minor, pending problems. Yet my love affair with Monette sweetened my life. It satisfied the human need for intimacy and companionship with the opposite sex. It annulled my sexual frustration and it was a relationship that did not add problems to the ones I already had. There was no question of marriage and the difficulties attached to it. I did not have to spend

much because we did not go out to fancy hotel restaurants or nightclubs. We put in a movie now and then followed by dinner in one of the cheaper restaurants. Places I would be able to afford because I would not accept to have her pay. I neither wanted to feel like a gigolo nor wanted her to feel she was keeping one. The difference in age put many restrictions and susceptibilities in our social behavior. Monette did not want to be seen in public with a man so much younger than her. She had a wide circle of acquaintances and knew its ways and the malicious glee with which the news would spread. We both tried to figure the logic why this should be so. We were very happy together and marvelously compatible in our sexual desires and aptitudes. Equal in the pleasure, tenderness, and comfort we derived from each other. Were we at fault? Were we ridiculous?

We had fallen into a routine of meeting three times a week in the afternoons at the atelier after the girls had left. I say the routine but it was hardly that. Every meeting was a new thrill. It was an energy discharge of our accumulated craving. I was gorging because of my traumatic starvation and Monette, in any case a natural, stocking sensations for the arid times of melted clocks. Once in a while we would put in a film at the six-to-nine screening when the crowds were mostly young and the chance encounter of possible acquaintances at a minimum. Soon after the cinema became almost a weekly event, Monette asked me if she could tell Djamila to join us.

Three of us will look less fishy, she said. She lives alone and is probably quite lonely.

Of course you may ask her to join us. Are you friends? I asked.

Well, yes and no. We were linked in life in a strange way. You might say I feel responsible for her like an elder sister.

I did not ask any more questions. I did not want to pry. Not right then. But I was curious to know the story and curious to see Djamila again.

We met in the jam of the cinema entrance, a sort of covered street-side patio under the huge signboard advertisement of the film. The usual crowd that packs the Cairo cinema entrances a half hour before the screening had already formed; noisy, exuberant, physically pushy males in the main. We arrived separately and I stationed myself on the sidewalk just off the patio with the peanut vendors and shoeshine boys to monitor the approaches on two streets when I saw Djamila coming. I had not seen her since that single occasion at the atelier some months ago and though my happiness with Monette, my erotic satiety had halted the mad mental searches for an elusive sexual salvation, my polygamous male genes brought Djamila's smile and furtive looks, again and again, to mind. Yes, it was her in the distance, black coat, black trousers, black bag, shoulder-length black hair. An interesting walk, light and unhurried, as it brought her white-complexioned face closer and diminished her height.

She saw me, remembered me, and smiled. A smaller woman than Monette, she was perhaps not more beautiful but decidedly different. A subdued air, with the total absence of mannerisms that in Monette with her humor, liveliness and outspokenness were so charming, nevertheless, gave Djamila a sort of enigmatic appeal. She exuded a greater attraction of the eyes that were strong and direct but clouded occasionally and gave the impression of inner turmoil and suffering. And the aura of alluring maturity that begins in a woman at thirty-five and lasts until her physical rundown commences in her sixties. She offered her hand.

I am Djamila, she said with a smile.

I know. And I am Farid.

I know. Thank you for inviting me. I did so much want to see this film and I hate going to the cinema alone.

Her face was lightly made up with a trace of eye liner and a touch of lipstick but little else on the white, unblemished skin. She was a good-looking young woman but alone and in mourning. Why? In Egypt, families marry off young widows on the double, practically by force to any available man. Young, old, rich, poor, handsome, ugly, it does not matter. They wish to safeguard them from the Tonys of this world.

So you like Yousef Chahine?

Yes.

Why?

He is drawing the Egyptian cinema out of its customary silliness and insipidity.

Wow! That was quite a wholesale condemnation of Egyptian directors but also of the public's taste. Nevertheless, I agree.

And he has talent.

Yes. And guts.

She smiled. And guts, she repeated. Guts to do what is right. What one thinks is right. To liberate oneself.

You are right, Djamila. Sometimes it is very difficult to liberate oneself. To find one's own way.

Yes, she said and smiled.

Monette came to us late and out of breath. Tall, elegant, smiling, she overshadowed us. She kissed us both and we hurried to the darkened hall. We were guided to our seats by the attendant with torchlight. The newsreels, the cartoon, and intermission were over and the main feature had just started. I sat on one side, Djamila on the other and Monette between us. She searched and held my hand and I felt awed, as I usually did when she was well dressed and made up, that this imposing woman was my lover. A little self-conscious too that Djamila had noticed. The film absorbed us despite the general restlessness and whispering of the audience. They were not disposed to tolerate intimations of homosexuality.

When we left the cinema, Monette invited us to a nearby restaurant where we had dinner with the luxury of aperitifs and wine and pleasant light-hearted conversation. A discussion of the film, of homosexuality, the morals of our inexplicably provincial and hypocritical society where every deviation from a narrow-minded framework invariably surfaces in gossip, and Monette's jocular recounting of the latest scandals. Djamila did not talk as much as she looked and smiled but her comments when they came were surprisingly adroit. We had removed jackets and coats and I stole interested glances at the body I had seen, sitting, bent, one leg over the other, stitching a dress a few months ago. Not a body to cause obsession but a body for that face, those eyes, the voice, for that articulate smile. It conformed to her psyche. It was normal and slim, shapely legs in trousers, small, assertive breasts pushing the black woolen jumper.

We left the restaurant a couple of hours later, walked Djamila to the bus station and I walked Monette to her car. It would not do to go to the atelier at this hour. It would set the doorkeepers' tongues wagging. I met Monette on schedule the following Tuesday in her love nest and we kissed and joked and made obsessive, inventive, and assorted love. When we lay to rest, to renew our urges and Monette was quiet, motionless with eyes closed, I started thinking that this happiness was detrimental because it kept my mind off my serious problems. I was now very happy in my stagnation, in my dead-end job and my utter lack of ambition. I told Monette

about it for a laugh and she told me she was very happy as well. Of course she did not face the same problems though growing old preoccupied her too.

But, she said, Freddy, this cannot last, so let us be happy while we can.

Why can't it last? I asked.

Because, you silly boy, good things don't last. Happiness does not last. It comes in snatches and you must snatch them. And then, before you know it...

She pointed at Dali's melting clock. It melts away.

But we have snatched it.

Yes. So wait and see...

She was silent for a while in my arms. A large, warm, wonderful, naked female, a dream come true. That would not last.

Fawsi called me again today, she said. He has been calling me more and more often.

For the same reason?

Yes, the same tune: I miss you, I cannot live without you, I am going out of my mind. I have a new lover, I told him. I am very happy. He doesn't have a wife, he has just me. I am so miserable, he said. I want you back, lover or no lover. Listen, Fawsi, I told him, the only way you can have me back is to divorce the General and marry me in church. Like a little virgin. That way I'll know you really love me. Let me think about it, he said. Take your time. I'm in no hurry. And I shut the phone to avoid more useless bla-bla.

I laughed. I'm in no hurry, either, I said. But are you serious?

It's a roll of the dice. We'll see.

We'll need a wise king Solomon to slice you in half because, have no illusions; I'll never let you go.

She smiled wistfully. You shall grow up, she said. Meanwhile, give me your youth. She rolled over me and slid her tongue in my throat.

Why is Djamila without a man? I asked Monette when we recovered from the second bout.

You liked her? She is nice, isn't she? We used to go to the cinema together regularly before us two got together.

She's very nice, very quiet and seems intelligent.

She's educated, too.

So it's very peculiar that she is working as a seamstress at your atelier.

It's a long story. Want to hear it?

Yes please.

It is partly my life story too.

So much the better.

In 1943, just after the German defeat at El Alamein, I started working as a salesgirl at Hagop Alekian's jewelry store. I was twenty at the time and my family's circumstances none too bright. My father had died a year earlier and I had to work to keep us alive. Hagop fell in love with me almost immediately and wanted to marry me but he was forty and I felt I was too young to take such a step and in any case he was not exactly the dashing fellow a girl at that age dreams about. Well, you know him. Imagine a younger version. Still he was kind and taught me a lot about the business. He had an accountant called Albert Sadek, two years older than me, who had a tiny cubicle at the back of the shop and spent the day there with his bookkeeping and invoices. He was a strange person this Albert. He kept talking about this new religion and how it would change the world and everybody would be happy because there wouldn't be poverty any more. No poverty, no wars, no armies. We were in the

middle of a war, of killing, of poverty and famines, the destruction of cities and he was dreaming of benevolent governments and altruistic citizens. And what religion is that? I asked him. It is called Communism. It is the religion that will wipe all religions. It is a belief that when it enters your blood can make you a martyr and a saint. And it is true, he was quite mad my Albert. He was always penniless, squandering his pay to help friends and acquaintances, the worthy and the unworthy. Helping people left and right without discrimination. You are wondering why I call him my Albert. Because he was terribly handsome and whenever Hagop was not around he called me to his cubicle and kissed me. I could not resist him. We started seeing each other in the evenings, after work, whenever he was free because much of the time he went to meetings, which he never spoke about.

He managed to rent a dingy flat and we became lovers. It was a delirious time in my life. The war atmosphere with the allied soldiers, the general looseness of morals, the cabarets and brothels made for a hallucinatory environment. War and death in the morning and carousing at night with the sirens wailing. But the worst of the war was past, at least for Egypt. I was madly in love with Albert and I think he was with me. It was a magic two years we spent together though I discovered in time that he had short, parallel affairs all the while. Many of those secret meetings, I suspect, were *rendezvous* with other women.

He was arrested and interned in 1945 and I never found out either for what reason or where he was sent. I just waited for him and when he was released a year later Hagop would not take him back and he left without a trace. Without a word to me. During that one single day he came to the shop to ask to be reemployed, he treated me like a stranger. With complete reserve. He was like a zombie. I wondered if he was tortured but it was generally accepted that the British do not torture people. It was a heartbreak, of course, but a minor one because a year of not seeing someone kills something in you, not while he is absent, but when you see him again.

Hagop, meanwhile, kept up pressure. I had a few short-lived affairs but Albert Sadek left me with a taste for exceptional good looks and passion. A passion not only sexual but a passion for life, for one's beliefs, for action, for a whirlwind existence. As both were in short supply in my milieu, I took the conventional option for security and married Hagop. I was a blooming twenty-three. Here, let me show you a picture I have. She stretched her body, opened the drawer of the night table next to her bed brought out a picture, and handed it to me. In those days, she said, there were roving photographers on the streets who used to snap your picture and give you a piece of paper with which to claim it, a day later, from the photographer's shop, if you wanted.

I looked at the black and white picture of her at twenty-three. A fresh, pretty, smiling girl, with brown shoulder-length hair curling at the back, striding energetically on the pavement. She wore a wide-shouldered summer jacket, a very short checkered skirt, high heeled, white summer shoes with straps, and a white bag hanging on her shoulder. She looked obviously tall and the short skirt revealed a terrific pair of legs. Old pictures make me sad. They tell of the mercilessness of time. Especially like now, that showed a woman I loved but did not know at the time of her youth. There is always this sense of loss, this musing of how nice it would have been to have known her then.

Wasn't I pretty? she asked.

Yes, very.

So let me go on...

Just a moment. I kissed her, caressed her hair and she looked at me questioningly.

I wanted to tell you that you were very pretty then and that you are very beautiful now. A blooming forty or is it thirty-five?

Perhaps it is fifty, she said with a smile. Thank you, baby. Shall I go on? Please.

When I married Hagop he was living in a small apartment in town. I made him buy the apartment in Zamalek where we are now. He had a lot of money. Much more than I expected. We crave for money when we don't have it but, let me tell you, money is no substitute for passion. He was kind and caring and I have no complaints because what he lacked were gifts that could not be acquired. You are either born with them or you do not have them. He was not the man for me. I was a passionate woman and one sometimes does not realize one's mistakes until he has fallen in the trap.

A year later Antoun was born and I stopped working at the shop and was occupied full time with him until he started going to kindergarten. After that I had plenty of time on my hands and I continued going to the club in the mornings just as I did when Touny was a baby. I started some tennis and swimming and workouts at the gym but all that did not alleviate my boredom and to make a long story short, within the next few years, I met a few nice men and had a few nice, discreet affairs which raised my morale and made my life palatable. And then, one day, as I was window shopping idly in town, in Kasr-el-Nil, I came across Albert Sadek.

More than a decade and a half had gone by and it was I that recognized him. I could not have missed that face. He was roundabout forty and looked some years older with the few new wrinkles and weathered look imprinted on his face. A new maturity that added to his allure. He was well dressed, striding as usual in a hurry, in my direction. I blocked his way deliberately and looked at him, smiling. He glanced at me annoyed and looked again at my smile and looked and then stared at me for a few seconds. I thought for a moment that it was the same indifference he had shown that last day we met but suddenly he grabbed me in his arms and hugged me and kissed me, laughing.

We entered Lappas, nearby, and sat and over coffees exchanged our news. I told him I had married Hagop and he said, Oh God! and that I had a boy of sixteen. That I didn't work anymore and that I fooled around a little. He was the love and passion of my life, I could not pretend. I wanted him to know. To know I was available. He had married six years ago a girl twelve years younger than him and had a boy of five. About his work, not a word and when I asked he just said, Politics; nothing more. I could get nothing else out of him and I worried because politics, especially the politics I suspected he practiced, were a dangerous game in the days of Abdel Nasser. We talked of old friends and who did this and who did that. When we got up to leave, he kissed me and smiled. All this bla-bla, he said, and I did not tell you the most important thing. What? I asked. That you are as desirable as ever and that I fool around a little, too. Can I have your phone number?

We became lovers again and brought as much passion to our love affair as the first time. We were adults, had children, spouses, obligations and we had to be circumspect because of our marriages but it was, for both of us, a thrilling period of our life. I often asked him why he cheated on his wife. A wife much younger than him, than me. Didn't he love her? I love her, probably more than I love you, was the answer, but you excite me more than she ever will.

I was five glorious years with Albert. Although in my previous love affairs I meticulously covered my tracks, with Albert I turned careless and, in any case, I seemed not to care too much if I were caught out. It was the only thing that gave meaning to my life. Hagop started suspecting something serious was going on. He had

his suspicions for many years, even before Albert, but this time my attitude was irritable and confrontational. In a fight where he exasperated me, I let it out that I saw Albert and that was the last straw for him. He packed and left the house to return to his old digs, which he had kept. We have lived apart since then. In a sense I found my peace and so did little Touny who suffered terribly from the constant quarreling in those last two or three years at home with Hagop. But from then on I had to be both the woman and the man in the house. Well, now, Touny has grown but it was tough in those days. I stopped going to the club since I was not shopping around for transient thrills and, with a girlfriend of mine, went to dressmaking classes because fashion always interested me. I was very good at it and when I finished the course I found this flat and little by little business blossomed.

It was almost the fifth year of our affair when the 1967 six-day war with Israel broke out. By then, like sex in marriage, our affair lost its fire and fury but the embers were still glowing enough to keep us together. We met irregularly every two or three weeks in the pleasant little flat that he kept for his love affairs. Because, knowing him, I suspect he never ceased his womanizing even when he was with me. Especially during the final years.

After the pitiful debacle that Egypt suffered in 67 at the hands of its incompetent leaders and the tiny Jewish state, Abdel Nasser resigned and was brought back by the massive demands and supposedly spontaneous demonstrations organized by the Arab Socialist Union. The government was frantic for excuses to justify the inexcusable, total, disastrous defeat. It interned thousands in concentration camps, mainly from the Moslem Brotherhood and the tiny, banned communist party. In March 1968 they arrested a cell of communists who were supposedly financed by Israel to foment discontent and overthrow the government. I read it in the paper and found Albert's name amongst those arrested. He had not called me for six months and I was worried but I did not call his home even though I had the phone number. There was a trial a year and a half later and five people were condemned to death. Albert was one of them. I phoned his wife and went to see her. I told her I was a friend of his from his past and wanted to help in any way I could. Since then I have been very close to her.

Is she still around? Do you still see her?

Monette smiled. My dear boy, I see her every day. His wife was Djamila.

I was flabbergasted. Good God! So what happened?

We hired a good lawyer but, what the hell; it was an exercise in futility. All our appeals at the military courts were useless. Djamila has an elder sister married in New York and she came and took Adel, the son, to the States to get him out of the way of the drama and heartbreak. He was nearly twelve at the time. Djamila has not seen him since. He must be around seventeen or eighteen by now, still living with the sister in New York. Djamila visited Albert in prison a few times and then he refused to see her in the few months before his execution. I do not know the reason why.

So he was executed?

Yes, he was, my poor Albert. Not yet forty five.

My God! Why doesn't she leave for the States?

The American embassy will not give her a visa because they are aware that her husband was a hardened communist. I offered to pay for the boy's fare to come and visit his mother but she will not risk bringing him here for fear he would not be able to go back. They exchange censored love letters and pictures under Big Brother's watchful eye.

God, what a terrible situation she's in. But you have been very good to her.

Well, perhaps. I am expiating my guilt.

I continued my lazing at the club and the golf pavilion after the useless couple of hours at the research center and my twice-weekly games of tennis with Tony. On the surface, nothing much had changed between us apart of a slightly greater reticence. We never talked of Monette and he never gave an indication that he was aware of our love affair though he must have certainly known about it. He seemed to be very happy with the new steady girlfriend and had stopped the incessant chatter about girls. He was therefore less amusing but was as pleasant and affectionate with me as always.

I saw Djamila often after Monette recounted her story. Asking her to join us for a movie became a regular weekly event and she seemed happy and grateful for these invitations. I paid for the cinema tickets and Monette invariably invited us to dinner in one or another of the better restaurants in town. We never mentioned her predicament nor did I give any indication I was informed of any details of her life. The atmosphere was easy and friendly and with the increasing familiarity Djamila became slightly more talkative but never much more. I had finally understood the cause of that soulful look that occasionally crossed her large expressive eyes. The laugh that ended with a sigh. The black clothes of mourning. Perhaps, even the absence of a man in her life.

A few weeks later, on the warm bed where I shared ecstasy and sensuality and unending passion with Monette, she told me she had a phone call from Fawsi.

Oh, not again!

Oh, yes. He told me he decided to file for divorce from the General. He wrote to his son about it and his son is flying back to Cairo to try and patch up things.

She laughed. Isn't it funny? Our two sons trying and conspiring to keep their families together and Fawsi and me apart? Do you think they shall succeed?

It depends on you two, doesn't it?

Yes. But I think when the glass is broken it does not stick again.

Meaning?

I am finished with Hagop and he is finished with the General.

But will you two get together?

Well, if I had to choose, there is no doubt Fawsi is the better choice. At least with him I can have a little sex. He is my age, good looking, and a man of the world. And we did have a nice time together. Always doing something. I will also go out again, respectably, in society. I miss it, you know. What you and I have together is wonderful but there are other facets of life that a woman like me also needs.

I smiled. These are new confessions, I said.

She kissed me. Oh Freddy, you are young. This thing between us cannot last. It is new for you and exciting but love and passion eventually wear out. An old bird like me should know. You might meet a girl and fall in love and ditch me. And where would that leave me? I have to think about having someone to grow old with.

So you are preparing me for the exit.

She kissed me again. Oh my little darling, don't talk like that. So many things can happen. It might never work out.

Nevertheless, you are telling me, be prepared.

Yes, be prepared. Be prepared for this, too.

She grabbed me by the hair and kissed me avidly, again and again. A vigorous, excited tongue swept my mouth, my teeth, stretched to my throat, set my mind reeling. I held her lovely breasts and haunches, the warm ample flesh, caressed

her belly and her sizzling openings of love that electrified her psyche and there was no return.

Later, I told her, I love you, Monette. I am not angry. I understand.

Yes, I know, she said. This is our talent. Yours and mine.

It was not sudden our separation. It took months and months. It gave me time to digest it. To digest its slow-paced, inexorable approach; its finality. To wonder what it would be like to shake hands with Monette and her husband and exchange polite smiles and lingering, penetrating glances. Meanwhile, she kept Fawsi at arm's length. She kept her word like a woman. No shilly-shallying like a man. She would be his only in church. We continued making love, week in, week out, punctuated by Fawsi's bulletins of progress.

Filing for divorce.

The son rushing in from Canada.

Pleading with his father.

The family council.

The General's demand for money.

The bargaining.

The compromise.

The son's decision to settle in Cairo, enter his father's business, safeguard his interests.

Agreement, finally achieved.

No obstacles left.

Divorce taking its course.

The poetry of life in free verse.

Could he see her now?

No.

I was feeling strange, with a sense of loss but also a sense of freedom. The fickle, faithless male was ever-present in me with secret, repressed hopes. New hopes, new dreams. New eyes, troubled and troubling circled in his brain; raven-black shoulder-length hair. Old problems too, reemerging. The future, the stagnation...the problems Monette had put to sleep with her intoxicating sensuality.

The divorce finally out, Fawsi and son paid a visit to Monette and Tony's home. Fawsi made a formal marriage proposal to Monette, which she accepted. Privately, he asked her to stop seeing me. Not me, specifically; her lover, whom he had never met. He said he did not want to feel a cuckold even before he was married. She laughed and agreed that it was only fair. But, she said, she would not sleep with him until after the church ceremony. When I phoned for our usual appointment she told me, My little Freddy, it's over. Please don't be sad. It is the best time. Because we shall remember each other and the lovely days we spent together, with tenderness. I shall send you a wedding invitation. Will you come?

Of course, Monette.

Thank you my dear. I love you too.

I waited a week for my next move. Not only to think and reconsider the practically non-existent options of my situation but to recover from the melancholy of the abrupt severing of ties with Monette. I was surprised, finally, by how much it affected me though I knew it was coming and had vague but persistent thoughts, hopeful and chancy, for a new romance. I kept thinking of her. Not many women in

her mold. The contradictions: the enduring great love for Albert Sadek, marriage with Hagop for security, a good mother if I were to judge from Tony's love for her, sensual enough to search actively for sex throughout her life, dynamic enough to build up a successful business, apprehensive enough of old age to seek a companion to share it. All with a zest for life, with a lively, outspoken, sociable personality. So what was I for her? Oh, probably another whim, another passing fancy. A face in her crowd of lovers. A last fling with youth, energy, and insatiable urges before the fadeout. And now that she was gone, the usual feeling that I did not appreciate her enough while I had her. That I had taken too lightly something that was precious.

At our next tennis game, Tony told me that Monette was getting married with her old lover. He was hoping she would forget him. And she probably would, he said, but unfortunately Fawsi could not forget her. Tony still could not stomach him though Fawsi had lost his previous airs of superiority after being dismissed by Monette and after having to plead to be taken back and taken back on her terms. His father too was very much upset as he had hoped to reunite with Monette.

He never stopped being in love with her. That's what makes me sad, said Tony. He was not the right age for her and he did not have the looks or the personality to keep her. All he had was money and with that he managed to keep her, precariously at that, for a time. He laughed. Enough to bring me into this world.

And you, how are you getting on? I asked.

With Rose? Oh very nicely. *C'est la vie en rose*. Equations are changing. Mother shall be leaving the house. Father was so upset with her impending marriage he says he shall get married too. At sixty-seven, he must be mad. I didn't even bother to ask with whom. But best of all, Freddy, I decided to get married, as well.

Tony! I don't believe it!

Yes. I can't believe it either, most of the time. I'll give it a try. See how it goes.

Can't you stop being frivolous?

I don't think so. It runs in the family. And you my serious man, what shall you be doing now? It was the first and only oblique reference to my affair with Monette he ever made.

I have something in mind.

Okay, good. I know you won't tell.

I shall if it works out. May I be your best man?

He got up with a gloriously happy smile and embraced me. You are my best man, he said. The very, very best.

I waited for her at a small coffee shop opposite the Khedive building. I ordered a coffee sitting at a table where I could see the building's entrance. The girls finished work at four and started appearing quarter of an hour later hurrying to their various destinations. I remembered some of the faces. Djamila came out in a black coat with another girl. There was a momentary flash of eyes, prominent nose, and white complexion before she turned her back and walked away with the girl, in her characteristic graceful pace. I put some money on the table and ran to the door. The crowds were moderate and I had no difficulty following them ten paces behind. They turned right towards Ramses Street, the main artery running north, where the bus stops were situated. Passed the Mobil station and Alfi Street with the auto spares and greasy, pavements. They walked on the road to avoid the shoppers, the merchandise, and the bicycles of the delivery boys. At the bus stop, the girl said good-bye and immediately boarded a bus. Whew, I thought, bye-bye. That was lucky.

Djamila?

Farid! What a coincidence!

Not a coincidence. I was following you.

Following me? Why?

There is a good film at the Rivoli. East of Eden by Elia Kazan.

Oh lovely. Did you call Monette?

She isn't coming.

A look of surprise and uncertainty crossed her face. Oh Farid ... I don't know..., she said. Here's my bus.

I shall explain, I told her hurriedly. Saturday, 6:30. I shall be waiting for you.

She pushed into the crowd boarding the bus. On the steps she turned round and smiled. Raised my hopes. One smile begets another.

For the rest of the week, one image kept recurring, another would not fade. One set me on imaginary scenarios, the other brought memories and smiles and sexual longing. It is the pastime of the idle to daydream and I was an idler *par excellence* tied to my daily routine of research centre and club, of golf, tennis and swimming in the heated pool. In between the daydreams, the inconsequential activity and the ample time to be wasted, the countdown of days till Saturday also preoccupied me. On Thursday I bought the tickets.

The Rivoli was near my house, on the main street called Shara Fouad. A long avenue, it passed through the better and the lesser districts of Cairo but not the worst. It started at the Opera Square, a square with the Cairo opera, with the shopping centres, with the big department stores, crossed into a poorer section of workshops and *souks* and a few remaining, authentic, inhabited though decrepit buildings of Arab-Islamic architecture from Cairo's Middle Ages. It crossed the Nile into high-class Zamalek and another bridge to the Mohandseen suburb, which was new and developing though not tip-top or classy despite its planned, wide thoroughfares and on to the slums of Bulaq el Dakroun.

My house, a two minute walk away from the Rivoli was on a parallel street to Shara Fouad. It was small and narrow and a *souk* or market as its name, *Souk el Tewfikieh*, implied. A food market with groceries, butchers, greengrocers, fruit and cereal shops as well as merchants for kitchenware. A few years back, cars were able to pass through but now wooden hand carts with diverse merchandise appropriated street and pavement and together with the dense humanity and strewn rubbish obstructed even the circulation of pedestrians. My father's grocery was at one corner of this, once tolerable, street and another central avenue. So despite the appalling deterioration of the neighborhood my parents would not consider moving elsewhere because of the convenience of being two steps from their work. My mother went to the grocery every afternoon partly to help but mainly to while her time away as my father's working hours were long and the only person at home was her dull and taciturn son.

Djamila was on time that Saturday. She smiled when she pinpointed me in the noisy horde. I waved and smiled. She could not have missed the happiness in my eyes. I was elated that she came to our appointment but did not attempt to kiss her as I did when Monette was around. Kissing was for the sophisticated. I was not sure she was that and I did not want to play the debonair and make her feel uncomfortable and defensive. I wanted to play it gently and just told her she looked very attractive, which she was with her light makeup, her well-combed, jet black hair and neat clothes.

She smiled. Not more, not less than the other times, she said.

True, not more, not less but still very attractive.

Thank you.

How's Monette? I asked.

She turned and looked at me to see if I were teasing. She's very well, she said. Why isn't she here with us?

I shall explain Djamila. Shall we go in?

We entered the hall and found our seats as the lights were dimming. This time we saw the newsreels and the cartoons and previews of the coming features, the *prochainements*, which we usually missed with Monette and had an ice in the intermission. We made small talk and little jokes and I was happy that Djamila was in good humor and our easy exchange and familiarity held good even without Monette's presence that previously was the common denominator. I asked her if she could tell the couples dating from the married couples. She laughed and said, Of course, the couples on a date talk and smile. The married couples are silent and glum.

Is there a lesson to be learnt?

It is a fact to be ignored, she said with a smile.

Why? Because no one would get married?

Oh, it's more complicated than that.

The main feature started. It had been shown a few years before but I had missed it and so had Djamila. It made film history and created a film legend, James Dean. During the film I placed my hand on hers but she pulled it away. I leaned towards her and whispered, Why?

She turned and smiled and said, I shall explain.

The film was good, the acting superb and when we left the cinema I invited her to a tiny pizza restaurant around the corner. It was all I could afford. She demurred at first but I insisted and told her there were explanations to be aired and she smiled and accepted. We sat, ordered two pizzas and beer and I asked her if she enjoyed the film.

Very much. It is one of the few times when the film is as good as the novel.

Oh? You have read the novel?

Yes.

In translation?

No. In the original.

You know English?

Yes. I have a B.A. in English literature from Cairo University.

Djamila! I am impressed.

Why?

A seamstress with a B.A. in literature is not exactly commonplace.

Life, sometimes, leads you in paths you would never envisage.

It was the time when Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize. I asked her what she thought of him.

When they asked him if he thought he deserved the Nobel, Steinbeck said he didn't think so. It was not false modesty on his part. I think, much to his credit, he evaluated his work correctly. Nevertheless, he is a great author and a major part of his work describes the hardships and the life of the poor and the quaint nonentities that worked in the fish packing plants in Salinas, California. You must have heard of *The Grapes of Wrath*. It's his most famous novel. Much more so than *East of Eden*.

Yes, though I have not read it.

She smiled. I suppose, between your golf and club activities and your playboy pursuits you have not much time for reading.

I laughed. Is that why you did not let me hold your hand?

It is one third of the reasons.

And the other two thirds?
The second third is Monette. The third third is personal.
Is the third, another man?
Aren't you being a bit indiscreet?
Of course I am. And believe me, it is not my nature. But I do like you. I want to be your friend. I think you are someone very special.
Is that your opening line?
Yes it is. To you, Djamila. Will you give me five minutes to introduce myself? Mr Farid Naguib, if I am not mistaken. Pleased to meet you.
So you know my full name Mrs Djamila Aswad. The pleasure, the happiness, the interest, the trepidation is all mine.
She smiled and I extended my hand over the table and she shook it.
May I proceed with the introduction?
Please do.
To start with I am not wealthy. That is why I brought you to this pizza place instead of one of the classy restaurants where Monette invited us.
Yes? Then we will share the bill.
Will you stop being aggressive? I said. She was smiling. It was a game she started playing. Was she flirting with me? I am not a playboy, I continued, because a playboy with empty pockets is a contradiction in terms. I realize this might disappoint you but it's the truth. I want to start on the right foot with you.
Which brings us to the question, start what?
Is friendship too daring, too *avant garde*, too immoral?
Is that all you want?
Do I discern a note of disappointment? If it is not enough we can up the stakes.
She laughed. Go on, she said.
Secondly, I go to the club every day because I am employed in a research centre that has no research and the little I do does not interest them and the club is the only thing that helps me retain my sanity. And thirdly, with Monette it's all over. She is getting married to Fawsi something or other and she has dropped me as quickly and as easily as she picked me up.
She smiled again. And you are disconsolate.
She was nice to me. I was nice to her. We had good sex together. It is over. It was a shock. I am not devastated because she kept the relationship nicely balanced avoiding sentimentality and mawkishness. In any case it could not last. The age difference was forbidding.
Our age difference is quite big as well.
I am glad you are considering the pros and cons of our friendship, my sweet Djamila.
Don't make assumptions that are not there, she said and laughed.
So can you tell me what the third reason for not wanting me to hold your hand is? I believe I dispelled your other two reservations.
Because I believe you have been frank with me I shall tell you a few things. First of all, there is no man in my life. Well, there is. My son. He is seventeen and I have not seen him in over five years. He lives with my sister in New York and my one objective in life is to join him there. To see my son again. And then, without going into details or discussing it, I have to tell you that I have had some quite horrible experiences in my life and I have no desire, at least for the moment, to get involved with a man.

Monette told me a few things about you and I understand and sympathize with your wish. I respect it and I promise never to be overbearing or to become a pest.

It would be easier if you realized I am not available.

Next week there's Lawrence of Arabia at the Metro. Saturday, 6:30. I'll be at the door with two tickets waiting for you.

She smiled. We'll see, she said.

You like to keep me dangling. Don't you know it only increases my interest?

I have to think about it.

As you like. I shall be there waiting for you.

We changed the subject and talked of different things and the conversation flowed easily during the meal. Since there were only two of us, Djamila talked much more than when Monette was there. I was getting used to her beauty that was strange and incorporated features that were uneven but created an overall blend that was arresting and, with time, seemed increasingly attractive. The eyes that were strong, the smile pleasant, and in conversation, often teasing with an inoffensive irony, the laugh silent and private and the voice tinged with the slight foreignness of the Lebanese accent. An hour later I walked her to the bus station which was close by and we waited for the bus to Daher where she lived alone.

Thank you, Farid, for a very pleasant evening, she told me as the bus arrived.

Give Monette my love. I think she will be happy we went to the cinema together. Thank you Djamila for coming. I was impatient all last week to see you and shall be in agony waiting for Saturday.

She laughed and waved and the bus took her away.

My, my, what a secretive friend I have, said Tony at our next tennis game. But you did not fool me. Mother told me, of course, but I was certain it was Djamila all along.

For Heaven's sake Tony, we only went to the cinema.

It's a good start, my boy. She gave me the cold shoulder.

Well, the shoulder she is giving me is not much warmer. I promised I would tell you if I succeeded and I am a long way off. Things don't look too promising.

Nonsense. Only a gentleman like you can capture her heart. A little patience, a little perseverance should do the job. What is she like?

Intelligent and pleasant enough but something's eating her. And your Rosie?

He let out a chuckle. Not very talkative but pretty and sexy and she wants it all the time. Just what I need.

I was hoping she would change you but it seems you have found your pair.

Yes. Isn't that wonderful? You must meet her sometime.

Bring her for a game of tennis.

She doesn't like sports. Well, except one, that is.

You really are incorrigible.

I did not see her in the madding crowd that was milling at the Cinema Metro entrance and spilling on the street creating a strident cacophony of car horns. She pulled my arm and I turned round and saw her familiar face and lovely smile. Impulsively, I uttered her name, Djamila, and kissed her and she kissed me back. I am so happy you came, I said and I could see my pleasure reciprocated in her smile and her eyes. I took her by the arm and we pushed our way to the entrance of the cinema. Inside we were in a sane world once again. We looked at each other to replenish the void of a week and we smiled and slowly climbed the stairway to the upper tier where our seats were. The film was long and the cinema dispensed with the newsreels and cartoons and the main feature started as soon as the lights went out. People kept

coming in, noisy and vexing, but the screen was huge and the sound loud and overcame the commotion to some extent until the seats were packed and the only sound was the intermittent coughing of the audience. The music, the beautiful scenery of the desert took us to an exotic world of the past, of legend and adventure, of bravery and ideals. There was an intermission half way. I got up and bought two ices.

How was your week, Djamila?

Much the same. Long and lonely. I write to Adel. Read a little and I go to bed early.

Do you watch television?

Not much though I switch it on as soon as I get home. It keeps me company. As if another person is with me in the house. How was your week?

Long and lonely, too. I could not wait to see you. She smiled and squeezed my hand. I leaned towards her and whispered, Sometimes the squeezing of hands is more thrilling than an orgasm.

She was startled and turned round abruptly to look at me and then she smiled. I never thought of it this way, she said.

And the perfume you are wearing is very nice.

Thank you, she said. I thought you might like it.

The second part of the film started and it was exhilarating and absorbing but not enough to make me stop thinking about Djamila and her sudden change. I held her hand and she held mine and we turned and smiled at each other now and then. A change like an extension of that second glance and smile she gave me at the atelier that first day I saw her and fell in love with her. I had this strange conviction that came and stuck in my mind. That I fell in love with her that day at first sight. It seemed so true and credible; so definite, however much I ridiculed it with my logic.

Directly opposite the Metro was a restaurant run by a Greek lady. It was reasonably priced with tasty home cooking. Tony had taken me there several times and I suggested it to Djamila when we left the cinema.

Only if I share the bill, she said.

I can manage, Djamila.

I insist, if we are to go out together.

We sat at a corner table. I looked at her. Something happened. I did not care what. I was happy. I needed no explanations. The lonely week, the little companionship we shared, my sincerity, must have changed her mind. We ordered our food and talked of the wonderful film and the accomplished acting, of the British versus the crumbling Ottoman Empire. She talked to me about T.E. Lawrence and The Seven Pillars of Wisdom. Did I read it? No, I didn't have the time, what with my flirting all the pretty girls at the club. A smile. Her smile, again and again. I couldn't get enough of it. And conversation that did not falter.

We shared the bill and I walked her to the bus station.

Tomorrow is Sunday, I told her. I'll meet you here at ten. We can take the bus and spend the day at the pyramids.

Oh, I don't know Farid...

It's better than an empty house with a blabbering TV.

I don't want to raise your expectations.

Of a pleasant day together?

She smiled. You know what I mean. Of a romantic attachment I am not ready for.

What about a comfortable friendship?

One thing leads to another.

Hopefully, I said and smiled. But if it does, I promise it will only be with your consent. It will be something you shall want as well. Meanwhile, the weather is fine. Let us enjoy the winter sunshine with the Pharaohs, with Isis and Osiris, with talk of Faulkner and Mahfouz, with each other. I shall be here at ten, waiting for you.

You are twisting my arm.

Gently, I hope, so you can wrest it away if you want.

That's why it is so difficult.

A bus screeched to a stop. It's mine, she said. Good night, Farid.

Good night Djamila. See you tomorrow.

She was on time. She looked lovely. The wide forehead, the prominent cheekbones, the strong eyes drew me like a magnet. As did the smile, the air of happiness. The black coat was there, of course, and black trousers but beneath, a dark red pullover, a touch of makeup. She was inching out of mourning. One could tell. Why did it take so long? We took the bus to Midan el Tahrir and from there the bus for the pyramids. An empty seat for two in the first class section and a noisy, stop-and-go journey along the familiar landmarks. The Nile, two bridges, one long and flat, one short and humped, the Botanical Gardens, the Cairo University, the Zoo. Passengers getting on and off at every stop. Then the flat, green fields encroached by the monster, the land-gobbling, expanding city, dissected by the arrow-straight highway to the pyramid plateau.

Sitting, arms and legs touching, comfortably and comforting, a dawning of intimacy, chatting, looking at the hamlets, the date palm trees, the little overworked donkeys and placid, munching buffaloes, commenting and pointing at a thousand things we had seen before but hardly noticed, until the great pyramid of Cheops loomed into view and sent a shiver down our spine because it was stupendous, because we were together and our thrill was multiplied by two.

We left the bus, walked the uphill gradient to the plateau leaving behind the horses and donkeys and camels for hire, the smell of their excrement and their badgering owners. We walked to the great pyramid of Cheops and again for the hundredth but certainly not the last time were aghast at its size. Caressed the stones chiseled by armies of human beings five thousand years ago to entomb and give eternal life to one man. We sat for a while a few tiers up, on the granite blocks, to contemplate man's terror of death, the vast ignorance of his existence and of his universe: the first unavoidable, the second unknowable.

What do the pyramids tell you, Djamila?

She smiled and thought for a few seconds. They remind me of the futility of life because even a stupendous structure such as this did not serve a purpose. It is a vast undertaking based on false premises, on ignorance, on a warped and obsessed imagination. They are the most gigantic tombs ever built yet they change nothing. Our corpses would not know the difference. They remind me of the cruelty of man, the Pharaoh's towards his subjects but also of the cruelty we find in our midst. Of a person you might meet in your path, a chance encounter with a human beast. Of the instinct to survive but not unconditionally. If you are hurt, humiliated, strike back even at the risk of your life. Life without self respect is a hell not worth living. It will haunt you forever. I know. I have experienced it. And you?

For a moment I wondered what or whom she was referring to. I knew very little about her life. For me, I said, like any cemetery, they tell me that there are no answers to the big questions of life, that time is short and not to be wasted. Unfortunately, I am not heeding their message. I am ignoring their warning. But this

is the fate and flaw of the human being, the narrowness of his vision. His sole preoccupation with the trivial.

Like spending your time at the club, flirting with pretty girls? she said with a smile.

Yes. If it means nothing. If it is just killing time. But being happy is not trivial; it is not wasting your life. It is man's only redemption.

You remind me of Albert, my husband. He was a sort of home-spun philosopher. Always talking of human happiness through equality and I was constantly reminding him of its impossibility because of our human nature, because of the way we are made. And you, Farid, when are you happy?

I am happy now.

She smiled. And were you happy with Monette?

Yes. But I am happier now. Do you know why?

Please, don't go on. We are entering fields I do not want to tread.

Then get up let's go for a walk. Let us tread in the sand.

We walked a lot that day. Talked and walked around the pyramids and the Sphinx and in the desert with galloping horses in the distance and flat-footed, swaying camels. With the sunshine, the pure, desert breeze and the blue skies of the Pharaohs. With the tourists wearing the Bedouin headdress, taking snapshots, pretending they were El Aurence. I held her hand sometimes when we were alone and she did not pull away but did not draw closer. A wall most decidedly between us; friendly and pleasant as far as walls go but still defining our boundaries.

On our way down we visited the Mena House Hotel, a landmark in Egypt's recent history with the nice clean toilets we needed. Coming out, I pinched my face with mock disapproval and told Djamila that the restaurant here was not quite tip-top. That I knew of a better place and we walked further down the road to a grocer and had two large, delicious, fresh bread sandwiches with white feta cheese and olives and a coke for dessert. She could not imagine Djamila said with a smile, that the meal at the Mena House could have been half as good. It was about four by then and the afternoon sunshine was giving way to the evening chill. We took the bus to town and at Midan el Tahrir she switched to the one for Daher refusing my offer to accompany her.

It was a lovely day for me, Djamila. Thank you for coming.

Unexpectedly, she kissed me. Thank you, Farid. I enjoyed it too. This is my phone number. Please be careful what you say when you call. It may be tapped. She gave me a scrap of paper which she fished out of her bag. She must have written it earlier, at home.

So I have passed the test? I said.

So far, she said and smiled as she climbed onto the bus.

The next day at four I waited for her at the coffee shop opposite the Khedive building. I needed to see her. I missed her all through that day. I missed her as soon as I left her the day before, in fact. I thought about her and questions kept circling my mind. I wondered if her behavior was a normal reaction to the horrific ending of her marriage, to the temporary loss of her son. Did she feel that a new life, a renewed quest for happiness would be a betrayal towards her executed husband? That this pursuit would mean the neglect of her son and that she would be unable to overcome the guilt this happiness would engender? Would some minor detail I did not know provide an explanation? And why did I care so much? Tony gave her up as a bad job. But he was faced with a blunt refusal whereas the reluctance I faced in her response

had small increments of diminution and an ensuing acceptance of my person, with each consecutive meeting.

I felt tied to her because of her story, even because of my relationship with Monette and the strange link of their lives through the same man. And that I, another man, another link to their chain was repeating a similar move again, from the one to the other. All this, apart from the fact that I found in her a beauty that perhaps was not there, a mixture of vulnerability, hopelessness, and strength that intrigued me. That made me eager to protect her even as she was trying to protect herself from me. From another possible happiness. I wanted to hold her and kiss her, to tell her that she was still young and the little pleasure she could yet wring from this world should not be thrown away. That I longed to touch her and give and take from her body the love I already felt.

She came out a little before five. Most of the girls had gone by and she came out alone. I rushed out and called her. Farid! She exclaimed with surprise, a smile of pleasure followed by a frown. Oh, Farid, this won't do. You are complicating my life. I can only take emotions and companionship in small doses. Too much and I shall lose my balance.

Just for a coffee, Djamila. Ten minutes. I had to see you.

Why? Did something happen?

Yes. Not now. There's a question I want to ask you.

We walked to *A l'Americaine* a little further down on Emad el Dine Street, sat at a table and ordered two coffees.

Well?

Remember that time I came to the atelier with Tony?

Yes. What about it?

Monette and Tony left the room for a moment and I was standing alone, uneasily, and you glanced at me, turned to your work and almost immediately looked up again and smiled at me. Why?

She laughed. Searching for hidden meanings where there are none?

Yes. Because I am convinced I fell in love with you at just that moment.

There! Now you know.

She laughed again. You have a lively imagination, my little dreamer. I looked at you, looked away, I was curious and looked again and found a face I could smile at. Or rather that drew my smile. Was that why you wanted to see me?

Yes, that's why. Do you understand?

How was your day today?

I smiled and held her hand. So you do understand! I had no doubt, Djamila, that you would change the subject. My day was okay. Ordinary. Research centre for an hour, the club, golf, flirting with pretty girls. Waiting for time to pass so I could see you.

There's another terrific film on at the Diana. The War and Peace. We can see it on Saturday.

How about tomorrow? And then you can talk to me about Leo Tolstoy on Sunday.

Give me a break.

Give *me* a break!

Okay. After tomorrow.

I'll think about it.

She laughed. Giving me back some of my own medicine?

I bought two tickets for that coming Wednesday and I did not see her the following day. I called her on the phone to let her know and her first question was, Why didn't you come today?

To give you a break, Djamila. To give you breathing space.

I missed you, though.

So did I. Terribly.

It started in fits and starts but we fell into a routine of seeing each other daily for coffee and going to the cinema on Saturdays and any other weekday that was convenient. Sunday was our day out of the city. The Botanical gardens, the Zoo, the Barrages which were the first large dams of the Nile built by Mohammed Ali, the tombs and step pyramids at Saqqara, the Japanese gardens at Helwan, the Citadel, old Cairo with its superb mosques, and the Coptic museum and antiquities.

After a couple months we were running out of places and I was running out of patience. I was in love with Djamila and she seemed to be in love with me although sometimes doubts would poison my mind. I did not know how long a love between two adults could last without any sexual contact. I asked her this question often and she would answer that if I truly loved her I would be patient. That she could not indulge in sex at the moment. That she had gone through a terrible nightmare and she was working it out of her system little by little. With our love, the lovely days we had together these last few months, the companionship, the holding of hands, the hugging and the kissing we stole in secluded places and moments. Farid, she told me, if I have any hope at all to recover it is with you. Please be patient.

But did anything else happen apart from the terrible fate of your husband? I asked her.

One day I shall tell you my story.

Why not now?

I can't. I am sorry, Farid, I love you and I trust you but give me time.

Despite everything she filled my life. She dominated my thoughts and I could not envisage my life without her. The pretty little girls at the club were good for jokes and to pretend I flirted with them, for laughs. They would have meant nothing to me even if I could afford them. My routine continued as it was but the club was now a place of exercise and not a means to keep me going in my emptiness. I was not empty. I was filled to capacity with Djamila. I had her soul and she had mine. I saw her body as she came to me dressed with clothes that were already changing from black to less somber colors and imagined her naked in my bed, detail by detail, as my gaze roamed from her familiar face to her unfamiliar, hidden parts that I craved to touch and kiss. One day I asked her, How much longer?

Oh, Farid, she said, if you cannot wait, find yourself another Monette at the club. I am sure they are not lacking. I shall understand. We shall still be friends because I can hardly conceive losing you. We were alone and I kissed her on her mouth and caressed her breasts. Her tongue was eager and passionate. Her breath quickened. I don't understand, I said and caressed her face and hair. Is it easier for you to send me away than to join me in an act of love that will bind us even more? She looked at me with that soulful look that had almost extinguished little by little in the months we were together. If you knew how I feel about you, you would love me more for uttering this suggestion.

A few months went by, sweetly, companionably even passionately despite the absence of physical fulfillment. Spring was in the air with the khamsins, the hot winds and desert dust before the pleasant month of April and the increasing warmth of May. I sensed a growing desire in Djamila for caresses and kisses. A greater tenderness and

need for tactile contact. She held my hand and caressed it and surprised me by kissing it every now and then. She was less reluctant to externalize her feelings. I took her one Saturday afternoon to the club racetrack to see the races and I pointed at the horses at the starting line, prancing, excited and eager to be off. I told her they reminded me of us.

Are we at the starting line Djamila?

She smiled. No, she said. The race started, the spectators cheered, the noise grew in intensity. She turned to me. We are still racing, she said.

Yes, but where?

Wait, she said. She looked intensely at the horses. The shouting became deafening as they approached the finishing post. She said something to me. I did not hear.

What? I asked. What?

There, she said pointing at the finishing line as the winners were approaching. There. That's where we are.

I continued my sports at the club and my tennis with Tony. He asked Rosie to come to the club to get acquainted with their best man and we met one afternoon. Not for tennis. I do not think he wanted her to see his game. Just to meet me, his friend and brother. She was a pretty, lively girl with a perfect body, dressed in a short skirt and high heels, which out of regard for Tony she should have avoided as she was already slightly taller than him. She had dyed blond hair, a pert, perfectly made up, smiling face on a long neck on slightly wide shoulders that led the eye to her wonderful breasts and arms and ended at the extraordinarily well shaped legs. A piece of Turkish delight for my dear, little barrel Tony. We shook hands. She told me she was so happy to meet me because Tony loved me and I said the feelings were mutual and ancient and we sat and talked for a while at the bar over a beer. Well, Tony did most of the talking and most of it as crazy as usual.

I have to have your okay, Freddy, because I'm thinking of marrying her. I have not yet decided for sure but she seems to be the one. As far as looks are concerned, she is obviously above my class but at least our children if they are half way between, they shall be reasonably good looking. I don't want my offspring looking like me. He looked at Rosie and smiled and then turned to me. There are many things that will make this a stable marriage. Rosie loves sex and loves spending money. Aren't these things basic? Did you know that short plump people are very sexy, Freddy? Rosie does. Don't you, my love? Rosie giggled. So as far as that goes, I satisfy the requirements: I can't get enough of her and I have plenty of money. Anything else Freddy?

Well... I don't know...? I started cautiously.

God, I don't want a treatise. Just something I might have overlooked.

We both laughed. No Tony, I think you have the main issues covered.

And then, anyway, if we don't get along, we can always divorce. I mean, you never know with these broads. Rosie is just wonderful with me, I have to admit, but she might be on her best behavior to get me hooked and after marriage might turn out a little shrew.

I looked at Rosie. She was smiling with a perfect set of teeth. I hope, I told her, you have learned not to take him seriously.

How else would we get along? she said.

So do we have your approval? Tony asked.

Wholeheartedly, I said. You are a lucky man, Tony and, even if it doesn't sound sane, you are lucky, too, Rosie.

At our next tennis game, Tony asked me what I thought of her. Quite a dish, Tony, I answered. And very, very sweet. Unlike the other hens in the coop where you played the cock.

But I suppose you wouldn't change her with Djamila, though, of course, I wouldn't change her for Djamila either.

You come up with the most bizarre statements.

How are you getting on, by the way?

Okay.

Boy! Not that I expected anything more. By the way, mother is getting married in two weeks' time. My father's in a terrible state. He was hoping things would not work out but everything is more or less ready, their new home and all.

Djamila gave me the invitation a few days later. There would be a reception after the wedding at the Tamerina.

You are invited, of course? Aren't you?

Yes.

Wonderful. At last I shall dance with you.

I haven't decided on the reception yet.

Please, Djamila.

She smiled. I'll think about it, she said.

The wedding took place at the Syrian Orthodox church in Daher. Not too many people were there. Just close friends of the couple and the non-aggrieved members of both families, which meant Hagop and the General were not there and perhaps a few of their solidary allies. I dressed up in a light summer suit as the weather was already warm and took the bus to Daher looking definitely out of place in it. Djamila walked to the church from her house which was a ten minute walk away. She had a new suit made for the occasion and what with her makeup and well combed hair looked gorgeous. The groom was at the door and I peered at him with interest. He was a large man, imposing and plump with a pleasant, slightly pudgy face. I shook his hand and wished him happiness.

I am Tony's friend and a friend of the family, I said.

He was hearty and obviously did not for a moment suspect I was the reason for this marriage. Well, at least, an inadvertent catalyst. Rosie arrived a little later, flashy and glamorous, and I introduced her to Djamila. We stuck together and chatted until Monette arrived in a limousine with Tony who was to give her away. Monette was regal in her bearing, her white, ornate wedding outfit and elaborate hairdo and veil. She was happy, she was smiling. She had secured her old age and had given me Djamila. The ceremony was long and tedious and I made fun of the pagan ritual of psalms and incense and the comings and goings of the priests: comments to pass the time. When it was over, we filed to congratulate the newlyweds and Monette hugged me and thanked me for coming. I felt the breasts that thrilled me, on my chest, and was surprised at my complete indifference. Another woman had bewitched me.

The newlyweds left in the limousine and we went to the Tamerina with Tony who had parked his car outside the church earlier that evening. I sat in the rear with Djamila and held her hand. Tony was subdued, not his usual self. I tried to make conversation and told them how lovely Monette looked. Brides always seem to be heavenly on this occasion.

Rosie, I hope the next wedding we shall go to shall be yours. Your best man is on standby. She turned round and smiled. And Djamila's after that.

Tony laughed. Is that a proposal, Freddy?

Our case is more complicated, I said, but we are working at it. I am working at it, that is. Djamila is still considering. Djamila pinched my arm. I looked at her. She smiled, put my hand to her lips and kissed it. A message I did not understand but whose tenderness I loved.

At the Tamerina we were placed, thankfully, at the same table with Tony. An orchestra was playing and a young Greek singer called Tracy was singing wonderfully the hits of the day. The romantic slows I dreamt of dancing with Djamila. After a few drinks Tony's humor seemed to improve and he was slowly regaining his outrageous self.

Why the long face, before? I asked him.

I just cannot stomach him, he answered.

Well, it's over and you can do nothing about it. Don't be a spoil sport. Let's get up and dance.

I took a reluctant Djamila by the hand and we went to the dance floor where a few couples were already indulging in this public, civilized, musically assisted, swaying embrace called dancing. I smiled at my love.

You did not think you would escape me, did you, my Cleopatra? I told her. I held her in my arms, her perfume permeating my lungs, my brain, inventing new, olfactory dimensions in sensuality. I love your smell. I love your breath, warm and moist, I told her. You like to torture me. She smiled and I kissed her lightly on the lips. She kissed me back. Yes, you like to torture me. To give me hints of paradise and refuse me entry. I pulled her tightly on me and her small breasts, her hips, her belly and legs touched and rubbed on by body, my senses and my imagination. We swayed dreamily with our love, with the music, with Tracy's dreamy trilling.

And then, suddenly, the wedding march and clapping. Monette and Fawsi arrived and the gathering became boisterous with shouts and wishes and Monette's lively responses and jokes and laughs. Glasses of champagne were offered and the newlyweds went from table to table to clink glasses and exchange a few words with their guests. Then the buffet was opened and later the white wedding cake cut and served, Monette and Fawsi feeding each other and Tony saying, Oh God! Finally the bustle settled down, the dancing resumed with the newlyweds taking a turn on their own with a spotlight on them. Tracy's magic voice revived their romance that perhaps had faded for a while and was entering its final stage, a temporary warming up before the death rattle of passion and the birth of companionship and a conjugal routine: the security of old age. The show ended with applause. The indefatigable Monette went around getting the men to dance with her. I had my turn with the smiling bride in white and held the tall, ample body that had given me so much pleasure, occult knowledge, and sensuous experience. We now exchanged what remained: the genuine, asexual tenderness of past lovers.

I returned to our table and pulled a smiling Djamila to the dance floor again. I held her in my arms, breathed in her smell and looked into a pair of piercing eyes that could turn tender and forlorn; like now. She held me tightly. She must love me. I was not sure. Perhaps it was her loneliness I assuaged. Nothing more. We danced for a while in a world of our own. No one else was around. Just a void and music and the magic voice of Tracy.

Do you believe I love you, Djamila? That it's not just sex? What are you hiding from me? She kissed me on the lips and I pushed my tongue in her mouth and her tongue told me she loved me, again and again. That she needed me; that she was aroused just like I was.

Farid, she said, will you stay with me tonight?

I was startled. I looked at her lovely eyes. Are you sure?

Yes, she said. Almost a plea.

I'll think about it, my love, I said and she smiled. We kissed again and again, oblivious to the people dancing around us. We left soon after. It was past one. The party was in full swing. Tony told us to stick around so we would leave together and then he smiled.

Okay, okay, I understand. Wow! You opened our appetite. Didn't they Rosie? Unfortunately we have to stick around for a while.

We said good-bye to Monette and Fawsi and wished them happiness. Took a cab to Daher and held hands in comfortable silence, our hearts beating in anticipation, our temperature rising and our love overflowing.

Remember the races? Djamila asked.

Yes, I said. It was a thrilling, wonderful event, wasn't it?

Yes, she said, and today we won the race.

Up the stairs we went to the first floor of an old, slightly rundown building in a narrow side street. Djamila unlocked the door, switched on the lights and we entered a dowdy sitting room. Not much of a house, she said.

It's beautiful, I said and she laughed.

This was our bedroom and this small room was Adel's. Bathroom, kitchen, and wrenching memories.

I held her and kissed her. We shall alleviate them and enrich them.

No, Farid, I do not want to alleviate them. I do not want to forget. That's why it took me so long to accept you. I took you in little by little so I would not be swept off my feet. So I would not forget. A woman my age has a past and sometimes it is a past she does not want to forget. Can you accept that?

We kissed for a long time standing up and felt our passion rising. I love you Djamila. Being in love with you is accepting you totally. What I know and what I don't.

She took my hand and led me to the bedroom. Please, lead me back to life gently, she said caressing my hair, looking into my eyes. She switched off the light and lit an *abat-jour* on the night table. She started undressing. Take off your clothes and lie on the bed, she said. I undressed and lay on the bed. She came to me naked. A lovely, slight, perfectly proportioned body. I yearned to caress the exquisite breasts, shapely legs, the hair between, the hidden opening of life. I waited. She sat looking at me. Farid, she said, this first time, I must take the initiative. I have been abused and it is my way to fight back, to recover, a way to heal my hysteria. Please, do not move. Let me caress you. Let me get used to your body. What a wonderful, muscular body you have. I did not know you were an Adonis.

She caressed my chest, my arms, my belly and my legs. She held my erect penis firmly, my testicles, pulled back the foreskin attaining my total exposure and vulnerability and then bent to kiss me. Again and again her tongue entered my mouth, eager and demanding. After every lingering kiss, a searching look, a smile. I reached for the two suspended, delicious breasts and held the nipples. She straddled me and lowered herself on me. I entered a warm, moist, silky paradise and we were off with movement, moans and frenzied love poetry from the depths of our souls, with whirlpool kisses and volcanic orgasms.

We did not rest for long. My darling, Farid, she said, I am grateful to you for being patient and gentle. For bringing meaning to my life once more. I thought I would never be able to love a man again.

Why, Djamila? Whatever your nightmares, everything has an end and life goes on.

No, Farid, I cannot forget. I do not want to forget. I did not think I could be happy again without guilt. And I am, thanks to you. But to be free of guilt I must not give up the past.

I kissed her mouth and she was ready again for my longing. It was my turn to explore her and I drank the secrets of her femininity like the heady nectar of the Gods. I was intoxicated with passion and sensuality for her delicate body and troubled soul and through my mouth, my hands and body, like an electric current, they flowed into her. We were drugged for a while after our second orgasm and then she caressed my face and hair.

Do you want to sleep, my love? she asked.

No, my darling. I cannot waste so much happiness with sleep.

What shall we do then?

Talk to me, Djamila. Talk to me about literature, which you love and talk about so beautifully. I love to hear you talk of books and authors and ideas. Then I can tell you all about rocks and soils and minerals. About chemical reactions and soon enough it will be time to go back to human chemistry and human chemical reactions.

She laughed. Choose an author, she said.

Naguib Mahfouz.

Why?

Because I have read some of his books and he writes so beautifully about our country. About the poor, the troubled and the hopeless of this country, our Egypt.

Shall I tell you a story about our country? A story he might well have written? It is a story of a girl. My friend from university.

I'd love to hear it.

It's rather long.

We have all night, my darling. And then, I said with a smile and kissed her, we can always have an intermission to freshen up.

Hardly to freshen up, I would say.

Okay, then. To relax if the tension becomes persistent.

She laughed again and was thoughtful for a moment.

I met Rania on the very first day I went to university. I felt rather lost that first day in the crowds of boisterous students, the noise and incessant movement, while trying to find my way to the lecture hall in the labyrinth of corridors. Finally, I found it and sat next to a girl and we started chatting as we waited for the lecturer. We had exactly the same program and so we stuck together all through that day and it was the start of a close friendship that endures up till now. In time, we found we had the same ideas, affinities, and temperament. She was Christian like me and that tied us even more closely though, at the time, religion was not as divisive an issue as it is today. We studied together, visited each other's home and had many discussions on the Egyptian woman and her oppression in our society. She lived with her parents in Heliopolis just like I lived with mine in Daher. She was a lively girl and, like me, something of a rebel. Well, as much as one could be in those days of restricted freedom and the strict separation of the sexes. Still we were interested in boys and were not above flirting with them light-heartedly and secretly going to parties, each providing the alibi for the other. Eventually we met two boys and became attached and went to the odd cinema as a foursome, sitting at the last row of the upper tier and exchanging a furtive kiss now and then.

It was a year before the revolution and the country was in upheaval, what with the '48 war with Israel and Egypt's humiliating defeat, the student body was in turmoil with almost daily street demonstrations. Our two boys were involved in student activism and it was the students at the time that constituted the most vociferous part of the opposition to the regime. We went with them regularly to secret meetings where the agitators planned their moves and the excitement of the illicit exhilarated us.

In those meetings we met a dashing, handsome young man called William. He was not a student. He was much older than most of us and helped us organize and coordinate the moves of different cells of dissenters. We met him again and again in those meetings of student agitators. He was always there, planning the demonstrations and inciting the students to protest against this and that injustice and recruiting them to his cause. He was said to be a communist and this had terrible connotations the worst of which was its atheism. However I found that most of what he said was logical and I liked his idealism, which, in any case, is the virtue of youth.

William was attracted to Rania and Rania was swept completely off her feet. She fell in love with him and would talk to me of nothing else. She slackened in her studies, broke up with her boyfriend and started going out with William. Soon they became a steady couple and eventually she confessed to me that they became lovers, which was an unthinkable audacity in those days when virginity before marriage was non-negotiable. A year later he proposed to her and her parents gave their blessing on condition that her marriage would not hinder her from completing the remaining two years of study and getting her degree. Inevitably with Rania's marriage we drifted apart but we never stopped communicating and our friendship never flagged. We saw each other more or less regularly at college for the next two years and kept in touch even after we graduated. In the meantime, I also broke up with the boy I was going out with and married Albert Sadek but this is another story.

William, at that time, was working part-time at three or four small businesses as an accountant, keeping their books and the money was not much but it kept the couple going. This arrangement gave him the freedom to continue his political activism. It was a happy time for them and after she got her degree she fell pregnant. They both wanted a child and she thought this wonderful happiness would last forever.

She also thought their child's birth would bring them even closer together but the opposite happened. She was restricted much more in her movements having to take care of the baby boy and they were together much less than before. She could no longer go with him to his political meetings which interested her and they saw each other fleetingly late at night and early in the mornings before he left the house. Meanwhile the revolution had taken place, first with Mohamed Naguib at the helm, then Abdel Nasser. William hoped that a new political tolerance would come about, the old corruption would be eliminated and social justice would prevail but an implacable dictatorship was established instead. A couple of years later, Abdel Nasser's attempted assassination occurred in Alexandria, which was blamed on the Moslem Brotherhood and the communists. The situation became precarious for, amongst others, all known and reputed communists. Rania begged William to give up his political activities but he seemed to revel in danger travelling up and down the country promoting his party and beliefs.

At about that time, Rania started suspecting that William was having affairs with other women. He had the reputation of a womanizer even when they were courting but he seemed so in love with her that she disregarded the rumors. There was

nothing specific to make her think he was having extra-marital dalliances but she felt it in her bones. There were frequent all-night absences, a falling off of his sexual desire for her and sometimes he arrived very late at night with the barely perceptible smells of another woman on him. However, she usually convinced herself that her nose was playing tricks on her because he was kind with her and tender with the child and she ascribed her suspicions to boredom and her warped imagination.

The years went by. Rania's mother died and a year later her father leaving them a tiny sum of money, which they did not really need and left it in the bank for an emergency. William somehow had more money in his pockets though his work habits did not change. He just changed employers occasionally, always keeping his part-time status with three or four small businesses. When the boy went to school, Rania started looking for a job and was eventually employed as an assistant librarian at the American University at Tahrir Square. She was happy because she loved books and liked the milieu of young people. Her son was growing up and he inherited his father's good looks. They sent him to an expensive private school, the English Mission College at Zeitoun. He was their pride and joy and only capital. He kept them together and united after ten years of gradual wear and tear in a marriage where infidelity or even suspected infidelity poisoned it. Despite a lack of concrete proof, Rania was convinced that William had a string of consecutive love affairs. He was polite and even tender with her in an abstract and casual manner but rarely approached her in bed. On the other hand he doted on his son. There was not a whim of his he would not satisfy.

Then catastrophe struck. A year after the 1967 defeat of Egypt at the hands of tiny Israel, William was arrested for high treason and jailed out of reach of his family or lawyer. For many months he was interrogated and probably tortured and then a trial was held in a military court, *in camera*, and he was condemned to death. You can imagine the small family's state. The boy stopped eating, sleeping and studying. He refused to go to school. Rania had a married sister in the States and she asked her to come and take the boy away. The parting was heart rending beyond description or conception but Rania hardened her heart and sent her boy away. A former girlfriend of William's appeared at that point and helped Rania both financially and practically by taking her to high-powered lawyers but the appeal to the sentence was rejected and the day of execution was set a month hence.

Rania had not seen her husband since his arrest. She went to the high-security prison in Tourah repeatedly but was not allowed to see him. Persons condemned to death have no rights. They are at the mercy and whims of the prison Governor. She went and asked to see him. She had to bribe her way at every step. She finally reached the God-General dressed in the black police uniform with swords and stars on the shoulders showing his rank. He told her to sit down and wait on a chair in his office lounge. He was a large, plump man in his fifties with a moustache. Not ugly; on the contrary; he had a swarthy, pleasant-looking but arrogant face. He was conscious of his power inside and out of the prison. A bully. She could tell by the way he treated his underlings. He kept her waiting from nine till four in the afternoon. They were alone in his office.

Do you know, he told her, that you are not allowed to see your husband? Seven hours for this information. Your Excellency, he will be executed in a month. We have lived fifteen years together. We have a son. Am I not allowed to see him to bid him farewell, to show him I care, that I love him, that I am heartbroken? I did not make the rules, he said, I follow them. Please your Excellency, I beg you, can I not see him now for just a moment? He went behind her chair. He caressed her hair and

her shoulders and his hands reached her breasts. Tomorrow is Friday. Things are more relaxed around here. Come at this hour when everyone is gone. I shall come especially for you and we'll see what we can do. He smirked. He named his price. She was free to accept or reject it. I shall be here at four, she said and left.

She was there on time the next day. Five pounds at the door to get in. A five pound bribe to be abused. She was taken to his office. He spoke to her familiarly, *Ahlan ya Rania*, welcome. He told the soldier, Stay outside and don't let anyone in. For good measure he locked the door. He pointed to a door. Get in and undress, he told her. She entered the room. It was his bedroom for prison emergencies. She took off her clothes quickly. The sooner it is over the better. He came in and ogled at her. He took off his shoes, his trousers and jacket and then his long underwear. He had a huge erection under his shirt. He came to her and pawed her all over and then he made her open her legs, spit on his penis and pushed it in. She was not aroused and was not lubricated and his thrusts tore at her genitals. He grunted and ejaculated, got up and dressed. She saw a door leading to a small bathroom. She went in and rinsed herself then dressed and went out.

She was led to a filthy visiting room and William was brought in, blindfolded. The covering was removed and the guards did not leave the room. He said, Hello Rania, how is our son? He was thin and wasted and seemed to have lost most of his hair in those few months and all of his beauty. He is fine. I sent him to my sister in New York for a while. You did well, he said. Forgive me; I have been a bad husband and a bad father. You have been a wonderful father, Rania told him. Superficially, yes. A good father would not have been so irresponsible. Are you guilty, William? Does it matter, Rania? Yes, it matters to me. I cannot think straight any more. I really don't know. They said a few more words and he was taken away. She passed by the General to thank his hateful mug for his kindness. If you want to see him again, come next Friday, he said.

She went home and washed for hours and sobbed. I am a whore, she kept on thinking. William has made a whore of me. I have no self respect. How will I live the rest of my life? And yet she went back the following Friday and was raped once more so that she could see a husband she no longer loved but for whom she felt a vast, desperate pity. The pity one feels for a good man whose life went awry. For a brave and idealistic man who was too reckless and immature to bear the responsibilities of a family. When they brought him in he was silent. He did not look at her. What's wrong William? she asked. The soldier who brought me here from my prison wing told me, you son of a bitch, your wife is getting fucked by the General. I really don't care, Rania. I am completely indifferent. If there is a shadow of feeling left in me it is for our son. Take care of him and don't come here again. They have taken their revenge these dogs a hundredfold. I really want to die and if there is a God up there I shall spit in his face. Rania did not see him again. The little hope she had for a pardon vanished when his death was announced in the news two weeks later together with two of his companions.

She went through a phase of severe depression, of sleeping day and night for weeks, of not wanting to get out of bed. She considered suicide and only the thought of her son kept her from attempting it. She felt a worthless wreck used and abused and unlikely ever to regain her self respect and desire for living. She could not face her work at the library, the loud, energetic students and their *joie de vivre* and was fired for absenteeism. The little money she had in the bank evaporated rapidly and was it not for the financial help of William's former girlfriend she would have been in dire

straits. She wrote to her son, obsessively, every day and his letters were the only things that kept her going.

About six months after William's execution Rania received a telephone call from the General. He asked her how she was. He told her he had bad news. The state security, the fearful *Mabahez*, had opened a file in her name. She would be investigated to ascertain whether she was involved in the conspiracy together with her husband or not. There would be interrogations, maltreatment, humiliations and maybe even torture. He was very upset. I have very powerful friends in the police, he said. I might be able to quash the investigation but it will take a great effort. I shall do it because I like you very much but you must also show me your gratitude. He did not have to tell her how. He gave her the address of a flat in Shoubra that he kept for such occasions and he expected her to be there the following Thursday at ten in the evening.

She understood that it was a lie. That there was no such investigation but that such an investigation could be started by a refusal to see the General. Her desperation worked better than any of the anti-depressants she was using. All of a sudden she woke up. The adrenaline started coursing in her blood. She realized she had a serious, potentially chronic situation on her hands. She was about to become the chattel, the private whore of a depraved, unfeeling, disgusting pig. She thought about it carefully. Was life worth living in this fashion? With no self respect, hating herself, hating her abuser and master? Her son was in good hands. She had to take the risk. Her heart was about to burst and she could hear her blood pumping in her ears and temples. But when she took the decision she calmed down.

The next day she went shopping downtown, away from her neighborhood. She was taking meticulous precautions. She bought a large, sharp, pointed butcher's knife and had it wrapped up without touching it. She went to a bookshop and bought a small book on the human body. She was not sure if the heart is on the right or left side of the chest. She did not know its exact position. She went home and strangely she started exercising, then took a shower and watched television. She had not opened the set since William's arrest. The three days passed very slowly. She did not write to her son. She exercised to work off her tensions, her impatience. She felt her lassitude evaporating. Thursday arrived and all day butterflies were fluttering in her stomach. She forced herself to eat so as not to have bad odor in her mouth. She took a bath in the afternoon and made herself up as if she were going to a party.

She left the house at nine, taking a large hand bag with the knife inside and a pair of gloves. She threw the book on elementary human anatomy in a garbage bin on the way. She changed two buses to get to Shoubra and then searched for the house. She found it and went upstairs to the flat. She rang the bell. He opened with a smile. *Ahlan ya Rania*. Good evening your Excellency. He was in a civilian suit. Don't call me Excellency, call me Ibrahim. We shall be good friends. Sit down. Can I make you some tea? No thank you your E...., Ibrahim. She sat down carefully not touching the furniture. He asked her how she was. How her son was. He is abroad with my sister. It is better, he said. And you have children, eh... Ibrahim? Three. My wife is pregnant on the fourth. Shall we go in?

They entered the bedroom and Rania undressed without being ordered. He undressed also, completely, unlike their intercourse in the prison where he had kept his shirt on. He had large meaty breasts and a huge belly that was not quite apparent with his clothes on, and massive genitals. He sat on the bed beside her and tried to kiss her. She turned her face. Why, ya Rania? he asked. Give me a little time to get used to you, she said with a smile. He caressed her and was aroused and they

performed a quick painful intercourse. He dozed off for a while and then he woke up. He smiled. Rania took hold of his large flaccid penis and caressed it and moved it up and down. He grinned. You enjoyed it? he asked. Yes. You want to do it again? Yes. I do not usually do it twice. I am not as strong as I was, he said and smiled. But you excite me, ya Rania. He was aroused with her manipulations and he entered her again.

The second time around her torture lasted considerably longer. But he ejaculated finally and promptly went to sleep. Rania got up, went to the hall where she had left her bag, put on her gloves and unwrapped her butcher's knife. She went into the room. He was sound asleep in the perfect position. He was stretched face downward his head slightly to one side, his arms along his head on the pillow, his legs apart and his breath regular. She came close to the bed, to him, calmly located the correct spot, held the knife with both hands, and in one sweep buried it to the hilt in his fleshy, hairy back, piercing him cleanly through the heart. She was sure of it. She had studied well her book of human anatomy. He let out an agonized growl and he slowly attempted to turn but fell back on his face while the blood oozing from his back painted the sheets red. She stood looking at him for a moment and heaved a sigh of relief. She had become a murderess but had regained her self respect. She felt like yelling, like singing out loud.

She went to the bathroom, took off her gloves, opened the faucet with a towel and washed the little blood that had splattered on her body. She dried herself and very carefully got dressed and collected her bag making sure she touched nothing, left nothing behind. She put on her gloves again, stood at the door and listened. It was half an hour past midnight and the building was quiet. She opened the door cautiously and went down the stairs and out in the street. No one had seen her go out and as far as she knew no one had seen her go in. She doubted Ibrahim had told anyone of this appointment and even if he had, there was no proof she had been there. She had been very careful about that. Oh yes, the *Mabahez* had ways to make you confess if they suspected you but she hoped for the best.

She walked all the way home. It took her an hour but public transport had stopped circulating and she did not want to take a taxi. It was safer to walk. The weather was cold but she was elated. I have taken revenge for the ruining of my life, she thought. I have taken revenge for the contempt and abusive manner with which I was treated. I defended myself as I had a right to. I took revenge for all the women who were beaten, raped, molested, and demeaned by bullies like Ibrahim. I am free. I am no longer a whore. I am free to be a whore if I want to but it will be of my own free will and not because a pimp has twisted my hand, has slapped me or blackmailed me. My self respect is my freedom and my freedom my self respect.

Djamila stopped and looked at me. I looked at her for a long time unable to utter a word. A look of uncertainty clouded her face.

What do you think of the story? she asked.

Rania, I said, will you marry me?

She looked at me for a long time, her eyes welling with tears. Yes it was me, she said.

Will you marry me?

I'll think about it, she said smiling through her tears.

DJAMILA

He thought it was a joke. We often said, 'I'll think about it', at times when our minds were almost but not completely made up and sometimes coquettishly on my part. I was madly in love with him but complications started surfacing some time ago and I did not let him know in case it would frighten him and cause him to leave me. I could not afford to lose him after he gave me back my life, my hope, my joy in living. After our wonderful physical intimacy; the intimacy which I missed for so many years and given up as lost and gone forever. I did not think I would ever experience such rapture again after Albert's faithlessness and the brutality I suffered at the hands of his executioners. After Monette's wedding we entered a period of nearly daily feverish lovemaking and Farid spent many nights at my flat.

His parents demanded an explanation for his absences and, in his surly manner with them, he announced that he was thinking of getting married. Many low key arguments followed with the main and obvious question of how he intended to keep his household on twenty seven pounds a month and, anyway, who was this phantom woman he never mentioned before and did not deign to introduce her to them. He was stubbornly quiet and just answered that he was trying to think of a way out. As a couple, they were not totally destitute. She had a flat and worked as a seamstress. For a while they would manage.

They were stunned. A seamstress? Are you mad? his father asked. This woman has slept with you a few times and has driven you out of your mind? I thought my son was more serious than that, he said trying not to shout with his mother beside him, giving him anxious looks.

I told Farid he should not have talked about marriage. The announcement was premature and would create tensions needlessly, especially since I had not decided on marriage. He was shocked. He said he took my phrase that I would think about it in the usual playful sense we used it. Would he have to go through another year of pleas and agony till I accepted? I told him that life was rarely uncomplicated and I have certain problems to overcome.

General Ibrahim Salah el Dine's murder caused a sensation in the Police and Security apparatus of Egypt. It was discreetly placed in the inside pages of the daily newspapers but there were comings and goings of the Minister of Interior to the President and demands for explanations and rigorous investigations. Such an outrage against a General on active duty in the *Mabahez* was unprecedented and unacceptable.

The corpse remained in the apartment for five days until the stink permeated the small building that housed it. His family had already alerted the police when he did not return home the second day. He sometimes spent the nights away from home but always called to give notice. Meanwhile a frantic search for his whereabouts began but it seemed very few people knew of his love nest or else were afraid to get involved. When the smell of putrefaction led the search to the naked General with a knife through his heart the police brought their finest homicide experts who combed the flat and collected clues and fingerprints. The body was moved to the Maadi Military hospital for an autopsy and despite the advanced decomposition verified that the General had sexual intercourse before he was knifed. More than once if one was to judge by the meager remnants of semen in his testicles. The men and women of loose morals of the neighborhood were brought in at the Shoubra police station including the *bawab* (doorman) and the owner of the building. They were roughly interrogated and beaten but they all seemed to have alibis and were released. The murder weapon

had fingerprints which were not registered in the police files and did not tally with any of the suspects.

The investigation reached a temporary impasse within a couple of weeks and it was redirected to the General's private files and diaries in the Tourah prison. Meanwhile a State funeral put this worthy and respected individual to rest in his family's mausoleum in Old Cairo.

I followed the details of the investigation in the newspapers both with anxiety and elation and the hope that it would not end in a false indictment of some innocent soul. In any case, it held the interest of Cairo's governing elite and gossip columns despite the best attempts of the government's censorship to gag all news pertaining to the incident. Speculations abounded that the Moslem Brothers, the communists, all of them victimized and maltreated by the government and the *Mabahez*, were involved in this mysterious murder. I had already been working for some months at Monette's in order to start earning my living once again and to stop depending on her generosity and handouts. She told me she was in love with Albert long ago and all the help, both moral and financial she gave me, was due to this love and its memories. There could not have been another plausible explanation and it testified to an uncommon generosity.

Monette, at that time, started seeing Antoun's close friend, Farid, who was very good looking and seemed of a serious and gentle nature. She started inviting me to the cinema with Farid and we would end our evening with her invitation to a meal at a restaurant. I owe a heavy debt to Monette and more than anything else I owe her gratitude for bringing me and Farid together even if that was not her initial intention. Or perhaps it was. I don't know. The human mind is unfathomable.

Six months or so after our cinema outings began, Monette and Farid split up, and Farid started courting me. I was afraid to get emotionally involved because at about that time a policeman came to my house late at night and told me to be at the *Mabahez* headquarters at nine the following evening. I was to present myself to captain Aly Ashour. For a moment I panicked but then I calmed down and thought it out as calmly and logically as I could manage. I figured, if they had verifiable evidence they would have picked me up in a box and straight to a jail cell. I assumed they must have come across my name and telephone number in one of the General's diaries and were checking me out. My only fear was that they might have interrogated one of his old guards who, although could not have witnessed it, might however told the interrogators that the General had intercourse with me. The rumor must have spread at the time to the prison staff for, after all, they did tell Albert. Albert was in a pathetic state during that second meeting and told me not to come again. I think it was to spare me the degradation of succumbing to the General's sexual appetites. More than a year and a half had passed since then. Would the investigation have turned up this information? It was farfetched but possible. What to do? Deny, deny, deny. Since I was sure they had no proof, it was the only way out.

Next day at eight o'clock I left my house, took a bus to Tahrir Square, and walked to Lazoghly Street where the *Mabahez* headquarters is located. It is a majestic building in baroque architectural style like many of the government buildings in central Cairo. They were solidly built in the nineteen twenties as was the Egyptian Parliament. It is a large, spacious three storey building complex covering a large area and surrounded by a high, solid rail fence. At its entrance was a large guardhouse with a smattering of soldiers and other individuals in civilian clothes loitering outside. Soldiers were also posted along the length of the railing up to its corners. A large but

relatively discreet bronze plaque near the guardhouse bore the legend *Mabahez Amn el Dawla* (Investigations of State Security).

It was almost nine sharp when I entered and was told to present myself at the Reception. Well, well, aren't we civilized, I thought, they even have a reception like a luxury hotel. There, I told them I was summoned by a certain Captain Aly Ashour and was told to wait in a nearby room. Not unexpectedly I waited for two hours in the room with an assorted, badly dressed crowd, mainly males, some wearing Islamic beards without a moustache and most with expressions of worry and misery. I made it a point of wearing dowdy and worn out clothing and messed my hair as much as decently possible. Oh Farid, what would you say if you saw me in this a state? And yet thinking of him gave me strength.

My name was called and I entered Captain Aly's office with a steady step and was told to sit on a chair, two meters away, opposite his desk. He was dressed in civilian clothes as is normal for the state security officers. First thing you noticed: the frigid arrogant look. Then the thin, long face with glasses, the piecing glance, and close cropped hair. An indifferent, unfriendly mien. A face that could never love, a face you could never love. He looked up at me severely.

The interview lasted a little over half an hour and I understood that there was not a shred of evidence against me. Just the vast suspicion which as a matter of fact extends to all that have the misfortune to cross the *Mabahez* threshold. And a malevolence that is palpable on almost every officer's face. One feels their need to hurt you. Were these people born that way or was it the culture of repression that fashioned these major and minor monsters?

Gamila Aswad?

Yes, sir.

You know that Ibrahim Salah el Dine was murdered. I looked at him with a vacant expression. Did you hear what I just said? he asked roughly.

Yes, sir, but who is the gentleman?

General Ibrahim was the governor of Tourah where your husband was executed.

And he was murdered?

He got up slowly and casually from his desk, came round and stood in front of me. He was tall and sinewy. He looked at me for a moment and with lightning speed slapped my face with all his strength. I fell sideways to the ground and hit my head on the wooden floorboards. I stayed there a moment stunned and then started getting up on my feet. My eyes were welling but I did not cry. I did not utter a sound. I sat back on the chair and looked at him through my tears.

Why did you do that for? I asked him.

Because you are trying to make a fool of me.

No, sir, I am not trying to make a fool of you. I didn't know the General's name and I didn't know he was murdered.

Where do you live?

In Daher, sir.

What do you do for a living?

I sow and repair old clothing.

Don't you read the papers? Don't you watch television? You must have heard that General Ibrahim was murdered. After all he supervised and witnessed the execution of your husband and the other two traitors.

May God forgive him and forgive the traitors. I don't read papers and I watch a little television before I go to sleep but rarely follow the news. As I told you before, I neither knew his name nor of his murder.

Your name and telephone number were in one of his diaries.

I cannot imagine why it should be there.

We know that he helped you see your husband before his execution. It was against the regulations.

He took pity on me. I wept bitterly in his office. He had a big heart.

Don't give me that crap. The General was a womanizer.

He was a gentleman. He would not look at the likes of me.

And yet your name and telephone number were in his private diary.

Were they the only ones?

Let me ask the questions. Have you been to his flat in Shoubra?

No, sir.

And yet your fingerprints are all over the place.

Sir, please take my fingerprints now and check again. I have never been to any flat in Shoubra and my fingerprints simply cannot be there.

The interrogation went round and round and got nowhere. Captain Aly could not get a grip on anything solid and after another half hour, in exasperation and fury, he bared his teeth.

Listen you bitch and daughter of a bitch, you can go now but I shall be after you and the next interrogation will not be as pleasant as this one.

I got up and left. I have Farid, you son of a bitch. I have Farid, I thought, and all the burden of the past twenty-four hours seemed to lift from my shoulders.

I had almost forgotten the interrogation when a few months later I arrived home after work and my key would not enter the entrance door lock. After pulling and pushing the door gave way and I entered the flat. I have a small dining room with a small round table, four chairs and a chest of drawers on which is the television set. The plates are on two shelves below and of the two drawers above, one contained the cutlery and in the other I put various papers and receipts of the rent, electricity bills and the such, which were strewn on the floor. Two prints hanging on the wall were torn, searched for hidden pockets and flung on the ground. With a thumping heart I ran to my bedroom where I found all my drawers and cupboard had been thoroughly searched and my clothes and underwear on the ground. On top of them the bed's mattress, sliced with a knife. Adel's room which was empty in any case, had its drawers thrown on the floor and the mattress sliced in various places. Nothing was missing, nothing was stolen. Just wanton destruction. What were they searching for, these animals? Love letters from the General tied with a blue ribbon, in my drawers?

My next door neighbor timidly knocked at the door.

Gamila hanem, are you all right?

Yes, yes, please do not worry.

Three beefy men broke your door and when I asked them what was going on they told me to get the hell inside my flat and shut up.

I asked Mohammad effendi to please keep a watch while I went for a locksmith to repair the door. When that was done I collected my clothes, put some order in the house, and stitched the slits on the mattresses. By now I was sure my phone was being tapped and I did not pay the bill when it was due in the hope that the line would be cut. It was never disconnected, that is why I asked Farid to call me only when it was absolutely necessary and to be careful with his words. Apart of that I kept these matters to myself.

Farid arranged for a coffee at his home on a Sunday afternoon so that I would meet his parents. Farid, I pleaded, release me from this useless ordeal. I shall not marry you, my darling. I have another man in my life that is more important than you. His eyes widened and his face suddenly assumed the pallor of a corpse. I embraced him and kissed him. You idiot, I said, I am talking of Adel. Nevertheless, I shall not marry you. I am in too much of a mess. So am I, he replied, and anyway my parents will not approve and the marriage will not take place anyway. Yes, I said, and I know to the letter their objections. She is too old for you; she has a son who is seventeen, for heaven's sake, and not a penny to her name. Why, by the time you are forty she will look like your grandmother...etc...etc. Shut up, just shut up, Djamila. Is it such a big request this visit, such an excruciating demand given the enormous love you claim to have for me?

So we went to the *Souk el Tewfikieh*, which on a Sunday afternoon was a mite less crowded but no less dirty and smelly, sidestepping decaying cabbage and lettuce leaves, squashed tomatoes and banana peels, into a shabby, dark, humid building, nearly as bad as mine and up worn steps to the third floor. Admittedly the flat was better furnished and I was at least graciously received with smiles of welcome and eager stares. We sat in a small sitting room. There was a reticence on all sides which the son, Farid, made not the slightest effort to alleviate. The mother, Madame Satenique, gave me the once-over and went to prepare the coffee. She was a handsome woman with a slight resemblance to Farid. The type of woman who is self-effacing but rules her family. Farid went to her for the small financial reinforcements he needed, not his father though it seemed to me his father was the gentler person. It was he who passed on to Farid his benign nature.

I wore a red jersey, black trousers, and a light grey coat. I had given up the strictly black but wore the black clothes now and then in combination with other colors. I could not very well afford to throw them away.

After an uneasy silence, the father asked me what part of Lebanon I was from. I told him that my family originates from the Christian town of Damour in the Chouf district. Have you been there he asked? I said I had not. I have, he said. I visited the Chouf Mountains before this cursed war. It is a very beautiful place. Like most of Lebanon in fact. My family originates from Beirut. We were very poor and my parents sent me to an uncle of mine here in Cairo. I worked hard, eventually opened a tiny grocery store, got married, and when Farid was born I rented this big shop at the corner of the street. He was our lucky star. Not a trouble in the world since he came to us.

Madame Satenique came in with the Turkish coffee, offered each a cup, and sat down. She kept looking at me, the rival for her son's love.

Tell us about yourself, said the father. Our taciturn son has left us in the dark about this romance. He told us he wants to marry you and we are troubled because he has yet to establish himself and we worry that he might not be able to bring up a family. We love him. He is all we have and we shall help of course but our means are limited.

I have not yet decided that I shall marry Farid. Husband and wife exchanged a look, glanced at Farid, and looked at me again. I love him but I have some problems to solve. However, because life plays strange games sometimes, and fate decides the course of our lives, I shall give you a few, very few, facts of my life. I work at Monette ex-Alekian's atelier almost two years now. I married long ago a man who was a dedicated communist, a naïve idealist, who was indicted by the present regime as a traitor, put on trial and executed. I have a seventeen year old son from this

marriage living with my sister in New York. I have not seen him in six years and this is the only true and urgent aim in my life.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

We understand and respect your situation and wishes, the father eventually said. We hope and wish you all the best with or without Farid. But most emphatically with your son. It touched a chord this wish. It was humane and sincere and I cried for a moment. Then, after a little general conversation I finished my coffee and we left.

We returned to Daher by bus and made love. Again and again. We could not get enough of each other. My Adonis seemed inexhaustible. I prepared some iced lemonade to refresh us. I caressed his face and muscular body.

And to think not one of those pretty girls at the club seized the chance to taste this ecstasy of paradise in your arms. I am forever grateful to them for this. Monette was much more prescient but she opted for a comfortable old age. In any case there wasn't a future for you two. Do you think it was her plan to bring us together? He smiled and changed the subject. The past did not preoccupy him. My parents liked you. I could tell, he said. I still think they would not want this marriage to take place, but they liked you. Tell me, my love, what are these problems you constantly talk about?

I thought it was time I told Farid about the ongoing investigation on the General's murder and my suspicion that the *Mabahez* were focusing on me. I told him, I was sure they would not let this great humiliation to the top repressive organization of the country go unanswered. They would find the culprit or else a victim to take the blame, justly or unjustly it did not matter. And he would be punished publicly and exemplarily. I told him about my interrogation and the breaking into my flat. Farid was shaken. Why didn't you tell me all this before, he cried. This is no laughing matter. We must act. But they have no proof, I said. That does not matter, they will not let go. They are searching for proof but if they cannot pinpoint it they shall trump up charges to get someone to pay, as you said, justly or unjustly. Djamila, we must do something about it. You have let this to drag for too long. What are we going to do? I asked. I don't know. All I know is we must get out of Egypt as soon as possible. Yes, but how? I don't know, he repeated and got up, dressed and left the flat. My, my, I thought, Farid, a man of action? My sweet indolent, club-loving Farid?

Farid contacted Antoun and met him at his luxurious office that same Sunday evening. He swore Antoun to secrecy and related my tribulations from a to z. Antoun was flabbergasted. Monette had told him almost nothing concerning me. In any case, she did not know of the murder. Do you care for her, Freddy, he asked? Because if you don't, don't get involved. I know what I am talking about. I am in the thick of things and I did not make my money easily or innocently. I have dealings with the police, with the state security, with the customs, with smugglers and diamond traders who are little more than criminals. And I can tell you, this is no laughing matter. Let's not get involved if we can avoid it. Tony, I asked her to marry me, Farid replied. I guess that tells me everything, coming from you, said Touny. He lay back on his spacious leather swivel chair and closed his eyes for some time. Farid thought he had gone to sleep. He picked up a magazine and started idly turning the pages quietly in order not to wake him.

Finally he opened his eyes. He smiled. It gives me great pleasure that, at long last, you have asked me for something. You have shunned all the easy stuff I offered through the years, dames, cars, apartments, a little loose cash and came to me with a whopper. But I do owe you your wonderful friendship and all those lovely tennis

games which have stopped since Djamila and Rosie separated us. I shall help you my brother Freddy but you must follow my plans without discussion. Do you agree? My poor Farid, did he have an alternative? Yes, Tony, I agree.

So do you have a passport? Lebanese? Good. Tomorrow we arrange a private ceremony for Tuesday morning at the church in Daher where mother married that clown. Quiet and unobtrusive. It's funny that instead of you being my best man, I shall be yours. It's the same thing, of course. The only guests: Monette and Fawsi, Rosie and your parents. Celebratory lunch not in a restaurant but at home with champagne nevertheless, and a final evaluation of Rosie's cooking. So far an average grade there, but as I have often said she has other more important qualities. Wednesday morning you apply for a Lebanese passport for Djamila. It would help if she has any papers showing her Lebanese origin. In any case she is your wife, and mother can put in a word with the consul who knows her well.

My Farid followed Touny's staccato delivery with an open mouth. Aren't you exaggerating, Tony? he asked. You shall soon find out, he replied. And then what? asked Farid. I shall be hard at work, Touny answered.

Late at night I heard the door bell ring and was frightened. It was Farid. Couldn't it wait till morning, my darling, I asked. When he broke the news, I told him, this Touny is mad.

Tuesday morning at ten, the small party gathered at the Syrian Orthodox church at Daher. The church was deserted. Rosie looking splendid and fresh, almost as if she were the bride with a short mini dress not quite the thing for priests, psalms and incense. Monette dabbing non visible tears with a silk handkerchief; next to her Fawsi, imperturbable and indifferent, and the shell-shocked Naguibs, Farid's parents, who could not figure out why after my denials that the marriage interested me, two days later was in church celebrating it. I could not imagine what explanations Farid had given them. I wore the same outfit as in Monette's wedding and Farid the same suit. Touny, our best man, turned up in a sweater annoying Monette considerably. The ceremony was short and after the traditional sugared almonds were distributed by Monette and the kisses and good wishes, we drove in two cars to Touny's house, his champagne, and Rosie's cooking.

Monette gave me an envelope with one thousand pounds and Farid's father another with two hundred. Touny went through the craziest antics and jokes and kept the subject of the rushed wedding from being broached. He said Rosie had finally passed the cookery test with a B+, and the only thing left was to fix the date of their wedding. We raised our overflowing champagne glasses to that. Wednesday morning I met Farid at the Lebanese Consulate and with the marriage certificate and my birth certificate which testified that my parents were formerly Lebanese citizens, we applied for a passport for me. The formalities usually took a month or more but the consul, after a telephone conversation with Monette, promised to deliver it in a few days. On that same Wednesday night a policeman told me to report to the *Mabahez* at nine in the evening the next day. Farid phoned Touny and asked him if he should accompany me as my husband but Touny thought it would be better to keep them in the dark about the wedding.

I arrived at nine and at ten I was summoned to an upstairs office where I found Captain Aly Ashour and two other officers. They were all dressed in civilian clothes but it was clear that the two new ones were of superior rank. I was told to undress. I asked for what reason and they replied because they said so. I had heard rumors of these things happening with women to break their morale and never believed them. I

kept my bra and panties on but was asked to remove them. When I did, I was told to stand in front of the desk while they sat behind it and to the side.

Gamila Aswad? the senior officer addressed me while the others stared at me.
Yes, sir

You were here a few months ago at an interrogation by Captain Aly and you refused to cooperate. You are wasting our time because we had to do further inquiries to get to the bottom of this matter.

In a firm voice, I answered, I did not refuse to cooperate, sir. I admitted to Captain Aly that the General allowed me to see my husband who was to be executed shortly. This mercy he granted me after much pleading and tears, and Captain Aly informed me that it was against the law. How was I to know? Had I known I would not have gone to the Tourah prison. He told me that the General was murdered, which I also was not aware of. I did not even know his name. I always called him *Hadret el Lewa* (your Excellency the General). He asked me if I had been to his apartment in Shoubra. When I said I had never been there, he said that my fingerprints were all over the flat. I asked him to take my fingerprints again and check once more because I had never been to anyone's flat in Shoubra and consequently my fingerprints could not have been there. If they were I would not be alive today. Is saying the truth a lack of cooperation?

Well, well, well, said the officer ironically. We have quite a lawyer to deal with. The fact is we do not believe you. Your name and telephone number were in the general's diary.

I asked if it was the only name in that diary and was told not to ask questions but only to answer them.

Quite correct. We continued our investigations and found out that the guard at his door, at the time, was aware that the General had intercourse with you.

Was he peeping through the keyhole?

They looked at each other. Captain Aly got up and again walked slowly towards me. I did not flinch. Again Captain Aly's specialty, the lighting full bodied slap threw me off balance and I landed on the floor. I got up without a whimper. Just tears in my eyes. You bastards, I thought, you have nothing on me except your venom.

Bring in the soldier, the officer ordered.

Captain Aly went out and returned with a soldier dressed in a dirty, creased khaki uniform, a highly worried expression on his peasant face. He stumbled in on his heavy, ill-fitting boots and stared dumbfounded at my nakedness. I did not recognize him. I would not have remembered that face even if I had seen it yesterday.

Tell us what you know, ordered the officer. He looked at me as in a dream. He lost his words and mumbled. Take a hold on yourself, soldier, and tell us do you know this woman?

He recited his little poem. Yes, she came to see her husband who was to be killed and first the General, God rest his soul, fucked her and then she went to see her husband.

For pity's sake, I screamed at him. Did you see the General fucking me? Did you see me like I am now, without any clothes on?

The soldier was dumb-struck. His lips started trembling.

Get him out of here, ordered the officer annoyed and Captain Aly led him away. At the door he gave him a push and told him, *Ghour*. (Get the hell out of here.)

Gamila, the officer said in a more reasonable tone. You are refusing to cooperate.

No, sir. I am not refusing.

We are just trying to establish what was happening at the Tourah prison during General Ibrahim's tenure of office. We are not trying to pin his murder on you. We have no proof. But we need to know of possible abuses so as to remedy the system and its procedures. We know the General was a womanizer and need to find out if he made indecent advances to you in return for this favor which was unlawful. If you cooperate, nothing will happen to you.

You snake, I thought, I shall not let you bite me. The General was irreproachable with me.

Very well. Get dressed. You shall remain in custody today. Tomorrow is Friday, the day for rest and prayer, and we shall continue the interrogation on Saturday evening. It is an opportunity for you to think things over before your situation worsens.

Farid, my husband..., my husband..., I could not believe the words. They were still too novel and wonderful. Farid, my husband, do not worry. I am a fighter. I am fighting. I am surviving. I assumed he and Touny would be frantic when I would not return home. But Touny would surely reassure and tell him to keep calm, that they must have kept me in. He would send his lawyer on Saturday to find out what the situation was.

I was taken by a guard to the cells in the basement. There were a few large ones with people sprawled on the ground in the semi darkness of a weak light bulb hanging at the end of a wire. The movement and murmur inside increased as I passed by and was led to a tiny cell further up a dark corridor. I was relieved I was not pushed into that crowd of living corpses. The atmosphere was putrid. It stank of urine and dirty toilets. The cell was tiny and empty with just a slop pail for urinating and an earthenware jug of water. The guard locked the door, which was just iron bars with a lock, and I sat on the ground with my back leaning on the wall. I wore a skirt and sitting on the floor was complicated. I had to pull it high up to bend my knees and sit. But it was all right, I was alone so there was no problem. I did not wear trousers because police officers do not like the sophistication that trousers impart to a woman. They like their women old fashioned and at home. They are paragons of the old, good family values. The defunct General was a prime example. I hope there are no rats and cockroaches, I thought. Apart of that, I shall survive. I have plenty of time to think and I must not be impatient. Time will run faster that way.

For a while I thought over the interrogation. No, I did not cede a single point. Then I thought of my life and the convolutions it put me through. For a short while I thought I had freed myself from the General's clutches and that the murder would be filed as unsolved and forgotten. I underestimated the tenacity and *esprit de corps* of the *Mabahez*. Their thirst for retribution. They would not let one of their own, a known womanizer, go unavenged. It was imperative to keep the country under their boots and in fear.

Who was it that dared challenge them? That dared to kill one of their own? He was a bully just like the rest of them, a fellow terrorist, keeping the law and order for the clique of revolutionaries under the shameful Abdel Nasser, his inglorious right hand man, the hashish-consuming Field Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, who was better at ruling Egyptian starlets and singers than his armies, and the extensive coterie of generals, who demanded from their subject servility instead of dignity. They threw out the King and democracy supposedly to free the common people but metamorphosed it into a hopelessly corrupt system of power-hungry self seekers. Not a single patriot in that vast array of our rulers. Not a single one that loved our Egypt.

They stripped the rich to take over their riches and led Egypt from one military defeat to another at the hands of tiny Israel. Poor gentle Egypt, give love a chance, let education eliminate the blind religious fanaticism both of Christians and Moslems, the fatalism that derives from poverty, control the birthrate, and start building a civilized nation. Then I laughed. I am going out of my mind, I thought. I am talking nonsense. Haven't I had a taste of human nature?

I stayed for a while mulling over the near impossibility of change. I wondered if I, myself, was hypocritical. I thought, I am talking of love. Where is my love? Did I feel any remorse when I killed a human being? He had a family that rapist, and children. Children that will grow without a father. No, I did not feel the slightest guilt, the slightest remorse. I would do it again, cold bloodedly, for there is nothing I loathe more than a bully. Perhaps the children will be better human beings without him as a role model in their lives. I was sure they would not suffer from penury. He must have amassed enough lucre for two lifetimes. Pity he did not enjoy fully his first. I wonder how many women he abused and raped. I wish I knew them. I would call them and tell them: rest in peace; I have taken your revenge. I still feel my blood burning when I think of him. Pity he did not live a few moments more to see me and realize that it was I that plunged the knife in his heart and that he was about to die soon, very soon, in a few minutes. This was missing from my crime and it left a void within me. I laughed again. Did I speak of love? In this world there are always two sides to each argument. There are no absolutes outside science. No absolutes in the unfathomable depths of the human mind.

I was thirsty and drank some water. It tasted of sand but was refreshing. I urinated in the slop pail and wet my clothes. No harm done. I won't stink half as much as the corridor outside. I stretched on my back with my hands under my head. My feet touched one side of the wall and my head, the other. The length, not the breadth. It was late. I could not see my watch in the dark. Past midnight, certainly. I was too tense to sleep.

I thought of Adel. My baby had grown to be a man. Handsome and tall like his father. The snapshots he sent me always made me weep. He would be through high school this summer and he applied to several colleges for Biology. He said it would provide an option for Medical School later, on graduation. Or else molecular biology and the evolution of life. He was a Darwin disciple. I asked him if he had lost his faith. Diplomatically he answered that he was still grappling with his conscience but that Adam and Eve and the snake were out. He was studying intensively for a scholarship because he did not want to burden my sister Nelly with college expenses. Thankfully their relationship was harmonious. Nelly did not have children, her husband had died, and their fit was perfect.

When he was fourteen I revealed his father's fate. I felt I had a duty to do this. Until then I pretended he was ill for a time and then died of a heart attack. During this last year I brought Farid into the picture and little by little made it clear that the relationship was strong. I sent him a photo of us together and he wrote that Farid looked much younger than me. He looks young, I wrote, because he is a sportsman and keeps in shape. I don't think he approved and I often wondered if they were ever going to come face to face. If I was ever to see Adel again for that matter. Years will go by and the need for his mother will diminish. Especially after he gets married and has children. But not my need for him. That was a constant.

Eventually my eyes closed. I woke when I heard the cell door being unlocked. I tried to get up but couldn't. My whole body ached. The guard entered the cell. Get up, he said, if you want to use the toilet before the men. I made a great effort and rose.

I tottered to the door. Bring the pail with you, he said. You don't expect me to serve you, do you? I picked up the pail and went to the toilet. The stink was suffocating. There were several toilet cubicles with no doors. I entered the one farthest away. The white enamel of the squat toilet was black with grime. I pulled up my skirt and defecated. The guard stood at the outside door. There was no toilet paper, just a small rubber hose attached to a tap. I washed myself and emptied the pail. I thanked him and he locked me back in my cell. Light was coming in from somewhere. I looked at my watch. It was six thirty and soon after I heard the commotion of the men entering the toilets..... A long day ahead.

I'm okay Farid, I thought. Please don't worry, I'm okay. I wondered what Touny was planning. I think he realized the dead end I had reached. That they would not let go until they got me. I wondered if the *Mabahez* were convinced that I had killed the General or if they were looking for someone, anyone, to pin the murder on and shut the case respectably with an execution. I wondered if this was only the start of my long trail to Golgotha. That these two interrogations with the relatively harmless slaps and nakedness would be followed by rape and torture until unable to bear the pain any longer I would choose the deliverance of death and would confess. I wondered if Touny had taken the matter to heart. That he loved his Freddy I had no doubt. But we had reached the point of life and death. Would he get involved and if so how far? He was a strange boy this Touny. Funny and funny looking, boisterous and forever a buffoon, he seemed fickle and unreliable and yet it seems he made a considerable fortune. Beneath the veneer of a clown he must have been a tough cookie. More than that I surmised, a man of steel. Compared to him, my Farid was a good-natured darling. The thing is, we had very little time left. How did I let it drag for so long? How was I so negligent? But then what could I have done? What were my options?

The guard came in later in the day and brought a *foul medammes* sandwich. Egyptian boiled beans in the flat local bread. I thanked him. I gobbled it up. I was hungry. I drank some water and leaned on the wall with my thoughts. Then I stood for a while because my behind hurt from the hard cement floor. I moved my arms and legs for exercise and even started to walk up and down the length of the cell. Two paces and turn, two paces and turn. It was ridiculous. So I just stood until I wearied and sat down again. Then I stretched on my back and so on throughout that day.

I do not understand these womanizers. People like the General and my husband Albert Sadek. What are they looking for? People with wife and children. Why is their family not enough? Okay, the General was a bully and a rapist but Albert? Is the harem mentality fundamental to males as it is to so many species of animals? I assume religion and civilization has reduced it in mankind but are there remnants in the male genes that push them in this never ending quest? The Moslem religion makes allowances for this by allowing four legal wives and the almost complete domination of the male over the female. Thankfully western civilization is moving away from this. My young Adel will explain these issues to me in a few years' time. But for some time now, not without trepidation, I am progressively losing my faith in God. I cannot accept His vast indifference to human suffering and, even worse, to the injustice that pervades His creatures on this earth He has supposedly created. Scientist and philosophers are mostly atheists. Does it not point to something that these brilliant minds have rejected the idea of God?

The day was long. No more food was brought to me that day. It was just as well. The immobility in my cell cancelled my hunger. In a way, this inactivity was beneficial. My body was still but my mind was working feverishly. I mulled over

thousands of questions and memories and accepted my fate whatever it might be. However, I would not give up without a fight. I was lying continuously to save myself but only after I was wronged, so horribly and mercilessly wronged. Touny might be a tough cookie and Farid a gentle, thoughtful, and upright person but by Jove, I was a tough cookie too. I would fight the bastards. I would not give up easily. I would fight and fight and not let them gain their victory, if it came to that, easily. I swore it on Adel's life. I was going to be rude and impertinent and damn the consequences. I was as determined as that.

On Saturday, the same morning routine. The interrogation would resume at night. I never understood their habits. What did these dogs do in the mornings? Administrative work, conferences, conspiracies, what? They went home for a late lunch and a long siesta and were fresh and kicking at night for their interrogations, intimidations, blackmail, and beatings. Touny sent a lawyer but they would not see him in the morning. He had to come back in the evening. At ten in the evening, the guard unlocked my cell and another policeman walked me to the second floor, to the same office with Captain Aly and his two superiors. I was in a sorry state. My clothes creased and smelly, my hair a mess and my face haggard from lack of sleep. It got cool at night and I could not get comfortable on the concrete floor. That second night I slept in fitful half-hour intervals and every time I changed position my body ached so much that the pain woke me up. I kept imagining that cockroaches were crawling over me and flapped my hands on my dress to frighten them off every time I woke up.

I entered the room almost tottering. They could not have missed that. I was not asked to undress but told to sit on a chair opposite the desk where the three were seated in the familiar fashion. Not a word of greeting. I wondered who the silent third person was. He did not utter a word and yet the one who did the talking glanced at him now and then as if for approval.

Did you reconsider your attitude, Gamila? asked the same officer who did the talking on Thursday night.

Yes, sir.

And what have you got to say?

That you are trying to incriminate me for crimes I did not commit.

I already told you that we have no proof that you murdered the General. We cannot incriminate you without any proof. His voice soft and gentle, his eagle eyes out for a kill.

But you are trying to push me to incriminate myself by admitting, to start with, that I prostituted my body to the General in return for a favor. And what an offensive favor: to see my husband who was about to be executed. Having established that I had a relationship with the general, his murder by my hand would be far more plausible even without my fingerprints in his flat. Let me repeat to you however, that at least with me, the General was impeccable.

We have a witness.

Please, sir, don't make me laugh. That poor imbecile of a boy is a fit witness for the *Mabahez*, not a court of law, not for justice.

Captain Aly started getting up for his daily exercise, his daily sport: a slap on my face but his superior restrained him with a motion of his hand.

I don't think you understand the seriousness of your position.

I do, sir, very much so.

I don't think you do. You would not have gone and got married at this moment if you did.

My God, I thought, they have been following my every move. They really are after me with all they are worth. Why not, sir? We have been planning it for a long time.

This marriage will founder under the weight and complications that your attitude with us is provoking. Furthermore, you should restrain your friends or your husband or anyone else from sending lawyers to check if we are conducting our duties correctly. This can only be detrimental to you. That was the first I heard that Touny sent his lawyer to ask what was happening to me. I suspected it was the reason that today I was interrogated fully clothed. Let me inform you, he continued calmly, that the *Mabahez* is the only organization in Egypt that is one hundred percent efficient and alert. For instance, we have learnt that you applied for a Lebanese passport as the wife of a Lebanese national. Please note that it does not place you outside the jurisdiction of the Egyptian state for crimes committed in Egypt and until the pending investigation is resolved you shall be forbidden to exit from Egyptian territory. In fact, specifically, you must at all times be available within the area of greater Cairo. All points of exit from the country have been alerted. There is no way out.

I looked at him hoping my dismay did not show on my face. The officer smiled.

Do you now perhaps wish to be a little more cooperative with us? Take a few minutes to reconsider your situation.

There is no need to consider anything. I have cooperated fully. Your wish to have me confess to crimes I did not commit is grotesque and I am sorry, I cannot do it.

You are very stubborn. I give you my word of honor that if you tell us the truth I shall do my best to end the pending investigations of your person and to set you permanently free.

Doing your best, sir, might not be good enough if I confess to something I did not do. It is being said in our country that in the *Mabahez*, for every honorable man like your Excellency there are ten who have no honor.

You filthy whore, Captain Aly shouted, unable to suppress his fury any longer.

His superior turned to him annoyed and said sternly, Please control yourself, Captain. Then addressing me again, Unfortunately, Gamila, you have chosen to waste our time. It is not to your advantage. The investigations will continue and, rest assured, we shall get to the bottom of this. We have all the time in the world. You cannot treat us the way you did. You may go now.

Downstairs I found Touny's lawyer. Somehow he recognized me and jumped up from his chair when he saw me.

Are you all right? he asked.

Yes, yes, I'm fine.

He took hold of my arm and led me to the door. I demanded that either they file a formal charge or they release you. If not I would file a complaint tomorrow with the Minister of the Interior. Thank God that alarmed them.

Ha! I thought. Nothing alarms them. They are a state within a state. Let the poor man bask in his illusions. On the street he shook my hand. Here I depart. My duty is done and your friends are across the street, Maa Salama, go in peace. I am always at your service. I thanked him warmly.

Farid and Touny were waiting in their car. They jumped out when they saw me and embraced me. Questions as they kissed me. Questions when we entered the car. Questions as Touny drove us to Daher. Farid held my hand firmly and kissed it now and then as if the nightmare had not passed. As if he might lose me again.

I am fine, I really am. No, I was not maltreated. No, I am not hungry. Just a little tired. I need a bath and a soft bed and the comfort of my husband next to me. Thank you Touny for the lawyer, thank you for everything. One thing I need to tell you right away. They are following us closely. They know I just married Farid and they know I applied for a Lebanese passport. They have alerted all exit points from Egypt to arrest us if we attempt to escape. We are in a rat trap.

Touny laughed. That's what they think and in any case it wasn't very wise of them to give us this information. I know they did it to intimidate you but, personally, I would have kept my victim in the dark and nabbed him at the border or the airport or from whichever point he tried to escape. I hope you did not succumb to their pressure and admit anything.

No, Touny, I was polite; politely negative and at times politely impertinent. I did not give them a thing they can use against me.

Good, because they might have been recording the interrogation.

If they did, they will bury it in their files. It would not be to their advantage to publicize it.

Listen folks, tomorrow is Sunday. I have arranged an outing at the *aesba* (farm) I bought recently. It is out in the country and we shall have no fear of eavesdroppers. We shall pass a beautiful day and discuss our plans. Rosie will be with us. She was terribly worried for Djamila and wants to see her.

I had a lovely hot bath and I dried myself. I felt my aches and pains evaporate. I dried and combed my hair. I put on the beautiful fragrance he loved and wearing just that went to our bedroom, to my husband Farid. I needed to feel blessed instead of cursed. And he blessed me, my Adonis, with his love and his passion, with his muscular body and inexhaustible energy. Does good luck have always to be coupled with bad? Was I to lose this happiness just as I had achieved it?

Touny passed by our home at twelve. We decided to stop using the phone except for emergencies and he rang the bell. Come on you lazybones he shouted from downstairs. Rosie is waiting in the car. We were dressed, still slightly languorous from our night-time exertions but we ran to the door and down the steps in a hurry. I kissed Touny. My Djamila, he said, it's so nice to see you happy again. Rosie fell in my arms and we embraced tenderly. She grew on you this Rosie. Each time I saw her she seemed more beautiful and fresh. I don't think I would be happy with a man like Touny. And not just because of his appearance and rowdy manner and it was a wonder how well he fitted with Rosie. They each found what they needed in the other. At first I assumed the union had a good measure of mercenary interest on her part but in the few times we met I slowly changed my mind. I had no doubt she was in love with him and it showed in the tenderness of her glance.

He was driving his station wagon. He had a number of cars; I didn't even know how many. I was never interested in them perhaps because they were so completely out of my reach. We set off on the road to the Pyramids and I remembered the times we took the same road by bus with Farid. Wonderful, carefree days that brought a sigh to my breath when I thought of them in our present impasse. These days the traffic was heavier on the way to the pyramids. People were getting wealthier and the cars more numerous. At least, some people were getting wealthier while the poorer classes were swelling so much faster.

The fields along the road, that typical Egyptian scenery of green fields with the patches of date palm trees and the occasional lolling water buffalo masticating placidly his regurgitated food, were gobbled up by the urban explosion. Badly planned plots of land were sold by speculators who bought them from hard up

peasants, and ungainly constructions dotted the land with amazing rapidity. Three and four storey red brick buildings without plastering, without running water or sanitary sewers. The children were usually charged to bring the water from a communal tap and carry it to their homes, up several floors, in zinc plated containers. One saw them crowding the communal taps waiting for their turn amid the overflowing puddles of sewer effluents, stray mangy dogs and featherless chicks.

Touny did not stop talking. His garrulity outrageous and amusing. I bought this *aesba* recently, Freddy. It is not strictly a farm. That is, I do not plan to raise crops. I shall fashion it as a place of relaxation. You know, green lawns and fountains, a swimming pool, a few horses to ride in the desert. Oh, and a ping pong room for our children and a billiard room. We never played billiards together, Freddy. Did you know I am quite good at the game? I have to find new pastimes. Rosie exhausts me, my dear friend, and I am no longer up to the tennis games we enjoyed so much for so many years. As you may have noticed my girth has expanded and I shall have a gym installed though I doubt I shall ever use it. I much prefer massages by Rosie. She is superb at this craft. If I weren't jealous and possessive I'd have her give you a body massage.

The *aesba* belonged to a pasha who went broke, courtesy of the revolution, and the villa needs extensive innovation. Meanwhile I tinker left and right and plan the grand design. So don't expect too much. We turn right just before the Alexandria desert road. It is in the Cité Nazlia. From the roof I can see the pyramid of Cheops. Now that Abdel Nasser has put spotlights on it, that alone is worth the price I paid. I am planning a roof garden for the dry desert breezes in summer when the city is sizzling. All I did so far is build a high wall to keep indiscreet stares at bay so my Rosie will eventually be able to swim in the nude, assuming, of course, I find a couple of eunuchs as servants.

I made a whole lot of money, Freddy. Not always legally. Well, I bend the law a little now and then. All those upper echelon officer bastards do it. Am I to be the sucker and follow the rules? So far I have kept a low profile but enough is enough. I want to enjoy the fruits of my labors. I am expanding my lifestyle here in Egypt; I have money abroad, of course. I bought a flat in Paris which Rosie loves, and I send her there for her dresses and coiffure. All I want from her is fidelity or if she cannot manage that, at least skillful infidelity. If she can do it without me knowing and, just as important, without my suspecting it, well, there's nothing I can do about it, is there?

We laughed. Cut it out Tony, said Farid. I really don't know how Rosie can bear you.

As for me, I started once again wondering how far we could trust this crazy Touny. He was driving fast glancing ever so often at the rear view mirror. I imagined he was checking whether we were being followed. Cheops's pyramid loomed colossal and majestic in the distance and as the Mena House Hotel came into view, just before the Alex desert road, he took a right turn. We travelled on an unpaved road of hard packed earth shaded by eucalyptus trees on both sides. To the right was the Marioutia feeder canal of the Nile. After a few minutes Touny stopped at a clearing and switched off the engine. Are we there, Farid asked? No, we'll just wait a moment to make sure nobody is following us. A few foreign looking riders on horseback passed us by, accompanied by a Bedouin. Probably tourists from the Mena House. They waved at us and we waved back. Three camels followed; a man, a woman and their guide, all wearing the Arab headdress. They swayed to the gait of the camels and the woman looked at us and giggled.

We started off again and in a few more minutes arrived at a newly built high wall enclosing a huge compound. Touny honked twice and the huge iron door slid open to one side on railings. We drove through, and up a driveway to a two storey villa elaborately fashioned in an oriental style with rounded balconies on the second floor and a sort of gazebo on the roof. The main door, up a few steps, framed by two reddish hued marble pillars, was arched and the door itself was made of finely crafted ironwork in an Arab motif and a thick opaque glass behind. As we left the car, two huge Alsations rushed at Touny and nearly knocked him over. Hello, hello, hello, he cried and tried to pet them while they whirled around him and tried to lick his face. On their hind legs they were almost his height. They then paid their respects to Rosie but not with quite the same enthusiasm.

These are Raouf and Kitty. Aren't they both beautiful? I named the male Raouf in memory of the recently assassinated *Mabahez* chief. Another dog that met an early end. As for Kitty, hardly an appropriate name for this monster, well, it was Rosie's idea. For the moment they are our children until we have some of our own.

What a beautiful house, I told Touny. I hope you and Rosie live happily with your children to enjoy it.

Do you like it Freddy? But for this bloody business we would spend many happy days and evenings here. Playing billiards and backgammon and riding our horses with the wives. Though one never knows, we may yet do so sometime in the future. Here, come let me show you around before we take a drink and then have our lunch.

He took us for a stroll on the grounds which were extensive. Rosie held my hand. I am so happy to have you here, Djamila, she said. I kissed her because she was sincere and was worried for me. A gardener was watering some plants with a long, thick rubber hose and grass was already sprouting on many patches. Touny was explaining, here this and here that. This area is for the swimming pool with a clubhouse for barbeque and one or two changing rooms for guests. There at the far end a few boxes for the horses, those date palm trees I shall not touch, I have already installed a pump and I draw water for the garden through a pipeline directly from the canal. Come see the house. It has lovely old furniture that needs repairs and refurbishing. That will be Rosie's task. Also the bathrooms and kitchen. I must keep her busy, my hot little number, so she doesn't look around at other men too much. Come see the view from the roof. Wonderful isn't it?

We sat in the garden just outside the house in the shade of two parasols for our drinks. It was the first week of May and the weather was lovely. The Egyptian Khamsin started mid March this year and was over by the beginning of May. A servant served our drinks with fresh cucumbers and peanuts. Ice cold beer Stella and scotch with soda. I was worried, and impatient to get on to our discussion of Touny's plans. I think so was Farid. Other than expressing approval for the property he said very little but Touny chattered away as if we had not a thought in the world. Rosie apologized that she did not cook for us. She said the kitchen was not yet ready and they ordered kofta and kebab from the Mena House. After the drinks, the kofta and kebab were hugely appreciated and so was the Turkish coffee that followed. Touny seemed ready for a nap but he pulled himself together and cleared his throat. At last, I thought, our fate is to be announced.

You know, Freddy, after Djamila's latest interrogation, I had no doubt you would have to leave the country. Not only that, you would have to escape illegally. Even if the *Mabahez* had not announced the measures they took to keep you caged in Egypt, I would have never risked putting you on a regular flight out or on a ship from

Alexandria or any other port. For a moment I toyed with the idea of hiring a small vessel which you could board from any deserted spot on our long western coast. But where would you go? Crossing to Italy or Greece or Cyprus or even Malta would be dangerous. One needs an experienced captain and crew and I am not familiar with those circles. With such a boat you would only be able to coast west to Libya and there you would surely be apprehended and arrested. Kaddafi is a Nasser disciple and aspiring pan-Arab leader and would consider it his duty to hand you over.

A lot of my work is done illegally. It conforms to the general work ethic in this country. Most businessmen do not declare their true revenues and most of our insatiable tax officials blackmail them not to increase their tax obligations but to line their own pockets with bribes. I consequently have a clear conscience that I am not harming anyone but am simply protecting myself when I smuggle my merchandise into the country and smuggle out my exports. Well not all, but most of them. I still have to present the façade of a reasonably thriving business to justify our living standards and our luxurious shops and offices. To be able as well to curtail the taxman's blackmail, which usually comes when the living standard of a person is not justified by his declared earnings.

As you know I deal in diamonds. Very few people are aware that I have become the leading diamond trader in Egypt. The beauty of this trade is that the merchandise is minuscule and the deals are discreet and generally unknown even within our circles. You will not find any jewelers bragging about their money or their sources of supply. Their good or bad reputation comes from selling their jewelry in the market. What I have been doing these last few years is importing large quantities of rough diamonds and exporting them again all over the world after cutting and shaping them. The price after the processing increases tenfold. I have a few wonderfully skilled diamond cutters whom I pamper with huge salaries but who are the mainstays of my wealth. Not just them. The others are the people who supply me with the stones which come mainly from Eastern Angola and a few other African countries. They, too, have their connections in the customs and the merchandise comes in illegally and untaxed in their pockets or hidden on their persons. A small satchel may contain hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of diamonds. The exporting part of the business I handle personally, literally moving the stones in my own pockets. I have my wholesalers in Europe and the States and my trips last just a few days. Well, lately Rosie has been accompanying me. She has great talent in putting on a woozy, frivolous persona that averts the slightest suspicion from custom officials. Isn't that so my darling?

It can become a dangerous game if too many loose tongues start babbling and I have adopted certain precautions. I deal with just one single smuggler. I shun people who come along making offers even if the stones are exceptional. I stick to my man, Anwar el Libi, who as his name implies hails from Libya. Through the years we have built up an unshakeable trust in each other. In fact he was the man who started me off by offering to be my exclusive supplier. Sometimes the rapport comes through instinct and I think we both had it though he is a Muslim and I am Christian. The chemistry was superb. We liked each other immediately. Almost like Freddy and me. Though my loyalty to Freddy is more than a family bond. Well, Anwar is a rich man now and he has his own organization of sub suppliers and smugglers and people in the customs at most key points of entry in Egypt. His collaborators travel all the way to Africa and return to him with merchandise. I know nothing of his organization and have absolutely no wish to find out. As the saying goes, what you don't know won't hurt you. Well, in some cases, anyway.

One thing I do know is that his right hand man is his brother, Samir el Libi. I never met him. I told Anwar I will get to know him when I go to the *souan* (tent) for condolences at his funeral (Anwar's), that is if he dies before I do. He talked to me, though, extensively about Samir, his bravery and dare devil feats. Apparently he often crosses from Libya to Egypt and back through the desert avoiding check points and official border controls. Like Anwar he is of Tebou stock, the tribes which are found in the south-eastern part of Libya. There are oases there and the larger ones have permanent settlements of tribes which grow crops and fruit on the fertile soil. The Saharan oases are connected to each other by well-known routes used by desert travelers and Samir knows his way in these desert trails. He must be in his early forties and he, too, is quite rich by now, unmarried, or at least has gone through a number of marriages and divorces and has no children.

I did consider crossing into the Sudan but rejected it. To start with I did not have people who were familiar with the ins and outs of that country. Then it is not as sparsely populated as Libya and travelling there and attempting to board a plane in Khartoum would be almost impossible. Your skin color would show you up like a sore thumb and suspicions would be aroused. Gaafar Nemeiri, the President-dictator was a chum of Abdel Nasser and, once he bagged you, would be happy to hand you back to the Egyptian authorities. As for attempting to cross from there into Chad, Ethiopia, or Uganda, that would be a much longer and hazardous trek. So that was out. No, the best option, to my mind, was Samir el Libi and correct me if you think I'm wrong. I called Anwar and we arranged a meeting with Samir as soon as you, Freddy, told me Djamila's unbelievable story. I did not waste a minute because I never doubted the final outcome of this affair if she remains in Egypt.

I started crying silently. Rosie came to my side and caressed my hair. Everything will turn out well Djamila, she said. I am not crying for that, I said. I am crying because I have lost faith in people. I distrusted Touny's love for us. I mistrusted his selfless determination to help us. And now I have only my shame and my gratitude. I am so grateful to you Touny.

Hold your tears, please Djamila, and let me continue. I am a doubting Thomas myself but I am a great believer in being fair in my dealings. I may be crooked with the government crooks but I never, never wronged one of my collaborators and I have been repaid many times for this. Samir did not hesitate one moment before accepting the task of guiding you out of Egypt across the border into Libya. I offered him a respectable sum of money and he refused it saying that it was the least he could do for me to whom he already owed so much. But it's a two way street, I told him. I, too, owed him so much. Okay, so sacrificing one or two weeks of his time for me was no big deal: so no more talk of money.

He is quite a character. Tall, slim, sociable, constantly laughing, you shall enjoy his company and, I hope, his competence. He said he knows south-east Libya like the palm of his hand but you shall have to enter Chad and travel across it almost all its length to reach N'Djamena to board a plane and he is not familiar with that country. Alternatively you might try to get to Abéché where there is an airfield and is much closer but he is unsure if it is served by regular flights. He shall study his maps and decide. What is encouraging is that the country is large, almost the size of Libya, sparsely populated in tribal groups, is in political turmoil and at loggerheads with Kaddafi.

Now for the nitty gritty. You must depart as soon as possible. Your passport, Djamila, should be ready in a few days. You must leave as soon as it is in your hands. I shall provide you with a Willys-Overland Jeep Station wagon which I bought years

ago when some friends convinced me to go gazelle hunting in the desert. We went out a few times, did not find a single gazelle and it has been resting in the garage ever since. It is a powerful four-wheel drive, just the thing for this trip. Furthermore it is white and it reflects the sun's rays away, it does not absorb heat as much as darker colors. My mechanic is putting it in shape at this very moment and will be ready in a few days. Prepare a small bag each with clothing. The utmost essentials. A few blankets and woolies too as it gets cold at night in the desert. The car will be overloaded with water and fuel for the trip and we don't want to burden it unnecessarily.

Samir will drive though you may take turns to relieve him, Freddy. The weather at the moment is just right. The Khamsin is over and the unbearably hot weather shall not be with us for another month or so. You must also have an adequate amount of money. I am scouring the market for English gold sovereigns which are the only currency that the Bedouin tribes understand. And another thing, please do not be alarmed, you must have with you at least a pistol each for self defense. And ammunition. Samir is always armed and is a crack shot.

He stretched and yawned. He ordered more coffee from the servant who served us. The funny little man showed his stature. I think Rosie understood his worth. She did not talk much and laughed at his jokes which targeted her but were nevertheless full of affection and admiration for her. She looked at us often to gauge our reactions and feelings to what her future husband was saying. Farid was silent. I think he could not externalize his feelings. The gratitude he felt for this response for help from his friend, which was to a point expected, in its extravagance overwhelmed him. It was the same with me because I was the cause of this turmoil, and feelings of guilt kept harassing me when obviously it was not my fault but fate that threw me in my present predicament. How many people was I to drag in this hazardous nightmare? When Touny looked at me while talking, I could not look at him in the eye.

My father Hagop opened his first jewelry shop in the late thirties in Shara Adly. During the War, not a few times he was the victim of holdups in his shop, mostly by British soldiers looking for money to carouse. He never kept much money in the till and usually gave away the few pounds that were there. The soldiers were not interested in grabbing jewelry and trying to hawk it. They needed hot cash immediately for their beers and brandy and the girls in the Clot Bey brothels. For protection he bought a lovely semi-automatic Walther P38 captured from the Germans but never used it. He always preferred to dish out a few pounds than to injure or kill a soldier or a petty thief. I found that pistol in one of my early age indiscreet searches in my father's drawers and have been fascinated by handguns ever since. I have a small collection and have brought a few here. I figured, when we start spending nights in this house one will always feel safer knowing their presence. I want you to have a look at them.

We went into the house and down a few steps behind the staircase that led to the second floor and roof. It was a depot of sorts and Touny unlocked the door and switched on the light. The room was empty except for an oblong oak table with about a dozen handguns, and cartons of ammunition stacked on the ground against the walls. He looked at them with a smile. Here is the P38, my first love. He explained some of the pros and cons of the various types and told me and Farid to choose a gun. We were a little shocked and genuinely hesitant. Come on, come on, he urged and we finally picked one each. Farid a heavier model and I a smaller one.

Good, he said, I shall sort out the ammunition and we shall come again before your departure for a short practice to get you used to them. Rosie and I practice sometimes on tin cans out in the desert. You'd be surprised at how good she is. A real sharpshooter. She's quite a tomboy my dainty darling. I bet she wouldn't think twice about joining you in your getaway.

Rosie smiled. I would do anything for Djamila, she said. I don't think I have met another woman as brave, as deserving respect, and as unlucky in her life as she is.

I kissed this girl who seemed such a typical bimbo, sexy and silent, but like her Touny was now revealing another facet of her personality. Not totally unlucky, my dear, I said. Fate has given me Farid and my only regret is that I am dragging him in this frightful adventure.

Listen, cut it out, said Touny. We are taking no chances. It will be a rather long excursion in the desert. Nothing more, nothing less. Don't you think so Farid? Farid had a troubled expression but managed a smile. I hope so, he said. But Tony, how will I ever pay you back? By being my best man as we had planned so many months ago. Rosie and I shall come to wherever you are and you shall marry us. And pay the expenses, too. It is a debt I shall not forgive. They embraced with bleary eyes and then Farid kissed Rosie.

We left Touny's arsenal and departed soon after, leaving our guns behind. It was a silent drive to Midan el Tahrir. Each to his thoughts. Touny said it was thoughtless of him coming to pick us up from our house and it must not be repeated. Moreover Farid was to call him at least twice a day from any public phone in case Touny needed us. We took the bus to our house, undressed and made love. A desperate passion that left us limp. We lay silent on our bed. No more the happy post coital embraces and chatter. The moment of truth was approaching; already staring at us in our face. Oh, my darling Farid, I thought, where am I dragging you? If we are ever caught it will be torture and death for me and a long imprisonment for you. Perhaps I deserve my fate but you? Will this be your reward for loving me? For being so gentle and good? These thoughts kept recurring in my mind. They gave me no peace. Later, at night, we went out for a walk in the back streets of our miserable neighborhood. Every time we went in or out of our building we looked around discreetly to see if anyone was loitering outside, keeping tabs on us but could not pinpoint any suspicious individual.

Monette badgered the Lebanese consul and three days after our Sunday outing I went with Farid to the consulate and collected my passport. We peered at the employees closely wondering which one of them was informing the *Mabahez* but of course we reached no conclusion. Not that it would have helped in anything. Farid called Touny to give him the good news and they fixed a rendezvous for the following afternoon at Midan el Tahrir. It was time for the gun practice and final arrangements.

Touny and Rosie picked us up. Touny in high spirits as usual. He said everything was ready and we could leave the day after tomorrow in the evening. Rosie sat next to me in the back seat and held my hand all the way. She left her parents' house some months ago and now lived with Touny. A big scandal in those days but of little concern for the new Rosie we were getting acquainted with. She looked so fresh and beautiful that she made me feel old and worn. And yet Farid loved me and was willing to risk his life for me. He was my husband. At times I found it hard to believe. I had not written to Adel since my second interrogation at the *Mabahez*. My previous letters were innocuous generalities and I did not write of my hasty marriage to Farid. In his last letter he asked me why I had slackened in our correspondence. I could not very well explain my current situation. All my letters

were routinely and officially censored. They were opened and sealed again with a white paper tape that affirmed the fact in print.

Samir will bring the car this afternoon to the *aesba*, Touny told us. It is in tip-top shape and fully laden. I bought ten British army surplus containers, you know, the type that were strapped at the back of their Jeeps, had them thoroughly cleaned and filled them up. Three with water and seven with petrol. The bloody car is powerful but not exactly thrifty on fuel. So you will have to be careful with the water consumption. I also bought some wide, heavy duty tires for the desert. Tomorrow Freddy you must take leave of your parents. Tell them you will be taking two weeks off for your honeymoon in Alexandria. As soon as I have word that you are safe and sound I shall visit them and explain what for them is a great mystery. We haven't been very considerate with them. Anyway, finish also your odds and ends and pack your bags. Sunday noon, please take a taxi to the *aesba* and we shall spend the day there. I have prepared tins and tins of food and loads of dry bread rusks. Hopefully, more than you will ever need. Oh, and a first aid kit and toilet paper. If you leave at ten you ought to be in Marsa Matrouh by five in the morning and on to the Siwa Oasis road before the traffic starts dribbling on the highways.

When we reached the *aesba*, we found Samir had already arrived. A tall, lean man with black, closely cropped hair and a well trimmed mustache on his upper lip coming down the sides in a thin line to just below his lower lip. He was taller than Farid and showed his age. Early forties as Touny had confided. He wore a white, close-fitting skullcap which always gives the impression of a person of tradition and a lack of sophistication. He had parked the Jeep further up, beyond the driveway in an empty area in order to leave space for Touny. As we arrived and entered the compound, he moved towards us smiling. He embraced Touny with some difficulty because the dogs thought they had precedence and were jumping all around him with yelps of love. Touny introduced us, the fugitives, and Rosie as his wife. There was familiarity between them but then Samir was highly sociable. He squeezed Farid's hand powerfully and somewhat more gently with us ladies. While he shook my hand, he stared at me a few extra seconds. I wondered if he knew I was a murderess. Farid noticed and seemed annoyed. Take it easy, Farid my boy, I thought, our life is in his hands.

Why the *taeya* (skullcap)? Touny asked Samir, laughing. It's my disguise, he said with a smile. Not of my features but of my personality. With it I become a simple-minded, pious Moslem, much less liable to suspicions from the authorities. It has gotten me out of many tight spots. In our trip I shall wear a *galabeya* (traditional full-bodied male garb) and if Set (Mrs.) Djamila prefers trousers, I advise she wears a *galabeya* or even a nightgown over them. For part of our trip, anyway.

I said fine and please Samir, just call me Djamila. He smiled and said that we would come to that soon enough. We then examined the Jeep. The rear part leaning slightly downwards on the back wheels because of the load. Two containers strapped to the rear on their assigned rests outside, and eight tightly packed inside on the folded back seat of the station wagon. The water containers marked with a white capital W. A tent was fastened on the grill on the roof. On the middle seat, many packages of food and place for our bags and I assumed also for our ammunition. The three of us would sit at the front. A true expedition to the unknown. I marveled at how willingly and readily Samir had accepted this assignment. I felt terribly grateful and indebted to him. Farid was a little surly. He did not relish having a daredevil to match him. A sociable, smiling extrovert daredevil.

Come, let us get to the firing range before it gets dark, said Touny with a smile. He went inside the house and returned with the pistols in a black plastic bag, a small cardboard box and two empty tin cans. We piled into his car, the three men in front and Rosie and I behind. We drove on the Alexandria highway more or less silently for about ten minutes and then turned left on a dusty lane which at one time must have been paved by the British but was clearly worn out and in disuse for many years. After a very bumpy five-minute ride we came to a vast depression about ten to fifteen meters deep with the lane narrowing and winding precariously to the bottom. Touny explained that this was an old limestone quarry which was now exhausted and not in use. I held onto the car nervously, hoping it would not topple over the side. Rather silly of me because it must have been used by trucks hauling the limestone boulders. The expanse at the bottom was level and huge and we stopped at some point near the sheer white wall that ascended to the top.

Out of the car, Touny gave each of us a pistol. To Farid and me, the ones we had chosen the previous Sunday. Then he placed the two empty margarine tin cans at a distance of roughly twenty meters. From the cardboard box he picked and showed us the different bullets used in each gun. Patiently and meticulously he instructed us how to load them and unload them and had us repeat the process several times. Finally, after explaining a number of correct postures he asked us to fire at the tin cans. My hand was shaking and the bullet after a reasonably loud bang hit the ground some meters away. Farid did a little better but, nevertheless, missed the cans. We emptied the magazines and reloaded and eventually our aim improved and we hit the target once or twice. More luck than skill, let me add. Touny was satisfied. Rosie came forward and bang, bang, bang, did not miss a shot. We clapped our hands and noisily congratulated her. The cans had rolled quite a few meters away and apart, but Samir did not miss a shot as he fired alternately at each can. Touny did not take a turn. It was getting dark and he wanted to leave the quarry without the headlights on. At the *aesba* after a cursory cleaning we put the guns and ammunition in the Jeep and locked it. We left immediately after, Samir riding with us.

Next day Farid went to say good bye to his parents while I started packing two small suitcases, one for each of us, and trying to figure what was essential and what was not for the trip. He returned some hours later pale and subdued. What's wrong I asked? He embraced me, my darling husband, and said that he cried when he kissed them good bye. I was never a very affectionate son but I had the feeling I would never see them again. I broke into tears and the poor people were puzzled, he said. They probably did not believe the honeymoon business. I felt terribly guilty leaving their many unasked questions in their eyes with no answers. Do you realize how much I love you Djamila? Yes, my love. Oh, yes, I said.

We had a light meal and made love. It was the release of all our agonies, our tensions, our emotional entanglements and fears. It was a novelty that continued undiminished since that first night after Monette's wedding, miraculous and inexhaustible. We slept a little and in the late afternoon went down for a walk. Again the scanning for a suspicious presence on the street. Nothing. We walked to the main avenue and from a distant kiosk called Monette. I told her we were leaving tomorrow and I thanked her for her vast generosity which she had also passed on to her son. We both cried and I did not let Farid talk to her. He already had his dose of sadness and tears. We made love again at night and wondered when we would do it again. Certainly not in the desert, certainly not with Samir around.

Sunday morning we made love, showered, had some tea with toast and some cheese and at about eleven thirty Farid went out to flag down a taxi from the main

avenue. He saw nothing suspicious outside our building and in ten minutes he called me to come down. Before I did, I looked around our flat. The flat whose walls saw my life unfold through many years. Our happy days with Albert and our baby Adel. The pain of his infidelities. My devastating shock when he was arrested and the unrelenting agony of two years of his imprisonment and execution. Of my sister's arrival to take my eleven year old baby away. The horror of the General's blackmail. The return of my self respect through a savage and justified act of self defense. The many months of Farid's courting, the last few months of lovemaking and last few days of a hasty marriage heading who knows where? I picked up our two battered suitcases, locked the door and descended the stairs. All that is over, I thought. I am finished with you, Egypt. Dead or alive, I am finished with you.

Hurriedly we entered the taxi and drove in silence to Cité Nazlia. We got off some distance from the *aesba* and walked ten minutes to reach it. Not a single car passed us by and we were sure we were not being followed. The doorman with an ancient shotgun opened the door and we saw Touny, Rosie and Samir relaxing under the shade of the two parasols. We walked towards them and they sprang up and embraced us. Rosie would not let go of me. Everything will be all right, she kept repeating. Everything will be fine. Samir was smiling as if we were about to go on an excursion. He wore a *galabeya* and his *taeya*. Touny ordered more beers and urged us to drink up.

We shall have lunch in a while, he said. Unfortunately, kofta and kebab again. Then all three of you must take a nap because you shall be traveling all night. I have two rooms prepared for this. So drink up to relax and get sleepy. Farid, I gave Samir forty three gold sovereigns. They were all I managed to find in the market at such short notice but they ought to see you through comfortably. The water is strictly for drinking. You shall be able to wash yourselves at the different oases. At least the ones in Libya. Samir has contacted some friends who travel across with contraband and they gave him pointers of the routes you ought to follow in Chad. You shall get more information as you approach the border of that country. Samir is no novice and, by God, I am so terribly grateful to him for his offer to help. I don't want to frighten you but I must caution you to keep your guns handy at all times.

We left at nine instead of ten o'clock after an emotional farewell. There was an impatience in all three of us to get started and, anyway, the afternoon had finally given way to darkness. Rosie and I shed many tears and even Touny and Farid had tears in their eyes as they embraced. Just as Rosie would not let go of me, Farid would not let go of Touny. How can I thank you my dear brother, he told him, how will I ever pay you back? Samir stood slightly embarrassed to the side and then he, too, was thanked warmly by Touny and Rosie.

In the car, I sat between Samir, who was driving, and Farid. Over my trousers I wore a *galabeya* that long ago belonged to Albert. I unearthed it at the last moment from a drawer of old clothes and it smelled musty but it served me well. The desert air on the Alexandria highway was cool and it kept me warm. Samir drove at a steady eighty kilometers per hour. He said the car was overloaded and preferred to take it easy. We passed the first police checkpoint with no problem, without stopping, just by reducing speed. Most of the cars did the same. The traffic was mainly incoming as very few travelers would start a journey to Alexandria at this hour. In the glove compartment were our two loaded pistols. Samir had his in his wide *galabeya* pocket. He figured we would be traveling in the car for at least a week so we should forego all embarrassment and when the need for toilet use arises, we should let him know.

Samir kept up a steady chatter. He asked Farid what he did as a profession and shook his head disapprovingly when he heard the explanation. He said that nothing in this country worked properly except the production of babies. The police and the *Mabahez* were competent in keeping the people intimidated and well reined in but they were ruthless and corrupt. As for the rest, they muddled along, including our leaders. All of them incompetent and on the lookout to line their pockets in every way possible, legal or illegal. He told me that he would have never accepted an assignment such as this even had Touny asked him but when he heard my story he did not hesitate a moment. He was not a very moral person and the work he did was mostly unlawful but he hated injustice. The hatred of injustice, he said, was a universal human trait. Only animals suffered injustice without protest, without revenge. It is why I understand you Djamila; I admire your bravery and decided to help you.

Well, there was nothing to do while rolling on the empty dark highway except talk and Samir did most of it. I was born in a small oasis near the town of Kufra in the south eastern part of Libya, he began speaking. There are many oases scattered around that region and Kufra is a sort of local capital. We were not nomads and our clan shared, with other clans in the nearby oases, pastures, and wells. There was a complicated system of sharing crops and water. The crops were mainly dates, which I have loved since my childhood, and grains. I attended a Koranic school for a couple of years and learned a little Arabic because, as you know, our language is Tebou. It is a Saharan language related to Arabic. When I was about twelve I became a goatherd and took care of the goats and camels of our family. This shaped my life because I was free of the shackles of a regular family life. I lived in the open air and enjoyed the freedom of rootless drifting and sleeping wherever I pleased. Moslems hate dogs but I had two of them that were almost as intelligent as I am and helped me control the herd. When I was seventeen, I grew restless and took off for Tarables (Tripoli) and then Beni Ghazi where I survived doing all the odd jobs you can imagine. I worked as a servant cleaning houses, a waiter in coffee shops, a driver, a mechanic's helper, a bricklayer, and many, many others until Anwar, who had earlier left for Egypt, came, helped me obtain a passport, and took me along to Cairo.

It was past eleven by the time Samir pulled up at the rest house of Wadi Natroun, roughly the half-way point to Alexandria. An impressive building with a restaurant, a tea room, and a coffee shop with ready-made sandwiches and pastries. Also a car repair workshop and a gas station for refueling which were closed for the night. Above all, large, airy, clean toilets which was the reason for our stop. He told us to go up, relieve ourselves, have a Turkish coffee, and drink plenty of water. There were two or three cars in the parking lot and just a few people inside the coffee shop. I entered as I was with the *galabeya* and the people seated at the cafeteria stared at me. I did not care. The weather had turned chilly and it kept me warm. Farid had put on a pullover. We did not talk much as we waited for the coffee. We just smiled, almost happily, because now that we were in the soup all our previous agony seemed to have faded away.

The coffee braced us up and when we finished we returned to the car and Samir went up the steps for his turn. He came back smiling. That coffee was damn good, just what we needed, he said. It will keep us awake and I need to talk to keep alert. He said there was an army camp outside Alexandria and another police check point beyond it but it was loosely administered and did not expect any trouble.

After we drove silently for ten minutes or so I asked Samir to continue his story. It was a pleasant way to while the time away and avoid the boredom of dreary interminable kilometers of sand and moonless darkness.

Well, when Anwar came to get me I did not want to leave Libya, Samir continued his tale. I told Anwar I wanted to go into politics to try and better things for our lot. Most of the Tebou live in Chad and only a small proportion resides in southern Libya. Kaddafi, that conceited nincompoop, does not consider us as Libyans and our people suffered massive discrimination from his government. All the while I was working in Beni Ghazi I tried to find a connection that would introduce me, even in a small way, to the political mainstream. The Beni Ghazi politicians have always been wary of our Beloved Son of Libya and I thought a path into politics from there would be somewhat more likely but Anwar disabused me of my illusions. Are you mad? he told me, the only way to get into politics these days is through the army and being a Tebou automatically disqualifies you. So I ended up in Cairo.

Anwar at that time was just starting his collaboration with Antoun Alekian. Antoun had begun the contraband game in a small way. He bought rough stones in the local market cut them, shaped them and flew to Europe to sell them. He had two of the finest cutters in the world, both Armenians, and their work was superb. Anwar proposed to bring him merchandise from the source at a fraction of the Cairo prices and the deal was closed. He flew to South Africa with all his savings in black market U.S. dollars and reconnoitered the diamond markets and sources. South African mines were closely controlled by De Beers but in Angola, which was a political mess with an endless armed conflict in progress, he found a considerable black market and dead cheap prices.

He stayed there a month, loitering outside the mines and bazaars and collected, bit by bit, a considerable amount of stones. He had the foresight to bring with him a round silver container the size of a small sausage where he put the stones when he finished his purchases and slipped it up his anus. His backside to put it more crudely. Sorry Djamilia about this, but this is how much of this business is done. From Luanda he flew to Johannesburg and then to Cairo. Alekian was delighted with the stones and the prices and, needless to say, Anwar, too, made a packet. The collaboration was cemented, Alekian hired another superb Armenian cutter, and business started booming. I also found my niche in this enterprise and am not doing too badly. The funny thing is, after several years of working indirectly for Alekian through Anwar, I only met him these last ten days in connection to your case.

Two hours after Wadi Natrun, we passed the army camp which was dark and silent as if deserted after which we crossed the police checkpoint by reducing speed and cruising through without stopping. A bit further down the highway bifurcated. To the right was Lake Mariout, a shallow lake of brackish water on both sides of the highway, which led to Alexandria and on the left the road for the western desert and the small town of Marsa Matrouh near the Libyan border.

When I made a little money I bought a flat in Heliopolis and another in Alexandria. I was very happy with my new job. I would never have been able to abide a regular job with nine-to-five office hours. I loved the freedom my job gave me. I traveled three or four times a year to Africa, Angola and another few countries especially the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the rest of the time I was free to enjoy myself. I spent much of my time in Alexandria, swimming, lazing around, and looking for loose women in cabarets. I made a few wealthy friends and pretended I was a businessman. With them I went duck shooting on Lake Mariout in season, cruising at daybreak in shallow rowing boats with their trained dogs. When a duck was shot the dogs jumped in the lake and fetched it. I was always amused at the excitement those dogs showed every time we dropped a duck.

From the bifurcation, the highway took a gentle downward gradient as we headed to the sea and when we reached it we felt the intense humidity in the breeze that characterizes the north Mediterranean coast. The road turned left and continued parallel to the seashore. The darkness prevented us from glimpsing the sea and, in any case, the road was mostly slightly inside the desert. At times we could hear the waves splashing on the beach as the sea is never as calm as it is on the Red Sea coast.

I got married three times and divorced. I was hardly the ideal husband. To start with, I did not want any children. I felt I was stateless. I did not belong to this country and I would not have liked my children to become Egyptians. I was a Tebou and had this pride in my desert origins which I would have been unable to impart to my children in Egypt. This was the main reason for my divorces and I do not blame my former wives for leaving me. They obviously wanted to have offspring, which would guarantee their legal status vis-à-vis the Egyptian law and their rights of inheritance, which without children are almost nil. This apart of their emotional need for a child. Then my absences and lack of an evident occupation troubled them. I could not very well explain to them that I was a diamond smuggler. On all three occasions it was their families that forced them to ask for a divorce and as you can imagine, there was never a passionate attachment to keep us together. So once again I am a free bird. It is better this way. With a family behind me I would not be with you today.

An hour after we reached the sea and began traveling parallel to it, Samir told us we were passing outside the village of El Alamein. It is about a hundred kilometers west of Alexandria and it is the setting where Rommel's Panzer divisions were smashed in October 1942 by the Allies. It is also the location of the World War II cemeteries and ossuaries. A little past the village we stopped to relieve our bladders and stretch our bodies. It was just past two o'clock and not a single car passed us since we turned onto the road to Marsa Matrouh. Apart from the discomfort of sitting for so many hours we were not in the least bit sleepy. Samir kept us amused and interested in his life story and various adventures he recalled. We would need another two hours to reach Marsa Matrouh where we would turn southward again for the Siwa oasis.

Half an hour after El Alamein we passed another tiny village called Sidi Abdel Rahman, well known for its beach and a few villas of wealthy people and a while later a car passed us in the opposite direction. For the split second it came into our headlights we realized it was a Russian made GAZ army jeep with a tall communications antenna leaning backwards from the wind. Samir looked in the rear view mirror. It has stopped, he said. We kept going steadily. I think it is turning around though I cannot see it clearly any more, he added. A few minutes later he saw their headlights approaching us fast. Keep calm, he said, take your guns and put them in your pockets. The jeep passed us and an officer leaned out of its window and motioned us to stop. We braked slowly and stopped behind the jeep. The two occupants came out and walked to Samir's window. They shone a large hand-held torch inside our car and our faces.

"*Aala fen Insha 'Allah?* Where are you heading by the will of God?" one of them asked.

In his best Libyan accent Samir told them we were heading for Solloum and then for the border. This is my wife and son. And those containers? They have a special oil lubricant I need for my factory in Beni Ghazi. Where are the invoices and export permits? They are with my employee who will meet us at the Egyptian customs. Don't you know these documents ought to accompany the merchandise? Give me your passport. Take your light off my face and let me get out. It's in my back

pocket. Samir opened the door wide and the officers took two steps backward. He got out and moved further away too. He whipped his pistol out of his pocket. Don't move you sons of bitches he shouted at them or I'll blow your heads off. Farid was out the other door, pistol in hand. The officers were stunned. They raised their hands as if in a movie. He told them to stand in front of the headlights of our car. Farid, search them he ordered, and Farid relieved them of their weapons. Keep them covered while I look into their car. The car engine was running. He switched it off and put the key in his pocket. He found no other weapons and tore out the mike which was suspended on the dashboard. He got out, stepped back, and for good measure, through the open door, fired two shots at the wireless radio. Then he went to the front of the army jeep and fired three shots at the radiator. Water started leaking beneath the car forming a thin stream of steaming water that trickled down the road. The car was useless for the time being.

Samir and Farid entered the car and we drove off leaving the two stunned officers by the roadside. Until Marsa Matrouh, which we reached at five, just as the day was breaking, we did not cross a single car. Samir was pleased about this. It gave us a good head start. We were mostly silent on this stretch of our trip. Not sleepy but silently evaluating our first skirmish with danger. Wondering how massive the army's response would be. Samir told us that the government was planning to build a modern road to Siwa but the project had not yet started and we were lucky in that. It would not be easy for them to chase us in the criss-crossing camel trails.

We did not enter the small, still slumbering town of Marsa Matrouh but skirted it and suddenly turned into a narrow trail of hard yellow sand. By that time we could see clearly, and in this maze of trails branching off left and right every few kilometers I hoped Samir knew his geography. The ride was slow and highly uncomfortable. The heavy laden car jumped and lurched left and right, its springs protesting noisily. Our speed averaged between thirty and forty kilometers per hour and we stopped every hour or so to recuperate, drink a little water and urinate. We breakfasted on boiled eggs and dry bread and drank hot, sweet tea from a thermos bottle, which our sweet Rosie had prepared. It was a first day consolation breakfast and we thought fondly of that darling girl. I took off my *gelebeya* because I started feeling stifled by the heat. After the princely breakfast, Samir, fortified, began talking again. We found out he knew his geography well.

Siwa is some three hundred kilometers from here, he explained. It should take a full two days to reach it, today and tomorrow. We certainly have to rest after traveling all night but today we will slog it as much as we can since they might start searching for us. I am not too worried about it though. By the time they get organized the birds will, hopefully, have flown. I do not think those asses will consider Siwa. They will start looking in Solloum and the other villages on the way to the Egyptian-Libyan border customs. Those tanks with the supposedly oil lubricant will surely confuse them. Moreover I do not think they figured out who we are and, in any case, neither they nor we can travel at night. In this total darkness I would lose the trail.

I asked him if he wanted Farid to relieve him for a while in driving the car. He said he was fine and once again I told him how grateful we were to him. He laughed. I do not think of this undertaking as a sacrifice or a good deed, he said. It is my desert upbringing and the hard life of my early years that dictate my behavior. Also my sense of fair play. Many times I spent days in the desert looking for a camel that strayed from my herd. Would I do less for a human being that is in danger because of an injustice? Yes, this was our gallant Samir, our forthright smuggler and guide. On

our bumpy ride he was for a while our teacher and I imagined he would be that for some time to come.

Let me tell you a few things about Siwa and oases in general, he continued. I am sure you city dwellers think of the desert as just sand. First of all, these oases for thousands of years allowed people to live in them and caravans to trek across the desert and carry on trade that was beneficial to people. They were a way of life, of livelihood, of culture and civilization because it taught people to coexist peacefully and benefit from each other. They talked different languages, had different customs and religious beliefs and yet they had the tolerance to associate with each other, something which is lacking in our so-called civilized world. They were a way station of travelers from the Maghreb to Cairo and hence on to the pilgrimage in Mecca.

The people who know, the archeologists, say that Siwa has been there, in existence, for ten millennia before Christ. Can you imagine? Now a macadamized road is to be built and soon, in a few years, the way of life and culture of the ten past millennia will go down the drain with electricity, telephones, television, hotels, with tourist tours that will arrive to see the Stone Age. They will teach them greed, vice and all the ills of civilization. Easy communication will bring taxes and the shackles of a corrupt and authoritarian government bureaucracy, the police, and the *Mabahez*. Where the people settled their differences within their clans or between them, the police will meddle and the law courts will decide the outcomes of disputes with lawyers lying on both sides. As you see, I am a queer mixture, like most people, of Puritanism and depravity. Well, not exactly depravity, but let's say, idealism and self-interest.

The oases in this part of the world are mostly found in depressions where water from underground rivers or aquifers is accessible enough to support plants and agriculture. Siwa itself is nineteen meters below sea level. It is located between the Qattara Depression and the Egyptian Sand Sea in the Libyan Desert. The Qattara Depression, at its deepest point, is one hundred and thirty three meters below sea level. Because of its proximity to the Mediterranean it has been studied for its potential to generate hydroelectricity but nothing has come of it. One imagines that the Depression is the ultimate aridity and yet it has fauna and flora. Acacia groves and wetlands with phragmites that support gazelles which in turn are an important food source for cheetahs. There are also jackals and foxes. Qattara is huge, twice the size of Lebanon, and yet it has been explored and traversed from end to end since the nineteen-twenties by English explorers.

Siwa has a population of, I would say, around twenty thousand people of Berber extraction and their mother tongue is a Berber language called Siwi. Arabic is their second language and everyone speaks it. Most Siwis are employed in agriculture and handicrafts. They produce, mainly, dates, olives, and basketry.

We traveled in this slow bumpy fashion for hours. The scenery changed very little as hills of unending, undulating sand dunes appeared and receded as we passed them by. Often when a new trail appeared, Samir took out a compass to verify the correct direction but the trails became fewer as we advanced. The heat from a cloudless sky increased as the day wore on and at every stop Samir checked the water level in the radiator of our car. We removed our woolies and remained in our shirts. A warm, dry breeze dried our sweat but the heat was not unbearable. I needed to wash my face but water was not available for this luxury. As the day advanced we started seeing shimmering water in the distance. Alas, it was only a mirage as Samir explained.

The trails were narrow and our jeep just about fitted in them. At times, only the wheels on one side of the vehicle were on the on the hard, pressed sand of the trail but the four-wheel drive of the car managed to keep us going. I doubted that Farid would have been able to drive us safely. While Samir prattled away Farid was unusually silent throughout our journey so far. What was he thinking? I often held his hand and he smiled at me. Was he thinking of our uncertain future? Even in the event of a successful getaway? Unlike Samir, he was completely unprepared for a new beginning. In his former life he had been coddled by his family, his useless, undemanding job and his sports and recreations at the club. He left all that for me and we were heading for my son, the other man in my life. Was he speculating how the equation of our lives would change?

We ate a light lunch in the early afternoon. Samir advised us to eat lightly so we would not get thirsty. Canned beef with dry bread. Who would have thought it could be so enjoyable? And a little water from the tank. We started finally to feel the exhaustion of our non-stop eighteen hour journey. Another three hours later we stopped for the night. It was around six, the sun was heading for the horizon and the heat was fading away. Soon the desert chill would be on us. Samir and Farid undid the tent from the grill and set it up. Three pillows and a blanket were wrapped up with the tent, which was just barely big enough to accommodate us. The blanket was our mattress over the sand.

For a while we sat on the pillows outside it and chatted. I asked Samir if there were any snakes and scorpions. He said perhaps there were but if we don't bother them, they won't bother us. He said if we had to go to the toilet to do it now with the daylight. It was always embarrassing for me to get up and move out of sight behind a small sand mound but there was no way around it. The men did the same. As soon as it was dark we felt the cold more intensely and I put on a pullover and the *gelebeya*. Samir brought out a torch and we settled in the tent side by side, Farid in the middle. I searched for his hand. The darkness and the silence were intense. Just the stars twinkled mysteriously so very far away in the dark sky. I felt as if we were in outer space or the moon. It did not take long for a gentle snoring to begin. I loved it because I loved the two men who were trying to save my life. Very soon I went to sleep.

The dawn light woke us up. Our bodies ached though we slept well enough. We did not waste time in order to benefit from the early freshness. The tent was rapidly folded and tied on the jeep's grill. We drank the remnants of Rosie's tea with a few pieces of dry bread. Scruffiness and creased clothing were inevitable in our appearance. The men did not shave and I tried to comb my disheveled hair as best I could at the car's mirror. The men smiled at my endeavors. Yes, the eternal coquetry of woman even in these dire circumstances did not abandon me. I had to be presentable to my darling Farid and even for Samir. We got into the car and off we went on the same slog. By afternoon we saw in front of us green fields as far as the eye could see. I was surprised. Is this Siwa? I asked Samir. I never imagined it to be so huge.

Yes, Djamila, the oasis is not the stereotypical palm grove with a watering hole for animals. It is a rough rectangle eighty kilometers in length and twenty in width. It is a vast region of date palms and olive trees with villages and a central lake. It produces huge volumes of olives and dates. Olive oil is one of Siwa's popular products as well a mulukhiya. We shall not go into the main town but once again will sidestep it and take a new trail to another oasis called Al Jaghbub. It is preferable not to be noticed. Unfortunately we shall travel north again but also westward. I know of

no other trail. Al Jaghbub is just inside the Libyan border. From there we shall travel west to the Awila oasis and from there turn south towards Al Khofra.

As we entered the green zone, which was not gradual but a sudden break of sand to arable land, we encountered the occasional farmer tending the land, a few people both walking and on donkeys and one Bedouin pulling a laden camel. They all stopped and stared. Not many cars in their life apart from World War II when both the British and the German Afrika Korps exchanged possession of Siwa several times.

Samir parked the car outside a tiny village, took the thermos flask and left us for a while. He returned smiling. Red Siwan tea, he announced. And dates both fresh and dried, plus some fresh bread for dinner. Oh, yes, luxuries indeed for people on the run. We took off again after Samir and Farid emptied a petrol container in the fuel tank and headed for the desert on the trail to Al Jaghbub. A couple of hours later as dusk was closing in we set up camp as in the previous evening and had tinned foul medammes beans without oil or lemon but with the fresh bread. In the morning we set off early.

Al Jaghbub was only about a hundred and fifty kilometers from Siwa and Samir hoped us to reach it by sundown. It was a tiny oasis of a few hundred people where nothing happens in a hurry, he said. It was the birthplace of King Idris and was for centuries a staging post for pilgrims. In the past it had a fine Islamic university set up by the Senusi clan to whom Idris was the last descendant. Nothing much remains of it. It was torn down by Kaddafi in an attempt to rewrite Libya's pre-revolution history. We had finally crossed into Libya but by no means out of danger. We settled near the village for the night. The next day we would start our trek across the Eastern Sand Sea.

We started off early after a cursory breakfast with the red Siwan tea. We would be travelling westward on a trail of about three hundred kilometers between the edge of a region called Gardabah to the north and the Great Sand Sea to the south. Gardabah is a large stretch of intermittent stony hills mostly covered with sand extending nearly all the way to Jakharrad and Awila. Again it would be a two day trek on hard ground with slow, bone jarring progression. Samir told us that around Awila there are many watering holes and drinking water less than a meter underground. We shall be able to wash and shave, he added with a smile.

The hours of travel were unending and tiresome because of the morning heat and despite the desert scenery which was usually monotonous but often grandiose with the looming granite hills of different heights and shapes. Those sheer hills and sandstone mountains, the vastness of the desert, made me feel like an ant one sometimes sees crossing one's path going to some unknown destination etched in its instincts. I could have crushed it with my shoe but I would have cancelled an infinitesimal design of nature. We were as insignificant as that little insect in the turmoil of humanity. A huge, malevolent governmental shoe was poised to crush us and we were running away from it. Would we escape it? I kept these philosophical musing to myself. No need to demoralize Farid, because always at the back of our minds, at least mine and Farid's, was whether this escape would end well.

Samir did not let Farid drive the car. He claimed this constant lookout for boulders, on one hand, and soft sand on the other, did not tire him. He talked to us now and then about Libya and his childhood in the small oasis of Zurgh. Strangely he did not talk of his mother and father. Perhaps it was the Moslem reluctance to disclose intimate personal matters. I was impressed by this uneducated but bright person's knowledge, of Libya in particular, but also of many African countries which he visited in his quest for diamonds. We frequently fell into silence and many a time I

felt my eyelids getting heavy. This is not fair to Samir, I thought. He must stay alert and he repeatedly asked us not to doze off. So I tried always to be ready with an observation or a question that would keep his mind working. I asked him to tell us about the recent developments in Libya which was now poised to become a major oil producer.

After the end of World War II, he said, the defeated Italy renounced its claims over Libya in a treaty with the Allies and Idris Senusi became king. A parliament was formed in 1951 and Idris declared Libya's independence. At about that time, that is twenty years ago, the Americans who built the Wheelus Air Force base in Libya, began prospecting for oil. Oil had already been discovered in Egypt in small amounts and in Algeria in much greater quantities. It was clear that Libya, situated in between, was a prime contender, and indeed initial prospecting showed that the Sirte Basin contained viable quantities. Almost as important was that the search for oil revealed a massive aquifer underneath much of the country. This aquifer predated the last Ice Age and the Sahara Desert itself. The exploitation of oil began in earnest in 1959 when Libya granted concessions to Esso, Mobil, and other mostly American oil companies.

Oil extraction inevitably led to the transformation of the economy. It is still in its initial stages but I foresee great changes. As you know, our climatic conditions and poor soil limit agricultural output and this new oil bonanza allows Libya to import a good part of its food. And another trend seems to be taking place. There are about one hundred and forty tribes and clans in Libya and most lived in nomadic lifestyles and in tents. Now they are beginning to settle in nearby towns. It is something that upsets me. I would feel suffocated to leave the open desert and live in ugly, lifeless towns and dreary apartment houses. Living in Cairo and Alexandria is obviously different. Egypt has culture and civilization. There are a thousand things to amuse you and entertain you. Here in Libya they have nothing. Do you know how the men spend their leisure? They play cards. Not gambling, no, it is forbidden by Islam. They play a simple-minded game called *Basra*. They sit at the entrances of their apartment blocks, gossip and joke and play *Basra* for hours and hours.

As you know Kaddafi overturned the monarchy a few years ago, in 1969. Straight after his revolution he visited his mentor, Gamal Abdel Nasser, in Cairo. He has been influenced by Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabist ideas and hopes to succeed him as leader of the Arabs. He is a strange character this Kaddafi. An erratic megalomaniac who, nevertheless, seems to want to develop Libya. He has extended the oil concessions to cover the totality of Libya and not just the proven finds in the north of the country. There is also talk of making use of the underground aquifers through a network of pipes to supply the main cities with water. Our glorious leader already proclaims that this project will be the eighth wonder of the world. The fossil aquifer from which this water is to be supplied is known as the Nubian Sandstone Aquifer. It has been estimated that this underground water could last for a few hundred years despite the fact that its water will not be replenished through other sources. What happens after that is another question. He laughed. Perhaps by that time Libya will be rich enough to import its water.

Like Farid, I did not speak much but many thoughts kept circling in my head. The desert, the endless distances, and the surfeit of time available kept the motor in my brain buzzing. Won't the Arab countries ever get over the Sultan and Caliphate syndrome? The one great, infallible leader we all have to adore, worship, and submit to? Abdel Nasser died two years ago and he left his country in a disgraceful mess. His armies defeated, a country where the bullies rule, corruption is widespread and justice

is absent. And now Kaddafi is following in the same tracks of his Great Pan-Arabist mentor. Dictators ruling left right and center in the Arab lands. And the Egyptian people, who had the chance to get rid of Nasser after the disastrous defeat of the Three Day War with Israel in 1967, brought back this abject failure of a leader. Begged him to return to the helm of the State through massive popular demonstrations. Yes, they were manipulated by the N.D.P. the one and only legal party in Egypt, his party, but wasn't there a reasonable, decent Egyptian patriot who was willing to take the risk to proclaim the truth to those utterly stupid, ignorant masses? My poor Albert was a victim of that defeat because he probably spoke up and preached the truth, and now Farid and I are running away from that same defeat. Dear Samir, as time passes I become more and more grateful to you for entering into this dangerous adventure with us when you could have easily avoided it.

We camped at night on the trail. The surroundings were eerily moonlike. Not a single camel caravan crossed our path and no animal life seemed likely to survive in this absolute aridity. Not even scorpions and snakes. Again we set off at daybreak on our fourth day. Each day making us more scruffy and sticky than the previous one. We changed our underwear and shirts and yet the odor of staleness was getting stronger each day. My scalp and the men's beards itched and we started using more water now that we were approaching water holes. However, without soap the cursory rinsing refreshed but did not relieve the scratching that went on. We reached Jakharrad in the afternoon and Samir decided to press on to the Awila oasis which was only about thirty kilometers away and a much nicer little town. It is one of the Jalu oases. The houses, he said, are better kept than most of the other oases and nicely decorated. Awila's old mosque is the finest oasis mosque in Libya and the town is a famous center of Berber culture and indeed, rarely for Libya, some people speak only Berber. The town has an active well in the center of the village and we stopped there to ask if there was a khan where we could spend the night.

A small crowd of men gathered around us and Samir explained that we were on our way to El Zurgh to our family. Our car attracted considerable interest and a few urchins sidled to the open window, pressed the car horn and scampered away laughing. Again Samir introduced me as his wife and Farid, our son. There was no khan available, an elder explained, because they rarely had visitors. We asked permission to use their well and we filled the water tank that had emptied as well as the empty petrol tank after washing it thoroughly. We then drove to the desert and hoisted our tent.

At daybreak, after emptying another fuel tank in the jeep we followed it with a glorious washing of ourselves with soap and plenty of water. Farid helped me with the water tank and the men helped each other and managed a quick shave. It was almost a resurrection. We had a quick breakfast and returned to the well to replenish the water tanks. The little town was still slumbering. Our next stop, Al Kufra, six hundred and fifty kilometers of bone-jarring travel. On our way out of Awila we noticed a number of pyramidal pigeon towers riddled with small holes for the pigeons to enter for food. I asked Samir if the pigeons were reared for food or sport and he answered, both. Pigeon breeding is a hobby that never interested me but it is a passion for many people.

We bypassed Jalu, which was thirty kilometers down the road to Al Kufra. Samir, in the best of spirits went into lengthy explanations. Be prepared, he said, for difficult driving through high sand dunes most of the way. The road to Al Kufra was more than a trail. It was wider, but unpaved and full of pot-holes. It was clearly used by trucks and trailers of the oil companies carrying supplies and equipment. The Sarir

field was being developed and seismological surveys were constantly carried out. Samir told us that the Sarir field was discovered in 1961 and is considered the largest oil field in Libya. It lies about a third of the way down the road to Al Kufra and slightly to the east.

Al Kufra is one of the most isolated towns in the world with a population of thirty to thirty five thousand. It is, as you see, quite a large town as far as Libyan oases go. Situated nearly in the center of the Sahara Desert, it has depressions all around it, mostly apparent in small oases such as El Zurgh, the one I come from. We shall not visit it. We cannot afford to waste time or fuel. I have not seen my family for a couple of years and if we visit them we would be expected to stay there a few days otherwise they would take offense. If all goes well I shall go there on my way back. Al Kufra was once an important staging post for trans-Saharan trade. It was occupied by the Italians in the 1930s and was important for the north-south air traffic to the Italian East Africa. Because of that it was a point of conflict during World War II and was eventually taken over by British desert troops. It has a rudimentary government bureaucracy and a police station where I shall inquire whether we need travel permits to go further south without problems.

The journey to Al Kufra was both monotonous but at times awe inspiring. We were now used to the desert dunes and the ascents and descents of the terrible road as it wound around the hills of sand. The feelings of our insignificance in that vast emptiness came back to me again and again. The mirages of water on the horizon were with us most of the daytime and at times I seemed to spy movement deep in the haze of the desert which Samir said were probably gazelles. On the second day, a convoy of trucks and two house trailers drove past us in the opposite direction. The drivers were clearly Libyans but three or four European faces were amongst them. Probably oil technicians or surveyors. We moved to one side to let them pass and closed the windows to avoid breathing the cloud of dust that their trucks raised. They waved at us and we waved back through our closed windows. The next day a caravan of about ten camels with two keepers came into view. They travelled in a row, each camel tied to the one in front. They were laden with two large sacs each on their sides. We stopped and Samir asked them what was their load was. Mainly dates, they said, and some cereals. We bought some delicious fresh dates and some dried ones. On they went on their way in the manner of their forefathers and distant ancestors.

The desolate desert began to get on our nerves. Our conversation flagged and I tried to think of subjects to keep it going. I asked Samir if he prayed regularly and if during our trip the absence of water prevented him from doing so. He said the Prophet dispensed the need for pre-prayer ablutions in the desert in order that the faithful who travelled for weeks and months in caravans would not be deprived of prayer, consequently that was not the reason why he did not pray. I am not very intelligent, he said, and certainly not educated, but Islam that has captured the minds and belief of people far more intelligent and educated than me, has not touched me. I cannot believe many of the things that I was fed at the Koranic school at El Zurgh. I cannot, for example, believe that the Prophet took the journeys called Isra and Mi'raj in one night with the angel Gabriel. The first to Jerusalem and the second to tour the heavens and speak with the prophets Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. He was a mystic who meditated in caves and received revelations and was certainly a great man in his time to have gathered so many gullible followers and so much loyalty as to create by word and by the sword a new monotheistic religion. There is certainly much wisdom in his teachings but for me prayer is irrelevant. Forgive me Djamila but I think the Christian religion is just as riddled with fantasy.

Farid hardly talked and I had the feeling he was depressed. Sometimes long sojourns in the desert have that effect. I constantly held his hand and every time he smiled. I do not think he regretted joining me in this life or death adventure but he surely wanted to see the end of it. To get on with a new life that was our great mystery. Once again we started feeling dirty and sticky. Samir told us that, tomorrow, the fifth day since our departure from Awila, we would come across a few wells with plentiful water. There was another well somewhat closer, the Bir bu Atia, but it was a few kilometers off the main road and he did not want to risk getting stuck in the sand despite our trusty jeep's four-wheel drive. Anyway we had to conserve our fuel. Already we had emptied four of our seven fuel tanks into its thirsty belly.

Indeed, next day we reached Bir bu Zarraigh. It had several wells with water just over a meter underground. Wonder of wonders, one had a hand operated water pump installed on a cement base. We camped there for several hours and enjoyed leisurely ablutions and shaves for the men. I washed my hair with soap and regretted I did not bring with me a bottle of shampoo. Our faces and arms were getting tanned not from direct exposure but the reflection of the sun on the car's surfaces and the desert. No wonder these hardy desert travelers kept their heads as well as their limbs covered despite the often unbearable daytime heat. As we were resting a few of them ambled along with their camels, watered them, filled their water skins, and left after a short rest. I noticed the placid, unhurried movements of these desert dwellers. It stood to reason, for nothing was pressing in their monotonous, austere existence. I wondered what recreations their culture supplied. I wondered if they did not suffer from terrifying boredom.

Samir exchanged a few traditional civilities with them and told us they were Arab nomads probably camped nearby. We filled our water tanks taking turns at working the pump handle up and down and lunched on the last of our delicious dates and some dry bread. We considered camping there for the day next to the precious, precious water but because it was a spot with frequent visitors of questionable trustworthiness we left and drove on for a few hours until sundown when we set up our tent near the road.

The next day, in the afternoon, the cluster of oases that make up Al Kufra was indeed a welcoming sight as we approached the town after this long and arduous journey. We entered the small town with unpaved streets of well packed sandy clay which converged onto a central plaza. A few ancient, dilapidated cars were circulating raising a little dust in their wake, indicating the presence of at least one petrol station. Samir was relieved. He had not been to Al Kufra in over a decade and the question of fuel for our jeep worried him. Houses and shops were dotted along the streets but not stuck to one another as in bigger towns. A few apartment blocks of three or four storeys had the clean appearance of the recently built and a few others were in the process of construction surrounded by scaffolding. The new oil revenues seemed to be filtering down even to these remote parts of Libya. A reasonable circulation of people dressed in the local style of long cotton, tight trousers with a tunic on top reaching to the knees but hardly any women; just one or two with shawls covering their head, a few donkeys and the occasional ambling camel with its owner swaying on the saddle. All in all, a dreary medium sized little town with one or two khans where weary travelers can find a bed to rest and a few kebab joints to sate their hunger.

We stopped at a kebab joint which also served Egyptian-style falafel and sat on rickety chairs outside the shop. It was late afternoon by that time and Samir ordered our food in Tebou, his mother tongue, and we vastly enjoyed our first freshly cooked meal in ten days. Fresh flat bread as well with our kebab and falafel but no

coke yet, they would surely put in an appearance even in this desert before long. When the meal was over, the owner directed us to a khan nearby. We reserved and paid in advance for two rooms and then went for a short walk to digest our food and exercise our almost atrophied limbs. On our walk we spotted a petrol station with a hand operated pump and told the owner we would be passing by tomorrow and we needed a large amount of fuel. He smiled and told us he was at our service.

Our walk lasted for over an hour and it was dark by the time we returned to the khan and parked our jeep outside. The rooms, apart from the rough wooden beds, were bare of furniture but the sheets and blanket though well worn were reasonably clean and beckoned us invitingly. We undressed and fell into each other's arms. Oh, Farid, my love, my husband, do you still love me after I dragged you in this absurd situation, this incredible hardship? We made love passionately, almost desperately, expending our ten-day pent up desires. We hardly slept and woke up before daybreak to use the single bathroom of the khan. We washed helping each other to pour water from a tap with the pan provided, and by five thirty we were fresh and ready, and even optimistic, to continue our odyssey. Samir was up soon after, and we walked to a *kahwa*, a coffee shop, for tea, bread and goat cheese. Then Samir left us to go to the police station for information about the continuation of our trip.

He returned, we mounted the jeep and went to the petrol station where we filled the jeep's tank and the empty fuel containers packed in the rear. The poor car's springs started squeaking once again with every impact on the uneven road. Samir said he did not get anywhere with the police. First, they asked him why he wanted to go to Chad. He gave them a cock and bull story that his brother was captured and held prisoner by a local war chief and he wanted to go and negotiate his release. They told him that, in any event, he would not be allowed to leave Libya and cross into Chad through the Libyan frontier. The only way was to head to the Sudan and from there to cross into Chad.

Relations between Libya and Chad were unfriendly and there have been continuing hostilities between the two countries since Kaddafi tried to impose a domineering attitude and hegemony in his relations with that country. He played one local leader against the other and the unruly Chadian clans hated his guts. War seemed inevitable and the prospect of crossing the Libyan-Chad border was a hazardous undertaking. He was warned that there was a Libyan army post on every one of the four tracks that crossed the border that would prevent him going through. Certainly, there was nothing equivalent on the disorganized, clan dominated Chadian side. However, Samir would not even consider the Sudan option. It would cost us an additional week or ten days of travel with much the same uncertainty. No, he decided to forge ahead with the original itinerary.

Apart from the road that headed south east to Al Awaynat and from there to the Sudan, from Al Kufra there were two options of crossing into Chad. One led to the Tibesti Mountains, whose northern slopes extend to southern Libya and the other which took a slightly more eastern slant avoiding the Tibesti massif. Samir said that the Tibesti was inhabited by Tebou, it was sparsely populated, and he was not sure the tracks could accommodate the jeep, quite apart from the elevations it would have to tackle. It was a range of inactive volcanoes that had the largest and highest mountains in central Sahara. Of course, we would miss the spectacular scenery but otherwise the region was arid with almost no vegetation. It was known as the mountains of hunger and the Tebou led a frugal existence tending goats and sheep.

We took the road south from Al Kufra and proceeded slowly on the hard sand. We travelled all day with the usual stops to rest, eat, and use convenient hillocks as

toilet booths. On the way we bypassed Libya's biggest camel market. Most of the camels you see, said Samir, have at some time passed through this market after forty days' arduous journeys from the Sudan and Chad. The proof was seen all along that road where we encountered every so often desiccated camel carcasses. Early on the second day we reached the well Maaten Bisciara where we replenished our water tanks. On the third day we reached Matan as Sarah and as Samir was informed, the army border post was thirty kilometers or so further south. We travelled twenty five kilometers down the road and stopped. It was late afternoon and the sun was on its way to the western horizon for its daily rest. The boys set up the tent and emptied a fuel tank into our jeep's innards. We sat around for an early dinner and Samir explained the plan.

At two after midnight we would set off and within half an hour we would traverse the five kilometers to the army post. The moon was already a crescent and as we approached the post we would switch off the lights and travel by moonbeam wattage. Hopefully the border guards would be slumbering. In any case, he said, when we reach it we shall improvise. What was reassuring was the information that the border post consisted of just a few tents, an army jeep, and a handful of soldiers. Samir considered the option of circumventing the army post by getting off the trail, driving in a semi circle in the desert beyond and around the army post and regaining the trail further down. He decided against this maneuver fearing that the desert near the army post might be mined for protection. Unfortunately we had to stick to the trail.

I don't think anyone slept that night and if the men did, it was only in snatches. At two, the tent was on the grill; we washed our faces to chase away any remnants of drowsiness and I looked at the moon. I begged it for a little more light but it just smiled. The desert was eerie but, thankfully, we could make out the track and off we set, slowly, with our lights out. Now and then Samir switched them on for a moment to make out something that was not clearly visible but switched them off again. As we approached, there was a big helpful sign indicating the presence of the army control post in the next five hundred meters. We stopped and Samir asked Farid to drive. He took off his *gelebeya* and when I asked him why, he smiled and said he might have to move fast and this heavy flowing gown hindered his movements. He checked his gun and told Farid to put his in his pocket. Farid drove slowly up to the post, stopped and, on instructions, shut off the engine. No one seemed to be on guard duty and there was no movement from the tents beyond.

A long, wooden pole barred the road. On one side the fulcrum with the counterweight and on the other the support. The three or four tents were about twenty meters away in the darkness and close by were the khaki colored army jeep and a circular water tank on short metal pipe pillars. Samir went to the support and found it was padlocked. He moved quickly to the car's rear and silently retrieved the wrench used in changing the tires. He hurried back to the support and with a violent but noisy yank broke the padlock and raised the bar. Start the engine, Farid, he shouted. The guard on duty who was asleep on the sand, unseen by us in the darkness, woke up and started shouting. Samir loped up to him, gun in hand, and shouted at him, shut your mouth, you animal, or I'll blow your brains out. Perhaps he did not see the gun and he kept yelling. Samir lunged at him and cuffed him on his face and the soldier fell back on the sand whimpering.

Soldiers began emerging from the tents. Samir rushed at them firing shots in the air. Back to your tents, he shouted, you are surrounded, back to your tents or my men will finish you off. The soldiers started retreating in confusion. At a run he

passed by the jeep and fired a bull's-eye at one of its tires and another at the radiator, then with the speed of an Olympic sprinter's hundred meter dash headed to our car shouting, get going Farid, get going. Farid started moving the car forward as Samir reached us and ran alongside it. I opened the door and helped him in. Farid picked up speed and in a few minutes Samir told him to ease the speed and switch on the headlights. The danger is over, he said with a laugh. We did not say a thing. What was there to say?

We travelled the rest of the night in our slow, usual pace and at some point we must have crossed the Libyan border into Chad. At daybreak we stopped for a rest, had something to eat, and just as the sun showed its face over the horizon, our eyes closed spontaneously and we sank, just as we were in the car, into a delicious slumber until the sun shone brightly overhead. I woke up with my head resting on Samir's shoulder. I apologized and he smiled. Apologize to your husband, he said, I had no problem.

We got out to stretch our cramped bodies and relieve our bladders. Samir took out some maps from his bag and studied them. He called us over. This is Chad, he said. We are somewhere close to here. We shall travel mainly south with a westerly slant to Faya Largeau. It is an oasis town comparable to Al Kufra but smaller and much poorer. However I believe we shall find fuel there for our car. From Faya I thought of proceeding south east to Abéché where there is an airport but at the police station of Al Kufra they told me that there are no commercial flights there. Hardly any flights at all, in fact. It has a French base with legionnaires wasting their time lounging in the shadow of their jeeps and that's all. It's funny how the French can never actually leave their old colonies. On top of that, the road to Abéché is very bad. Our only option is N'Djamena. The country is dead poor and in an utter mess but apparently there is a regular air connection to Paris because of an air base the French maintain at the airport.

On we went, on our way. The weather was getting noticeably warmer. In the morning the temperature must have hovered in the region of thirty-five to forty degrees C. We were thankful that our car was white and reflected away a good part of the sun's heat but despite that we could barely support our sweaty shirts. The hot, dry desert air did a good, though not very pleasant job, at drying us out. Samir shed his *galabeya* and *taeya* for good. At night the weather cooled and we were thankful and comfortable though usually we needed to cover up inside our tent when we slept.

For two days we travelled on the Jef-Jef en Kebir Plateau. The plateau is a flat sub tropical desert at an elevation of about five hundred and fifty meters. It has a few lakes of accumulated rainwater and many dried salt flats. Many of the tracks just barely accommodated our jeep and Samir was constantly consulting his compass. He told us that the nomadic Bedouins travel mainly at night and plot their journey by looking at the stars. There are rarely any clouds in the desert and the clear, star-studded sky is like a map which they are taught since childhood. They travel towards a certain star, or keep it on the left or right side of their face or even keep moving with that particular star at their back and as they move along they glance behind them every so often to make sure it is there and they have not strayed from the correct direction. They have other dexterities too. They recognize the camel tracks on the ground and can tell to which camels they belong and to which tribe.

Despite the heat or perhaps because he wanted to make us forget it, Samir began his very welcome monologues on the geography and general information on Chad which he garnered from a booklet he bought in Cairo. Chad, he said, is divided into three horizontal zones or belts. The arid Saharan belt in the north where we

actually are, the Sahelian belt which is semi arid and the Sudanian belt which is savannah and where agriculture is practiced. In the south live the settled tribes like the Sara, in the Sahel live sedentary peoples side to side with nomads such as the Arabs and in the north mainly nomads. Chad is home to two hundred ethnic and linguistic groups but nearly all, beside their own language, speak a dialect of Arabic known as Chadian Arabic. The official languages are Arabic and French. A little more than half the population is Moslem, about thirty percent are Christians, and the rest are animist. The state tolerates foreign missionaries, both Christian and Moslem, and from both sides busybody fanatics try to convert souls to their separate idea of salvation.

Chad is about the size of Germany with a population of just nine million. With temperatures regularly in the fifties, it has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world. Eighty percent of the population live below the poverty line and eighty percent live working the sand. Life expectancy is less than forty eight years.

What about family life, I asked. I am afraid this is an unapologetic male dominated society. Polygamy is common and is sanctioned by law. Although violence against women is prohibited, domestic violence is common. Also female genital mutilation is prohibited but the practice is widespread and deeply rooted in tradition. Girls are regarded as having been cleansed by the removal of the "male" parts from their female bodies. It ensures premarital virginity and inhibits extra marital relations due to reduced libido. Let me add, that nowhere in the Koran or the Islamic teachings is genital mutilation prescribed or approved. I am far from being a keen Moslem but I must make it clear that the common attribution of the procedure to Islam is unfair because it is a much older phenomenon. Herodotus who visited Egypt in ancient times speaks of this practice and genitally mutilated females were found among Egyptian mummies. I often wonder whose was that perverted mind that compelled him to overturn nature's designs so obscenely. Obviously it had to be a male dominated society to accept such practices. You see the injustice even now when property and inheritance laws based on the French code do not discriminate against women, local leaders adjudicate most inheritance cases in favor of men, according to traditional practice.

By sundown we passed Garat el Gorane, which was off the trail we were on and camped some kilometers before Tekro, a small village that played a part in the Italian campaign and later in the war with the British forces. We hoped the next day to reach Lake Yoa. As we were setting up our tent we saw two Bedouins approaching us on their camels. They were fully dressed in white robes and their heads were covered. They had rifles slung on their backs. When they reached us they made their camels kneel and dismounted. Samir did not like their looks and told Farid to get his gun from the car and put it in his pocket. They greeted us with a "*Marhab*" and asked for water. I went to the car and brought the pot we used for drinking and filled it with water from the water tank. They drank and asked for food. Samir told them we did not have food to spare. They looked around and ambled to the car and looked inside. Samir followed them looking visibly irritated at their impudence. They moved all around the vehicle peering through the windows. They saw the two pistols we had taken from the Egyptian army patrol at Marsa Matrouh. They were lying, just barely perceptible, beneath the rear seats but their eagle eyes did not miss them. Give us those guns, they said. Samir pulled out his pistol, pointed it at them and told them to mount and get the hell out. I saw those piercing, predatory eyes full of hate. They moved slowly, insolently to their camels, turned looked at us for a moment and mounted. *Salaamou aleikom* they said as the camels seesawed to a standing position. We did not answer. I felt almost physically their malevolence.

We stood and observed them sway to the gait of their camels as they left in the direction they had come from. At about two or three hundred meters away one of the Bedouins suddenly turned his camel to face us, swiftly unhitched the rifle from his shoulder, aimed and fired a shot. Farid dropped to the ground without a sound. Samir raced to the jeep like a madman, started the engine and with the growl of the engine, a whirling of tires and a cloud of dust he rushed after the Bedouins. Petrified, I bent down to look at Farid. His shirt was red with blood. I undid his buttons and saw his wound just below his shoulder oozing blood. The bullet missed his heart but must have ripped his arteries. I was in a panic. What was I to do? I needed help. Where was Samir? I stood up and saw Samir had left the trail and was after the two men deep in the desert. The jeep was churning the sand with all four wheels, roaring like an airplane. He had practically reached the galloping camels. The Bedouins were firing at him with their rifles but the camels' movement led their bullets astray. At twenty meters from the car they separated. One camel to the right and one to the left, but it was a little too late for this maneuver. Samir stopped at once, got out and with a shot each felled the men who toppled from their animals to the sand. He went up to them cautiously and gave each a coup de grace, then at a run entered the jeep and returned to us at full speed while the camels wandered aimlessly away.

How is he, he asked kneeling beside me. Farid was unconscious. I started crying. I think he is leaving us, Samir, I said. He is hemorrhaging continuously. I cradled his head and caressed his hair. Oh Farid, this is where your love has led you. How unfair life has been to you. Was I the bad luck in your life? Am I a cursed woman after all?

The sun had set and darkness was not far off. Samir started collecting the tent we had set up an hour ago. I was shocked that he took no more notice of Farid. We have to leave he told me. We cannot risk staying here. These dead dogs might have companions who shall come looking for them, especially if they happen to come across the stray camels. We cannot leave with Farid in this state, I said. He came up to me. Be brave Djamila, he said. *Bayik fi hayatik*, my condolences. Don't you see Farid has already left us? Be happy that he died a quick death without suffering. I pray that I may be as lucky as him.

We lifted Farid into the car and left that cursed spot. We travelled for many hours and bypassed Tekro. I held Farid in my embrace for our last few hours. My clothes were bloody with his blood. Samir stopped before dawn by the trail and turned right into the desert, drove for about ten minutes and then stopped. We must bury him here, he said. I was shocked but what did I expect? I suddenly realized the full magnitude of my loss. I would never see my beloved again. Samir took a shovel from the car and set to work. I cradled my husband on my lap and arms and kissed his face and hair. His expression was one of peaceful sleep. I had seen it so many times before and now was the last.

Samir dug a deep furrow with sloping sides. It was all he could manage with the loose-running sand. We lifted him from the car, laid him out on the sand and emptied his pockets. He had his pistol in one of them and his passport in the other. I removed his watch and put it on throwing mine in the furrow. I helped Samir lay him in his grave, took off my bloody clothes and covered his face and Samir shoveled the sand back in place. The day was breaking. I stood for some time looking at the ruffled sand of his grave. The desert wind was already smoothening it out. It was telling me that life goes on. Samir took my arm and led me to the car. I climbed in and when he entered on the other side, I told him that despite my son Adel, life will have very little meaning for me from now on.

SAMIR

At first, I thought Djamila was very brave with Farid's death. He was a quiet, strange boy, way too young for her but that was none of my business. Their marriage was recent and their bond seemed strong. After we buried him she did not indulge in the usual womanish lamentations. We returned to the trail and continued our southward journey towards Lake Yoa. I did not want to break the journey to sleep. In any case, we would have been unable to do so after so much tension and strong emotions and I thought it better to drive on to exhaustion. Djamila was silent and uncommunicative. I attempted to draw her into conversation and tried to recount the information I read about Chad and what I gleaned from its maps but there was not the slightest response. It was as if I was talking to myself and I suppose it was to be expected. We camped early that day. I was just too exhausted to continue driving. It was early afternoon when we stopped and had some food and water. Djamila ate slowly and silently whatever food I gave her. We lay back in the car and despite the heat dozed off. An hour or so later, I woke up, drove the car slightly further inside the desert and set up the tent. We sat on the blanket and I started talking to Djamila in an attempt to draw her out of that unnerving silence.

Tomorrow, Djamila, I said, we shall reach Lake Yoa. It is the best known lake of a series of lakes in the region of Borkou. It was part of a huge lake in the once lush, prehistoric Sahara that eventually dried up into many smaller ones. Its peculiarity is that whereas all lakes in highly arid environments with high evaporation rates tend to become saline, the system of lakes in which Yoa belongs remains fresh. Water is continuously supplied by an ancient underground aquifer and has survived the constant drought and searing heat. From what I see in the map, I think we shall be able to find a spot where we can have a swim in it.

Djamila lay back on the blanket looking at the sky. Perhaps she heard what I was saying, perhaps she did not. It finally began to dawn to me that Djamila, who had been through such tribulations in her life and one would have thought that by now was hardened enough to bear one more, was in severe shock. I could not imagine what she was thinking or if she was thinking at all. Her brain seemed to have shut down in a defensive reaction to the pain of Farid's death. I was hardly a psychologist but I did come across such cases mentioned in magazine articles. I wondered how long this state of indifference to her environment and me would last. I lay beside her on the blanket and looked at the darkening sky, at the stars now barely visible and thought of our insignificance. I was never a man of introspection or likely to speculate on the meaning of life. I caught that habit from Djamila. She had these thoughts often and expressed them to me.

When nightfall came I brought a little food from the car and water and we ate silently. I told her to get up and I pulled the blanket under the tent and brought two of the pillows we used. I told her to sleep and I lay beside her. I was so tired I went to sleep immediately. I woke up at dawn and Djamila was in my arms. I figured it was the cold that caused her to cuddle up to me. I woke her up and we washed with a little water and had dried bread and a few slices of canned beef for breakfast. Nothing had changed. She was as uncommunicative as the previous day.

We drove towards Lake Yoa and what a welcome sight the green vegetation was after our arid trek. Look Djamila, I cried, isn't this a wonderful sight? Look at those palm trees. Oh, my God, this world is a wonderful place and we constantly forget it. We are forever unsatisfied, always searching for more than our fair share,

always trying to cheat and dominate our neighbor. What a pitiful animal the human being is. What a hateful killer and murderer. Djamila looked around but did not respond. Finally we saw the lake, placid and peaceful and huge. It covered an area of about fifteen square kilometers. There was vegetation around it mostly in thin strips next to the water but also thick at other extremities with villages. At some places it was completely arid with sheer sandstone cliffs rising vertically from the lake, and at others there were smooth sandy beaches.

I drove around in trails trying to find the largest village to buy some dates and to change a golden sovereign for Chadian francs. I had been doing this all along in Libya being careful to bring out one coin at a time. I kept the pouch at a locked compartment in the rear of the car. So far we had not spent more than half a dozen sovereigns. After buying dates, fresh bread and a creamy, salty local cheese at an open-air market, I drove around on the periphery of the lake and eventually found a lovely, deserted sandy beach and brought the car right to its edge. Come, Djamila, I told her, let's go freshen up and wash. Don't go in too deep, though. One never knows what's lurking inside.

We went to the water in our underwear. I noticed Djamila had lost weight since the first time I saw her at Alekian's *aesba*. She had a slim body with well shaped legs. I put some water in a pan and started shaving on the edge, keeping an eye on her. She entered the water up to her waist and started washing her hair with one of the last bars of soap we had. I made a mental note to buy soap at Faya. Then she soaped her body, which was not a body to arouse the male libido. And yet I never missed the adoration Farid had constantly in his eyes for her. After dipping her body to wash off the soap, she went to the car and brought some of her soiled underwear and washed them squatting by the water. There, I thought, she is reacting normally under the circumstances. Why, then, that otherwise vacant look and depressing silence?

She finished washing her underwear and handed me the soap. I thanked her. I was through shaving and trudged into the water. It was lovely and fresh and I started rinsing the shaving cream off my face and washing my body. Djamila went in again and started swimming a little deeper inside the lake. I kept my eye on her. We came out a little later together and stood for a while looking at Yoa and waiting to dry in the scorching sun. She brought her comb from the car and slowly, patiently untangled her hair. She seemed at ease standing in front of me in her panties and bra.

I emptied a fuel tank in the jeep and checked the oil and water. We put on our shirts and trousers and drove off. I had a problem finding the correct trail for Faya Largeau. I followed my compass for the general direction and eventually met a Bedouin on a camel who set us on the right trail. I talked much, much less to Djamila who kept up her silence despite the lovely dip at Yoa. I tried talking to her but she would not respond. I, nevertheless, informed her of our itinerary to keep a semblance of normality. We are on the way to Faya Largeau, I told her. Faya is the biggest town in the north of Chad. I have never been there but I presume it is something comparable to Al Kufra though on a smaller scale. It has a population of around seven thousand. It is situated next to a depression and its climate is Saharan, which means it has extremely hot summers and hot winters. Unfortunately we are arriving at its hottest period. Due to the considerable underground water supply the main industry there is agriculture principally of date palm production. Djamila kept looking straight ahead as if I was not there, as if I was not talking to her, as if she heard nothing. At times it exasperated me. For heaven's sake, I thought, I am driving you to safety. I am

the only person between you and death. Give me a sign that you understand this. I am not responsible for Farid's death. I could neither have predicted it nor prevented it.

We drove all day with stops for rest, food, and toilet needs. Most of the way in silence. At night we camped near the trail. The journey throughout the day was so hot and exhausting that the cool night was a wonderful relief. I set up our tent next to the jeep and we sat for some time in the late afternoon resting on our blanket simply savoring the cool, dry desert breeze. There was nothing to do when darkness fell and we lay down to sleep. The moon was three quarters full and its light to some extent made the stars invisible. The desert was half lit and inert with just the gentle breeze blowing. Many memories of my desert boyhood flooded my mind. Such nights are made for introspection and I thought over my life. I doubted that after this long journey I would ever again volunteer to enter such an adventure. It already stretched much longer than I had anticipated. The terrain was more difficult than my memory intimated. I thought how lucky we were not to have suffered a sandstorm. Well, lucky and unlucky. We had lost Farid and Djamila was in a mental state I could not understand.

As night progressed, it got cooler than I expected from the unbearable morning heat and Djamila snuggled next to me. I embraced that poor lost soul and caressed her hair. She said, Farid, please shave your moustache. I am not used to you with a moustache. I was terribly shocked and wondered if she was losing her mind but I quickly realized she was hallucinating. That she had not accepted Farid's sudden and totally unexpected death and now, three days later, in her mind, I had become his proxy. I was now the dead Farid she longed to have near her. At what point, in those last three days, did she come to that incredible conviction? What was I to do? I wondered whether I should comply with her wish. Would seeing a new face that was neither Farid nor the old Samir shake her out of her fantasy? An intense curiosity seized me.

Very early next day, I shaved my moustache before she woke up. I went to the car and looked at myself in the rear view mirror. I had worn it for years and my face without it looked strange even to me. Somehow, I looked younger, more distinguished and though I was not as good looking as Farid, I resembled him more than before. This resemblance troubled me. Perhaps it was not a good idea after all.

When Djamila saw me she smiled. That's much better, my darling, she said. I was perplexed but I thought, at least we shall be talking to each other. We had breakfast, I collected the tent, and we set off for Faya. We did, in fact, start talking. I told her it would be very hot at Faya because May was the hottest month with temperatures above forty degrees C. Do you know the way, Farid? Now that that poor, wonderful man, Samir, is gone do you think we shall be able to continue on our own? A logical question in the midst of a delusion, I thought. Don't worry, Djamila, we shall be all right.

We reached Faya Largeau in the afternoon. A small ramshackle town with unpaved roads and one-storey mud brick houses a few shops and an open-air market for fruit and vegetables. Al Kufra was Paris compare to this. We noticed a coffee shop and a butcher's shop which roasted meats to take away. Wonderful, I thought but that is for later. I went to the grocer's with the pitifully few commodities such as rice, grains, locally prepared pastas, oil, vinegar, salt, and soap. I changed two gold sovereigns for Chadian francs, bought locally made odorless oil soap, and dry bread rusks whose supply in our jeep was nearly exhausted. I noticed, next to the people and the donkeys and camels, some ancient trucks circulating; some packed with people on their way to nearby villages and asked the grocer to direct me to the petrol station. We

found it and filled our jeep and empty fuel tanks, as well as the water tanks from the station tap. Back to the market we bought dates, dried figs and a watermelon. Then we feasted on tender lamb meat sandwiches and had some sweet, strong Arab tea. Djamila fished Rosie's thermos flask from the car and we filled it up for our journey.

We left Faya as the sun was about to set. Djamila suggested we should look for a khan to spend the night in town but I told her I preferred the desert. We had become too conspicuous with our white jeep in this dire poverty and Chad was not Libya. Chadians had the reputation for banditry and they were capable of slitting our throats for a single gold sovereign. We drove on the main road south and passed through an army checkpoint. Whose army, I did not know. At least in Libya we had one single glorious leader. In Chad they proliferated. They looked at us assessed us and let us through. Lucky I hid the two Egyptian pistols out of sight. Lucky we were let off so easily.

We were more or less finished with narrow trails that barely contained our jeep. This road south was unpaved but wide and had occasional traffic of camel caravans and rickety trucks and buses both coming and going to Faya. We would also be able to increase our speed by some ten or fifteen kilometers per hour. It made a difference for us and it made a difference to our jeep which would ease up from the groaning first and second gears to an easygoing third. We drove for an hour in the darkness with our headlights on and then turned off the road for the night. We were not hungry after our lamb meat sandwiches and just had some watermelon which also quenched our thirst. In our tent I passed out just as soon as my head touched my pillow. I woke up at dawn with Djamila again in my arms. I wondered how this story would end and if it was ethical to allow a deranged woman to lead me on and me, to feed her delusion. I was not what one might call an ethical person. After all, I killed with a light heart two criminals who did not deserve to live whereas I would not easily kill a dog. I had certain principles but I was human, after all, and a man. It would not take much to become Djamila's Farid.

On the road I began my explanations. Basically, information that I read in the small guidebook of Chad that I had acquired in Cairo. I was happy to see Djamila listening, even if a little absent-mindedly. I told her that to the east of our route was a huge area of many square kilometers planted with palm trees. It is known as *Palmeraie du Borkou*. This area has about one and a quarter million palm trees and is of considerable economic value to the region. The palm trees did not occur spontaneously, though water is present only a few meters underground, but were planted. The next village on our way was Tchié a hundred and twenty kilometers away. With our increased speed we reached it at noon with the sun literally roasting us. A redeeming factor was the dry desert wind that dried our sweat almost immediately though it kept us continuously thirsty. Humidity at these temperatures would have been a suffocating hell.

Outside Tchié we fell on a roadblock of two rickety army trucks blocking the road with six or seven soldiers with ancient rifles standing around. Again I could not imagine whose army it was. The roadblock was, it seemed to me, the Chadian equivalent of the European road toll fee. Civil strife and banditry were the order of the day. The French colonialists tried to instill a sense of national society but for most Chadians the local or regional society remains most important after the family. That's why there is this fragmentation of the country and abundance of local leaders, war lords, private armies, and lawless bandits. We were getting closer to population centers and I expected such pleasant encounters to multiply. I had warned Djamila to have her pistol always on her. Had I seen them on time I would have driven into the

desert to bypass them. However, we stopped and the following conversation took place in Chadian Arabic between me and what appeared to be a sergeant or junior officer.

Where are you going?

To N'Djamena.

Where are you coming from?

From Sudan.

Show me your passports.

We do not have passports.

You entered Chad illegally?

We are refugees.

You will have to come to Tchié to our commanding officer.

I have a better idea, I told him. Take this and let us go on our way.

I always kept two gold sovereigns handy in my pocket. I fished one out and gave it to him. The sergeant's eyes shone almost as much as the gold coin. He took it and bit it with his teeth to ascertain its authenticity.

It is not enough, he said. We are seven people.

Listen, I told him, it is better if you take me to your commanding officer.

Give me another one and *maa salama*, go on your way in peace.

I gave them the second sovereign and they moved a truck to let us through. Few minutes after we left them I saw in the mirror one of the army trucks following us in a hurry. They must have thought it over and decided not to let such easy loot slip out of their hands. Djamila kept looking back and was worried. I laughed and as the truck approached with the driver hooting the horn and gesturing for us to stop, I simply turned into the desert, into the soft sand. I kept going deeper and deeper, all four wheels working away in unison to keep us afloat and in motion. They are coming after us, Djamila said. Silly fools, that's exactly what I want, I replied and it did not take long before the truck was bogged down in the sand. After a wide semicircle we returned to the road and saw back in the distance three soldiers trying to push the truck while the driver was revving the engine. The rear wheels were spinning, spewing sand but their effort seemed very much in vain.

Chicha is a waterhole about sixty kilometers south from Tchié. We did not stop there. We were well stocked with water and henceforth most of the villages on the way had wells. We were in the same state of impatience that comes when one is finally approaching his destination after an interminably arduous journey and we pressed on. As a safety precaution, I made it a point to camp well inside the desert where we could not be seen from the road.

The night we bypassed Chicha, we made love. I could plead to my conscience that Djamila seduced me but it would not be the whole truth. I had yearned for her even when Farid was alive. I kept my feelings in check but her erotic overture found me eager to respond. Was it love or was it the familiarity that comes and grows into something stronger when two people spend time together and share hardships, loneliness, dangers, and loss? It was obvious that she was not normal. Her loss was all too recent and her belief that I was Farid continued without, I assumed, doubts on her part. She had moments when she seemed to be daydreaming, when her attention waned and asked me to repeat what I had just said. At night she sometimes suddenly sat up on our blanket, her eyes closed in sleep and a few moments later snuggled back in my arms. At others she moaned and called for Farid.

That night we lay on the blanket outside the tent looking at the moon. Each day a little more of it was exposed. In another ten days it would be a full moon. To

think that men actually walked on it, she said. Do you think, Farid, that man will ever colonize it? It must be as hateful as the Sahara but freezing cold. Who would want to go there? We talked a little and she went and fetched her own blanket from the car and left it by our side. Do you think it will be cold tonight? I asked. She smiled and said that we shall need it. After we ate some dates and washed our hands, we set the blanket inside the tent and lay down, our heads on the pillows next to each other.

In the dark, she put her hand on my upper lip. Farid, she said, don't you love me anymore? That gesture to verify if a moustache was there perplexed me. Was she making sure I was not Samir? Was she still as confused as all that? Was my identity still fluid and nebulous? I do love you Djamila, I said. She kissed me on the lips. We have not made love since Al Kufra. I love you, too, my darling husband, and I need you. Undress my darling. I never used to have to tell you this. She stood and took off her clothes and I did the same. We embraced and kissed passionately, our tongues urgently visiting each other's mouths and body parts, and I got to know Djamila and she may have noticed the differences in her Farid's new physique and lovemaking. Or she may not, I could not tell. It took two unions to extinguish our fires and they knocked us out. We lay in a prehistoric embrace of male and female with Djamila's blanket over us and outside our tent the occasional howling of jackals and sand foxes far away in the desert.

We bathed early in the morning, emptying water from the tank into a pan and pouring it on each other. We were no longer parsimonious with our water. Wells abounded on our route and we were travelling at greater speed. I kept looking at Djamila trying to fathom her thoughts. She seemed happy and relaxed. It was the same with me. I marveled at the bizarre circumstances in which I found a love I missed throughout my life. I went into three marriages that were half arranged by my friends and definitely lukewarm. That was the reason why they did not last. And my many affairs with cabaret girls were a way of relieving my sexual tensions. And now I was passionately in love with a woman who thought I was another man and would probably drop me with horror when she came to her senses. She would hate me for impersonating her dead husband. I took comfort from a saying: half the blame was hers, half was mine. The only difference was that she was mentally deranged and I walked into this love affair willingly and as an impostor. For the moment nothing was to be done except guide her to safety and enjoy my lovely Djamila and her all-consuming love for Farid.

We left after a quick breakfast and on the road travelled much faster. I figured by tomorrow evening or the day after we would finally reach N'Djamena. In three hours we reached Koro-Toro a village where excavations were under way for paleoanthropological research. The heat was intense. I did not see them but was amazed that scientists would be working in the desert in this weather. Then in rapid succession, in two-hour intervals, we passed Kouba Olanga, Nedeley, Beurkia and finally stopped at Tellis to have lunch and to rest. There was a water pump and we filled our tanks although Salal was our next stop, which was a larger town than all these tiny villages. We were entering the Bahr el Ghazal region and Salal was its largest town after Moussoro.

You know, Djamila, I thought Bahr el Ghazal was a lake. After all the word *bahr* means sea, but I read in my little book that, in fact, it is a huge *wadi*. Do you know what a wadi is? No? Well, a wadi is a valley bounded by relatively steep banks which in the rainy season becomes a watercourse. Yes, Bahr el Ghazal is a wadi with an elevation of just under three hundred meters above sea level. It is an extremely poor area, sparsely populated and suffers frequent famines. It has, of course, an arid

climate and the land area is not cultivated. Most of the natural vegetation is intact and the landscape is covered with mosaic vegetation. Consequently, its main livelihood pattern is nomadic-pastoral and the rest are agro-pastoral households. This immense area has only two hundred thousand inhabitants. They are badly nourished with high infant mortality and depend direly on rainfall. Things become desperate when the rainfall fails.

Salal was in the middle of green vegetation but the town was poor and dilapidated with one-storey mud brick houses built on straight unpaved lanes, most with gardens and palm trees in them. We did not see any cars circulating, just people, donkeys and the ubiquitous camels. Nor did we find a petrol station but were told that there were a few in Moussoro which was an important transportation centre. In any case, we still had an adequate fuel supply. In the town we found the usual miserable shops, coffee houses and lamb meat eateries. Its population was estimated in my little book to be around nine thousand.

We had sandwiches for dinner and tea at the *kahwa* and again filled Rosie's thermos flask for our journey. There was a wretched khan near a small square but finally we preferred to move out in the desert to spend the night. The presence of our white jeep was conspicuous and I noticed interested glances from some soldiers lounging in the marketplace.

Our second day of lovemaking was extra special because we both looked forward to it. For me it was a wonderful honeymoon despite the fatigue of driving in the heat for a good twelve hours. We set up our tent well away from the main artery and lay on the blanket enjoying the evening cool and the moon above. Djamila was in good spirits and speculated, as she often did, on the stars, the universe, and God. I never thought much about these things and found her questions interesting because they were just that: questions, unanswerable questions.

Did I think, she asked, that given the immensity of space, the billions of stars and galaxies, did I think there was a God that was intimately involved in our lives, a personal God we could pray to and expect his assistance? I said I didn't know but if there was, I was truly grateful to him for sending her to me. She laughed and kissed me. Farid, she said, I do not even believe in fate. I believe in chance. Things just happen haphazardly and events rule our lives and we react to these events to survive because our primal instinct is survival. Even the criminals you killed follow that rule. They were trying to survive like the wild animals that plunder, ravish and kill their prey. Unfortunately for them their turn arrived. Again I was shocked at her phrase, the criminals you killed. Was she talking of Farid or me, Samir? Was she coming round to her senses?

We talked and kissed and kissed and talked and I felt an immense tenderness for this harassed and victimized woman, for this intelligent and plucky person. I was glad finally that I happened in her path and was here to help her. We were not out of danger yet but we were close to getting past it. I love you Djamila, I told her. I love you, too, Farid, she said. I shall never forget you. I kissed her passionately not wanting to be distracted by that second bewildering phrase. I kissed her and she caught fire. We undressed and that thin intense woman showed me levels of female passion that I did not know existed. We were in the open air and when we finished we were perspiring. We pulled the blanket inside the tent and lay on it in each other's arms. It was a heaven on earth I had not tasted before.

Moussoro lies in a dry river bed and has more vegetation than is normal in the wadi of Bahr el Ghazal. I did not expect it to be much better than Salal. A little larger, yes, but not much better. With a population of about eleven thousand and its

proximity to N'Djamena one could feel it throbbing to a different tune. The marketplace was larger and noisier and near it on a wide sandlot a few rundown trucks were stationed waiting for passengers to the different villages. The passengers were packed like merchandise with whatever other goods or luggage was to be transported in the rear without even a tent to shelter them from the sun. Djamila and I marveled at their patience and good humor.

In the morning we left our camp, as usual in good time, and drove our daily quota of twelve hours with stops to eat and rest. On the way we passed two small villages with wells called Safi and Am Raya but did not stop. We arrived at Moussoro late in the afternoon and first thing we filled our tanks with fuel and water though we still had adequate supplies of both. I was out of Chadian francs and gave the pump operator a gold sovereign and took my change in francs. We were in good spirits because the next day we would be in N'Djamena, a distance of three hundred kilometers.

We dined at a kebab eatery and then moved to a *kahwa* for the usual tea. Djamila was cheerful despite the long hours in the car. We are eating well these last few days, Farid, she said. I am putting on weight. Good, I replied, because you had become far too thin. She laughed. So, like all Arabs, you like them *simina ou beda*, plump and white, I see, she said. I would not change you for the world, I said, not even for my life. Again, I noticed the allusion to me, Samir. Like all Arabs, she said, not like the Arabs. Farid did not consider himself an Arab. He and Djamila were *shawam*, Christians from Lebanon. I was not sure what she meant. I was not sure if she lumped me with all the Arabs. I did not say a thing.

We asked for a khan and were directed to the edge of the town where a few relatively new houses were situated. By that time darkness had fallen and the only lights in Moussoro were those of the moon and the kerosene lanterns that shone out of the house windows that did not have their wooden shutters closed. The streets were devoid of movement. The innkeeper showed us a room with its door directly on the street, with a tiny, smelly squat toilet in a corner and no water to go with it. For a moment we considered leaving that pitiful abode but were just too tired to contemplate driving to the desert and setting up our tent. The room had a wooden bed and sheets that seemed clean enough by the light of the kerosene lamp supplied with the room. He demanded his payment in advance and advised us not to open the door under any circumstances at night. We parked our car outside the room and brought in a tank of water half of which we emptied in the toilet to get rid of the stink.

We undressed and made love. It was nice to do it on a soft bed but then it would be lovely to do it anywhere with my passionate Djamila. When we stretched to rest, Djamila half rolled over me and kissed me. I kissed her and my tongue searched for her mouth. No, Farid, she said. I want to talk. I wanted to tell you that I think I am not well. Do you have any pains? I asked. I meant not well mentally, she said. Did you see some months ago in Cairo the film *The Three Faces of Eve*? It is a true story. It actually happened. A woman with three personalities which alternated and each was unaware of the others. I think I have something similar in another way. What way? I asked. In a way I am too frightened to think about. Every time I try to remember certain things, something blocks my brain. A kind of amnesia, like when a word is at the tip of your tongue but you cannot for the life of you remember it. It comes to you hours or days later. Don't worry Djamila, I said. These things you are trying to remember will come to you sooner or later just like a word does. Sometimes it is frightening, Farid. I think I am going mad. Sometimes I am not sure if you are Farid or Samir. I try to remember what happened in Libya, I try to remember your faces. Of

course, I see you but I try to remember the other face, the one that is missing, and my mind blocks. I am terrified that I might be losing my mind?

I told her to rest and go to sleep. Sleep and dreams are considered the brain's medicine. I tried to sleep as well and almost dropped off when I heard noise outside our room. From a crack of the wooden shutters I saw a man trying to pick the lock of the jeep with a piece of wire. I woke up Djamila and told her what I saw. I told her I would go out but she must be prepared with her gun and when I shout to her, Djamila bring the keys of the jeep, she must come out and shoot at whoever is out there, especially at anyone holding a weapon but try not to kill anyone. Djamila nodded her head, went to the water tank rinsed her face to wake up completely and smiled at me. Undoubtedly, a very brave woman. She took her gun and I took mine and I opened the door. Two men were ready for me lying in wait just outside our door. I was startled. They took me completely by surprise, grabbed me, and took my gun. The one who was fiddling at the jeep's door came up to us and took the gun. He seemed the leader and he pointed it at me.

We don't want much, he said, just one gold pound each. It is the usual sly tactic. To ask for a small amount, to reassure the victim that the loss after all will be small, and when the money appears to grab the lot. I don't have any gold pounds, I said. We saw you change one at the petrol station. I don't have any more. He smiled at this evident attempt at deception. We want to keep things peaceful, he said, and we don't want to harm you or your wife. The wife came in as an additional threat. Believe me it was the last coin I had and I needed fuel to go to N'Djamena, I insisted. Okay, we shall see, he said. Open the car. He waved the pistol in my face.

I called, Djamila bring me the keys of the jeep. After a moment, Djamila came out of the door calmly extending her left hand with the keys, her right hand in her trouser pocket. No one noticed it in the feeble moonlight of half a moon. She approached the man with the gun gave him the keys and pulling her hand out of her pocket fired a shot at his leg above the knee. The man fell down screaming at the top of his voice. I pounced at him and grabbed the gun and the keys. The other two men started running away. Come back, I called them. We won't harm you. They stopped. Wait, I told them. I had a gold sovereign left in my pocket and I gave it to them. Take your companion to a hospital or a doctor. The wound is not serious but he is bleeding. They lifted the moaning man on the back of the sturdier of the two and left. No one came out to see what was happening, which meant that sporadic shootings were not uncommon in that part of the country.

I told Djamila that we had better leave immediately. If the police or the army were alerted we would never finish with them. The excitement set our adrenaline coursing. We collected the few things we had in the room rapidly, and left the khan leaving the water tank in the room. Tomorrow, N'Djamena, we would not need it any more. We reached the desert and moved off the road and set up our tent, perhaps for the last time. We brought out the blankets, undressed and made love. All the exhaustion of the day vanished. You were wonderful, Djamila, I told her. I love you more each day. So do I, Farid, she said.

We woke a little later than our usual daybreak. We had exhausted ourselves the day before. We bathed with the second water tank's contents, emptied a fuel tank in the jeep and left the two empties in the desert. We were determined to cover the three hundred kilometers and enter N'Djamena that day. Until Massakori the road and the traffic were much the same as before. It was almost the half-way point and it took us three hours at a steady speed of fifty. Another two hours to Massaguet where we were stopped at an army checkpoint. I was prepared for that. I motioned to the soldier

to come to me, put a gold coin in his hand and he waved us through with a wide smile and a salute. Wonder of wonders, the road from Massaguet to N'Djamena was paved and we stopped by the roadside for a bite and some tea from Rosie's thermos flask. Then, on again at an increased speed of seventy towards N'Djamena. Both Djamila and I were terribly excited. The difficulties were not over but I hoped to overcome them. I knew corruption in that country was rife and that increased our chances of a smooth getaway.

I told Djamila that the name N'Djamena was only recently adopted. The capital was formerly called Fort-Lamy. It had a population of about two hundred thousand which however increased and diminished with the ups and downs of the constant civil wars. When things were bad, the population sought refuge at the opposite bank of the Chari River which separates Chad from Cameroon. N'Djamena is a port on the Chari River and directly faces the Cameroonian town of Kousséri. It is a regional market for livestock, salt, dates and grain and the city continues to serve as the economic centre of the country despite, and even during, the country's violent civil conflicts. On the north-west of N'Djamena is Lake Chad. It is a large shallow lake which is economically vital as it provides water to millions of people living in the four countries surrounding it: Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria. The Chari River fed by its tributary the Logone provides ninety percent of Lake Chad's water. Like Lake Yoa, regardless of the high rate of evaporation due to the semi-arid climate of the region, Lake Chad's water remains fresh. It has, however, been shrinking for years and worrying the governments of the surrounding countries.

Approaching N'Djamena in the early afternoon, we came across a convoy of local, skinny water buffaloes with huge upright and semi-circular horns. They were led at a slow, stately pace to the livestock market by a group of men, women, and children. The main animals were tied to one another with a rope tied around and inside their nostrils and the rest followed, supervised by men and women, some of whom bore pots on their heads. A little beyond, outside the city, we were stopped at an army roadblock. Again a golden coin to the officer in charge got us through. I did not want to risk last minute complications.

We entered the capital which could be called a city with a little good will. A multitude of scenes assaulted our senses. Initially the impression of the city was of a rundown shanty town which, however, was throbbing with life and untidy movement. The road was paved up to the city center but its surface was covered with dust. Some well used passenger cars were circulating alongside carts drawn by both donkeys and small bodied horses. Japanese Toyota pickup trucks had made an appearance in N'Djamena both for private transportation of goods and used by the army with small cannons and machine guns fastened on the rear section. Some ancient motorcycles and equally dilapidated bicycles added to the confusion. On this main avenue to the city centre we came across many burnt out military trucks, jeeps, and personnel carriers. Also we noticed a good number of armed soldiers circulating holding their rifles proudly and conspicuously. They seemed more a menace to the populace than defenders of the capital. Obviously the country was in turmoil and the security situation precarious.

The town's aspect improved at its centre. The marketplace was vast with merchants in tents displaying their goods and others in plywood partitions side by side offering food, fruits, cooking utensils, and clothing. Many of the souk sellers were women dressed in brightly colored dresses, their heads covered with elaborately tied, colorful kerchiefs. The men, almost in totality dark complexioned, were dressed in white cotton *galabeyas* and the women customers of the souk had their hair covered.

It was a Moslem country, after all, and mosques proliferated in N'Djamena. Herds of goats and camels shared the roads in an egalitarian spirit with the cars and the people.

As we drove on we saw better and cleaner districts and in one of them, a recently built, two-storey house with the signboard, Hotel L'Hirondelle. I looked at Djamila and we smiled. I stopped the car and we entered the hotel. A small reception desk next to a wooden ascending staircase and the owner behind it jolly and smiling. We booked and paid in advance for a room on the second floor for two days. It had a tiny bathroom with a squat toilet that did not smell as bad as the one in Moussoro.

I asked him for the Air France offices and he told me that we could book a flight only at the airport but because of the situation we should have official permission from the government. Who do I see about that? Go to the Gendarmerie at N'Djamena's main square. How is the situation? Oh, very good at the moment, but avoid circulating at night. Will my car be all right? Oui, Monsieur, I have a night watchman. Give him a little something and your car will be safe. A decent restaurant? The Ali Baba is not far from here. I hope it is without the forty thieves, I said. He laughed heartily. No, no, no Monsieur, the thieves are roaming all around N'Djamena but there are none there. If you are hungry hurry up and go now because it closes at sundown.

We walked to the Ali Baba and sat in a small room with three or four tables, a door to the kitchen and the appetizing smell of charcoal roasted meat wafting in. Mr Ali Baba himself, in a white *galabeya*, a slightly soiled apron over it and a white *taeya* took the order and served the food. The usual lamb morsels and minced meat koftas, but this time with fried potatoes and a tomato salad. Not only that. We finished with a sweet date pie and Turkish coffee. Two other men were eating. We all used the fingers of our right hand with the flat, thin bread to consume our food and Djamila was amused because I told her using her left hand to eat was taboo around here. I read it in my little book. For a moment she looked sad. Ali Baba's *taeya* reminds me of poor Samir, she said. What a fearless and wonderful man he was. You know, Farid, I often thought if I didn't have you I would have liked to have a man like Samir. I felt secure when he was around. I was flattered but was disappointed that the confusion in her mind had not yet cleared. Disappointed and yet apprehensive of what would happen when it did.

At the hotel I gave a good tip to the night watchman who, in his contentment, said he would sleep right next to the car. I told him it would be better if he did not sleep at all. The Hirondelle was superb. It had electricity. A single light bulb hanging from its wire and a tap in the bath-cum-toilet that trickled water. The bed was comfortable and wide and, after our energizing meal, supported with minimum creaking our lovemaking exertions. We left the light on as an additional aphrodisiac and I thought that even if I died on the spot, my life would have been amply rewarded with the love and ecstasy I derived from my passionate Djamila. We woke up late by our standards. The shutters prevented the daylight waking us up early. We made love again and washed as best we could at the deficient tap. Dressed, and walked to Ali Baba for eggs, bread, and tea. Compared to the desert, this was the good life. Then we took the jeep and drove to the town centre.

We parked, left our weapons stealthily beneath the seats, locked the jeep, and walked to the Gendarmerie. We entered a large and relatively well appointed building in comparison to the surroundings. Three or four burnt out army vehicles decorated the square outside. Why didn't they remove them? Presumably they were enemy casualties and served to remind aspiring rebels what to expect if they got any funny ideas. Inside, marble floors and columns and offices, and armed soldiers lounging

about. At a reception desk near the entrance, I asked to see the General. Which General? I don't remember his name, I said. You cannot see the General. I have a personal message from a friend of his from Cairo. Wait a minute. A young, higher ranking officer came up to me. May I ask why you want to see the General? I have a message for him. May I communicate it to him? Begging your pardon, Sir, it is personal. Again: Wait a minute, please. He returned and we followed him to the second floor and to a waiting room with ordinary wooden chairs. Forgive me, he said, I must search you for weapons. Both Djamila and I were wearing just a shirt and trousers. Where the hell would we conceal weapons? I lifted my arms and he patted my body and between my legs. To Djamila he again said, Forgive me, and did the same. The General will see you in a moment. A moment in N'Djamena is an hour but we were led eventually to his office.

It was large and airy with large windows which were shut to keep out the midday heat. A large fan was whirring in a corner, turning left and right. The General sat behind a large desk but stood as we came in and motioned us to sit on the two armchairs in front of his desk. A tall young man of perhaps thirty five, black but not Negroid, with closely cropped hair, dressed in civvies: a colorful shirt and light grey trousers. As Djamila told me later, the ruthlessness and arrogance of power was not missing from that face but he smiled at us.

You have a message for me?

Yes, sir.

From?

The Chadian Ambassador in Khartoum.

Oh? We have an Ambassador in Khartoum? Up till now I thought we were diplomatically a dumb country. So to which political faction does this ambassador belong? And what is the message?

It is not actually a message. He just told me if I need help in Chad to address myself to you.

The General laughed. Excellent advice from a man I do not know and who does not know me. And what can I do for you?

I shall explain, sir, and solicit your help.

My help costs money, Mr.....?

Farid Naguib. Yes, sir, I am glad that you made that clear because it means we can work this out. My wife and I entered Chad from the Sudanese border. We need to book a ticket to go to France and we were told we need an authorization from the Gendarmerie for this.

You could have applied for this authorization at the office downstairs

Yes but you see we have no visas on our passports, no stamps from the point of entry in Chad and we thought this might create a problem both at the Gendarmerie and the airport authorities when we depart. A directive from you will solve everything.

And how do you propose to repay me?

We arrived in N'Djamena in a jeep station wagon. A comparatively late model, original Willys Overland. We crossed the desert with it. It is in superb condition and we would be happy to let you have it instead of selling it.

The General seemed satisfied. Very well, he said. Major Ahmadou, my aide-de-camp, will go with you to the airport directly and you can book your tickets. I think there's a flight for Algiers and Paris tomorrow morning. He shall keep your tickets till your departure and the day you leave, be it tomorrow or the day after, he

will accompany you to the airport, put you on the plane, and take possession of the car. Please give him a small present for his services.

Thank you very much, General. Rest assured I shall reward the Major for his trouble. We shook hands heartily and waited for the Major in the waiting room. It was the same officer who took us to the General. With the jeep we drove to the airport. On the way he asked many questions about the car probably on instructions of the General. Amongst other things, I explained that it was a four-wheel drive and could travel on soft sand without sinking in. He inquired about the remaining tanks stacked in the rear and I told him it was fuel and water we had stocked for our journey.

At the airport, in an extremely hot hangar, which housed the Air France offices, we booked our two seats for Paris for tomorrow's flight. With the Major on our side, the formalities were cursory and I registered my ticket as Farid Naguib. It was a risk, but I did not want Djamila to find out my identity at that moment. I paid twenty seven gold sovereigns for the tickets and of that little pile of gold that Alekian provided us with, less than a dozen were left. We returned Major Ahmadou to the Gendarmerie. He kept our tickets and we arranged to pass at seven in the morning to pick him up.

Djamila was ecstatic. Her face was glowing. I can't believe it, Farid. I can't believe our troubles are over. But tell me, why do you seem sullen all of a sudden? I could not tell her that the moment of truth was approaching. That even if she did not recover her memory, I would have to reveal the truth. Would it devastate her? Would she hate me? Worst of all, our parting was imminent. She would leave for New York to her son and I would return to Cairo. I was in love with her. For the first time in my life I was deeply in love. I looked at her. I am not sullen, Djamila, I said, I am very happy. I am just thinking of our next steps. The money is almost gone and we shall need quite a lot in Paris for our stay and our air tickets. I looked at her. I could not bear the thought of parting from her for a day; how would I manage it for good. It would break my heart.

The heat was searing and unbearable when we left Major Ahmadou at the Gendarmerie but we decided to drive a bit around N'Djamena. The heat felt worse because there was no dry desert wind to evaporate one's sweat and alleviate the discomfort marginally. But we were more or less used to it. Ever since we left Cairo we travelled at the worst time of day in the hottest period of the year.

N'Djamena stretches out for several kilometers along the bank of the Chari River. It is almost two cities in one. The centre is the thriving market, the Grand Marché. To the west are some old colonial buildings converted into commercial premises and to the east is where locals live in tiny, cluttered mud brick houses. The poverty of the country is tangible and depressing and life in the villages without sanitation, electricity, and running water seems unbearable to birds of passage like us but is the only life the villagers know: survival at its most primitive and frugal.

We walked for a while at the Grand Marché to get the feel of the place. It was crowded and we verified what we were told, that Chad is a country of children. The soaring birth rate sees to that. They swarm around you these threadbare but lively children, running around in the dusty streets, playing with primitive hoops, discarded bicycle tires, and wooden skateboards with old roller bearings as wheels, barefoot and carefree. The merchandise on offer was mainly local produce and fruits but also hand-made clothing and shoes, artisan soaps and cosmetic trinkets. From the occasional coffee shops we heard the local music which resembled that of Sudan and was not unpleasant to both mine and Djamila's ears. The muezzin's calls for prayers were heard regularly from N'Djamena's many mosques and added to the city's din.

We drove to the river. The Chari is very wide, with islands in its midst and presumably quite shallow. There are sandy beaches on its banks and one can see men fishing from dug-out canoes, women washing laundry on nearby rocks and naked children splashing in the river. Upstream crocodiles and hippos are found and innumerable varieties of birds. After we enjoyed the spectacle of the river we returned to L'Hirondelle and lugged from the car our last water tank. It was the well water of Moussoro and as safe as water can be in Chad. We drank and drank, shut the shutters, shed our clothes and made love in the relative cool of our room. Oh, how many times more will I enjoy my love, my Djamila? Her body, her fiery temperament?

We slept and in the late afternoon before going for our last dinner in N'Djamena at Ali Baba, I collected our odds and ends from our jeep. I gave Farid's bag and clothing, surreptitiously, to the night watchman and brought from their hiding place the remaining gold sovereigns. I stuffed our passports in my handbag out of Djamila's sight and hoped for the best. The five weapons would be part of Major Ahmadou's present. We made love again at night and Djamila wondered why my kisses were less passionate and a little forlorn. I told her I loved her overpoweringly, more than I have ever loved a woman before, perhaps because the desert tied us in a bond of life, survival, death, and privation. This was about to end and it made me sad. She did not understand what I was referring to and said that in her life, love and death seemed to be interconnected. We talked for a while because we were excited about our departure and too tense to sleep. The mosquitoes kept buzzing in flying sorties around us and we hoped we would not get a dose of malaria on top of our three-week hardship. After midnight we opened the wooden shutters to let in the cooler night air and in order to wake up at first light.

Dawn brought with it a slight wind and mini cyclones of fine swirling sand. Major Ahmadou was waiting for us at seven at the Gendarmerie with our tickets. At least in their deals involving bribes, the generals kept their word. We reached the airport and as soon as I parked the car and brought out our meager luggage, I gave the Major the car's keys. I told him he would find five pistols inside. Three had their ammunition in a box and two belonged to the Egyptian army. I simply said we removed them from two officers who wanted to arrest us and Major Ahmadou smiled wryly. They were his to dispose as he pleased. I gave him five sovereigns as a gift and he seemed well satisfied.

The airport had a single runway and was also used by the French Air Force as a base, which was situated on the other side of the runway. The customs was a large hangar which had not yet heated up in the sun. With the Major accompanying us we sailed along the formalities and exited from the hangar to the tarmac where an Air France Boeing 707 was waiting. The jetliner had entered service only recently in the Chad-Paris itinerary. Formerly the route was serviced by Dakotas. The Major insisted on taking us right up to the sliding staircase. He told us we were lucky to be leaving early today as a sandstorm was brewing in the air. We shook hands, thanked him and ascended to the plane.

We were the first passengers to board and were greeted by two pretty, smiling French stewardesses. We found our seats, put our handbags on the overhead racks and settled down. We held hands. Djamila was radiating happiness. I can't believe we finally made it, Farid, she said. I just can't believe it. But I also can't get Samir off my mind. Is that why you look so preoccupied? I could not bring myself to tell her the truth. It was time I did, but I couldn't. The other passengers started trickling in, finding their seats, sitting and fastening seat belts. The plane was half full at takeoff. A few Chadian officials and businessmen and French officers from the Base. The

plane took off on time. Algiers in just over three hours, travelling over the deserts of Niger and Algeria.

As the airliner gained height the cabin cooled and Djamila asked me if I had a jacket handy. I brought down my handbag and while searching for a jacket our three passports fell out. I dared not snatch them to put them back in and Djamila casually picked them up and opened them. She opened my passport first, looked at my picture with a moustache and she stared at me as if she saw me for the first time. The next passport was hers; she threw it aside and anxiously opened Farid's. Her expression of alarm turned to horror as she looked at Farid's picture and then at me several times in succession. Then she lay back on her seat with her eyes closed and tears started running down her cheeks. She began weeping silently. She covered her mouth with her hand and her body shook without a sound, just a profusion of tears. I made no move to comfort her. I felt it would not be welcome. I did not know what to do, what to expect.

After a while she seemed to calm down. She turned to me and said, Finally it has all come back to me Samir. The whole of that terrible incident. I spent hours and days trying to overcome this strange amnesia, this blank in my mind, and all it took to dissolve it was a look at his picture. When we buried poor Farid in the desert, something happened to me. I don't know what, but somehow I was convinced that it was you that got killed and not Farid. Isn't it strange that I was unable to differentiate your faces? Isn't it strange that in my extreme anguish, my subconscious took over and to alleviate it made me believe you were Farid? I owe you my life Samir and that makes it all the more difficult for me to accuse you of taking advantage of my condition and letting me think that you were Farid. And instead of mourning my husband I became your mistress. Why didn't you just show me his picture? Why didn't you tell me that the watch I was wearing was his? It was not honorable to allow me to remain in that state of delusion. If I did not owe you my life I'd hate you for this. If I did not admire you for your bravery and intelligence I would hate you twice over. But I don't. How could I ever be ungrateful for your selfless offer to help me and Farid? I am just very sad at your deception.

The way she put her arguments, I had no answer. It was the first time in my life I was in a state of total embarrassment and unease. The first time that a woman caused me such an emotional upheaval. I was heartbroken. I was truly and pathetically in love and though I knew that this love affair would have to end very shortly, I did not want it to end on this note of bitterness. We were silent the rest of the flight, each with his thoughts. I kept up a silent dialogue with myself trying to justify my conduct. And she? What was she thinking about?

In Algiers we had a two-hour wait at the transit hall of the airport. We walked together, slowly and silently looking at the tax-free shops with the luxury items, expensive perfumes and golden Rolexes, silk ties and Hermès handbags, marrons glacées and Veuve Clicot champagne. At least in my mind, I was contemplating how trivial and useless this opulence was in contrast to the abject poverty we witnessed in the Chadian villages. When I walked on, she followed me. She had no one else. We were still tied together with the bonds of our desert privations and our loss, for Farid's loss was mine as well. I knew it would break Alekian's heart, not to mention Farid's parents. I prayed that our love and lovemaking, for all its present odium, still meant something for her. It was my only hope.

Walking slightly in front of her, I entered the transit cafeteria and sat down. She followed and sat next to me. I felt a terrible compassion for this woman who was left with just me, a man who in her estimation tricked her. Took advantage of her. I

brought two coffees from the bar and placed one in front of her. She smiled. Sorry, Samir, she said. That was no way to talk to you. I looked at her. Love is so bizarre. Why should this thin, ordinary woman enslave my being? Overwhelm my emotions and common sense? You were right, I said. I had extenuating circumstances but they do not excuse my behavior. ExceptThe announcement for boarding was called over the microphone, we gobbled the remaining coffee in our cups and left the cafeteria for the airplane.

The Algiers-Paris flight would take just over an hour and a half. The stewardesses started serving lunch soon after we took off. When the trays were collected I closed my eyes thinking I might sleep for a while. Djamila touched my arm. Except what? she asked. I understood the question. I felt that the game was not lost. As in tennis, it was still love all. Except, I said, I started falling for you even when Farid was with us. Except, though you did not talk for three days, I woke up each morning with you in my arms. I did not collect you, you snuggled in them. Except, you told me to shave my moustache and then you complained I had stopped making love to you. You see, I really don't have an excuse for my behavior other than I had fallen madly in love with you. And I was definitely not honorable because even had I known that Farid's picture would have brought you to your senses, I think that perhaps I might not have showed it to you.

Djamila was silent. She seemed to be trying to bring order to her emotions. She looked at me and smiled. You were frank with me, she said, and I, too, have to get something off my chest. Yes, love is enslaving. I loved Farid very much and it warped my mind when he was killed. Now I am overwhelmed by guilt for what happened between us. Not because it was wrong but because it was so soon after his death. It was as if he meant very little to me. And that is absolutely not so. This guilt I feel is amplified by my feelings towards you. Our passionate physical union could only result in love and it did. I do love you, Samir. At the same time, I feel an obligation, now that I have come back to my senses, to mourn Farid. Our relationship must cease. It is the only retribution.

I was shocked but relieved. At least she did not despise me. Oh Djamila, I pleaded, leave the dead with the dead and the living with the living. This privation will not benefit anyone. Do you believe Farid is in heaven keeping tabs on you? Judging you? She looked at me unhappily because I did not understand. It's for me, Samir, she answered, for my conscience. Our minds navigate in paths prescribed by our ancestors and our genes. We are prisoners of conventions which we cannot shake off. Please respect my wish. I must mourn Farid.

We landed at Orly in the early afternoon. From the plane's window we saw the sprawling Paris, the Seine, the Eiffel Tower, and the magnificent government buildings. We pointed them out to each other like little children. At the airport building we shuffled along with the other passengers through passport control. We did not have visas but coming from Chad, formerly a French colony, we obtained them on the spot, retrieved our luggage, and passed through customs. I changed the remainder of our gold sovereigns into francs at a Credit Lyonnais counter and feeling a little lost stood in line with Djamila for a taxi under Paris's grey skies. Do you know any French? I asked Djamila. Not much, she answered, but enough to get us by.

The taxi driver, an elderly, unshaven Frenchman was gruff with us: All I want is a street address and a number, he said. I don't like these complications. You want a hotel that is good but not expensive and you do not know in what district of Paris. That is going too far. I am not the Guide Bleu, you know. Will the Quartier Latin do? Yes? Off he went driving his Peugeot fast and mumbling to himself. Half an hour or

so later he deposited us outside the Hotel Odeon. We entered holding our meager baggage. An oak reception desk was at the right and a salon with comfortable armchairs and sofas to the left. Further inside a dining room and a bar on the side. At the reception, with my Libyan-English, I asked for two single rooms with bath and filled a small slip of paper with our passport numbers and addresses. Djamila was next to me when I asked for the single rooms. She smiled and said, Thank you Samir. I smiled back. Are you punishing me Djamila, I asked, or are you punishing yourself?

I called Alekian from my room. He started yelling like a madman as soon as he heard my voice. Where are you? What took you so bloody long to call? Are you all right? I shouted: Take it easy Touny, so that he would stop yelling. We are in Paris at the Odeon Hotel at the Quartier Latin. We just arrived half an hour ago. I am very sorry to have to give you some very bad news. What? he shouted. What bad news? Get on with it, tell me. It's Farid. What about him? Talk for heaven's sake. Farid was killed in Chad by two Bedouins. I heard a groan and Alekian started crying like a baby. I waited for a while until he got a hold on himself. Oh my poor Freddy, he moaned. Oh my poor brother. How will I ever tell his parents? Is Djamila all right? I told him that Djamila was fine and that we were short of money. He said he would arrive within a week with Rosie. Meanwhile take Djamila to see the sights and tomorrow morning, first thing, go to the American Consulate and apply for a tourist visa. We shall get ours from here. Oh my God, Freddy dead, I can't believe it. My poor, poor Freddy. I killed them, Touny, I said. Who? he asked. The bloody Bedouins. Good, he said. It saves me going out there to do the job myself. Call me again in three days.

We slept till late afternoon and at about seven met at the lobby. Djamila looked fresh and beautiful. She was not a beautiful woman but I was used to her, I saw her every day, every hour of the day for nearly three weeks. I made love to her and she made turbulent love to me when she thought I was Farid. Did she really think I was Farid? Did she make love with him as wildly as she did with me? I saw her when she was clean and when we did not have enough water to wash, and even then I loved the smell she gave off. I saw her for weeks without makeup. I saw her when she combed her hair and when it was dirty and disheveled and a comb would not slide through it. I saw her when she was the only woman in our desert universe and now, in Paris, the city of beautiful women and youth and the high-class courtesans, she still was the only woman I had eyes for. The only woman I wanted.

When she saw me she smiled. The afternoon rest seemed to have softened the bony structure of her face and those beautiful large eyes whose suffering gave a soulful look, gazed at me with affection. I could not possibly mistake that. A three hour separation after three weeks' constant companionship seemed to give away her attachment to me but it was not enough to cancel the separate rooms. The weather was pleasant and she wore a white shirt, black trousers, and a light jacket. Even in her dowdy clothes and worn out shoes she managed to look classy. She was tanned from the desert and her black hair was shining. I had a lovely hot shower, she said, and there was shampoo in the bathroom. That was one luxury I missed. And do you think, Samir, we can buy some makeup tomorrow?

I told her I called Alekian and that he sobbed like a baby for Farid. Yes, she said, I can imagine. This Touny, I misjudged him completely. He is a fine person. A bit of a womanizer but I think that's over now with Rosie. I am so terribly happy they are coming. How will I ever repay what he did for me? And you too, my dear Samir. Dear? She smiled. My beloved Samir. Too formal, I said. Okay, my darling, Samir, she said looking at me seriously. Do you mean that? Yes, she answered. I looked at

that lovely face. I sometimes think of the paradoxes of life, I said, I have had many women in my life and was never truly in love until now. You, my dear, have had just three men but you loved them all. You lost two of them and now you are denying our love that is alive to pay ghostly homage to a love that is dead. That's where you are wrong, Samir. My love for Farid is not dead and as long as I am alive it will also be alive. My darling Djamila you are idealistic but deluded. The mop of time wipes the greatest grief as surely as we are looking at each other. The only viable philosophy of life is: seize the day, which means grab your opportunities, your happiness, as it passes by because if you miss your chance you are unlikely to have a second one.

We went out in the street. There was still daylight and we walked slowly towards the University. There was movement in the street of people and students. I loved the freedom with which the young people intermingled and enjoyed each other's company. I liked the hustle and gaiety. The uninhibited way they held each other and kissed. I asked Djamila if she liked what she saw. She said, yes. Why I asked her aren't the Arabs like that? Why is Islam so puritanical and oppressive? All religions are puritanical and repressive, she said. It is their way of dominating their sheep-like believers with ridiculous concepts of an afterlife, paradise and hell, sin and what God wants and what he doesn't. Religion is born and thrives on ignorance. And I'll tell you why the Arabs are regressive and unbending, she continued. It's because it is a patriarchal society. A macho male-dominated society where three quarters of the men wear moustaches to affirm their masculinity. In France, they have moved on with time to a more civilized culture. Woman has come into her own. Here they do not stone women to death when they commit adultery. They do not practice female circumcision. They do not force their daughters to marry men they do not want. They do not kill them because they had sexual intercourse before marriage. What more can I say about a religion that gives the right to a man to beat his wife? I wonder, she said, will Moslems ever change or will they continue to regress step by step to the times of the Hegira?

I could not resist asking her, Are Christians any better? She smiled. Well, she said, the French are Christians. You just commented how nice it is to see a liberal, easygoing society. Christians are better when they draw away from their sanctimonious, hypocritical priesthood. And, of course, away from the myths and fairy tales of their religion. At least many are doing it here in Western Europe whereas the Moslems are stuck in an unrelenting religious fanaticism. Oh, there is evil and crime in this society too but one thing is present that is missing in the Arab lands: the rule of law, which protects the weak and the poor and guarantees justice for all.

We walked slowly on. I enlaced her arm with mine. She smiled at me. She must love me, I thought. This intelligent, educated, and opinionated woman must love me. We reached the Sorbonne. Do you know, she asked, why this part of Paris is called Quartier Latin? Because in the Middle Ages Latin was widely spoken in and around the university. It was the international language of learning and hence the name for the district. We turned into a narrow street lined with restaurants and bistros and entered a nice looking one. We sat down, looked at the catalogue and Djamila ordered our food to the German girl who was serving. A small carafe of Beaujolais as well. She told me, when in Rome do as the Romans do. The French are wine drinkers. Then she started crying. Oh, if only Farid was here with us, my poor unfortunate Farid. She cried silently for a while and then calmed down and wiped her eyes with the table napkin.

Every time she mentioned Farid I felt my chances with her take a step backward. Chances for what? She would be leaving soon for New York and I would

be on my way to Cairo. As suddenly as she cried, she pulled herself together and smiled. It's because I am so happy that I thought of Farid. But he is here with us now. Isn't he, Samir? I mean since we are talking about him and remembering him. Anyway, I don't want to pester you with my sniveling. She took her glass of wine and said, To our health, Samir, and to Farid's memory. Now let us talk of other things. She took a sip of wine and was silent for an instant.

Talking of civilizations, the Arabs had their heyday, too. You know that, don't you Samir? Vaguely, I answered. Yes, after the Arab conquests of the Middle East, North Africa, southern Spain and the Indian subcontinent, at the end of the seventh century AD, Arab civilization and learning flourished. There were advances in every aspect of human learning. Philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, physics and medicine. They recovered and translated the works of the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle and so saved their legacy, which was later translated to Latin and contributed to the European renaissance. The invention of the decimal system in mathematics is one of the biggest ever scientific innovations. There are, though, scientists and intellectuals who claim that most of these advances originated with the Assyrians many centuries before and were simply adopted by the Arabs. I cannot comment on that because I am not sure. There was a book I saw in a shop window of a bookshop in Cairo and I intended to buy it but never did. Its title was: Arabs – From a Great Civilization to Backwardness, What Happened?

We talked a lot. I liked the wine and we ordered a second carafe. Our tongues loosened. We talked about ourselves. We wondered if there wasn't the desert to throw us together, would we have matched as a couple, in Cairo for instance, assuming Farid did not exist? I said I was too rough and not refined enough for her and she said that on the other hand I was intelligent and very brave. You are a brave and daring woman too, I told her, and I want to marry you. A very impractical proposal, she said laughing. Theoretically, I accept. In practice it is not feasible. Lovely this Beaujolais, it makes us dream, she said and laughed again. We were a little tipsy. Back at the hotel, I prayed inwardly, please God, let Djamila ask me up to her room but she kissed me on the cheek and said, good night Samir. She had warned me that God does not meddle in the minutiae of human affairs. I kissed her on the lips and said, good night Djamila, my love.

Next day we had work to do. I waited for her in the lobby and she arrived beautiful and breathless. Sorry, Samir, I was finishing a letter I started last night for Adel. He must be worried sick that I have not written to him for so long. She came and kissed me. Good morning, she said. Do you think we can post it first thing? Don't you have his phone number? I asked. No. There was never the possibility of phoning him from Cairo.

Outside, the day was pleasant with the sun playing hide and seek with clouds, and after breakfast we walked to the nearest post office for the letter. We found a photo shop nearby and had some Polaroid passport photos taken of Djamila. I asked if I could keep one and she said, yes but they are horrible. I put it in my wallet. We bought a map of Paris and realized how centrally located our hotel was. Still, we took a taxi to the American Embassy which was just off the Place de la Concorde. We entered in the consular section, filled a form for a non-immigrant visa for Djamila, and attached two of the photos we had just taken. We were told to wait.

An American official called us. This is a Lebanese passport issued recently in Cairo but there are no other entries except your visa coming into France from Chad. Djamila, in perfect English explained that all the entry and exit visas were in her husband's passport pointing at me. In Arab countries a woman does not count, she

said and smiled. And where is your husband's passport? At the Hotel Odeon where we are staying. We would like to have a look at it. Unfortunately it is almost impossible. He is leaving in a couple of hours for a business trip to Germany and Sweden and I want to take the opportunity to visit my sister in New York for a few days. Could we have her name and address? Certainly. Djamila wrote them down. Mrs. Naguib, please come back in a week. By then we would have checked on your sister and issued a one month's visitor's visa.

It was a close shave. It would have never happened in Cairo. By definition citizens of that city were much less trustworthy than the ones in Paris. Or so the Americans figured. We left the embassy smiling. Why am I happy? I suddenly thought. Because everything was moving smoothly? I would be losing Djamila soon. I was helping to ease her out of my life. We held hands and walked in the Jardin de Tuileries. Djamila opened the map. Would it be too boring for you, Samir, if we visited the Louvre? It is quite close. I did not care much for paintings. I did not really understand their worth. I could tell the fine points of a camel or a goat but not of Mona Lisa's smile. Still one could not help being awed by the grandiose nobility and wealth of Paris. The wide streets, the magnificent palaces and buildings. The feeling that history was alive in that city though I knew very little of it. Every street, every square, every church, and even the railway stations spoke of it. They magnified my ignorance. Djamila, I said, it's good we cannot get married. I am uneducated but all of a sudden am thirsty for knowledge. I would bore you with my questions. She lifted and kissed my hand, and again I thought, how strange that this woman loves me while mourning another. An intelligent person is never boring, she said turning to me with a smile.

We walked for hours in the Louvre. I did not mind. Djamila looked at the paintings and I looked mostly at Djamila. People speaking strange languages, tourists in sneakers, herds of Japanese and pretty girls passed us by and jostled us and I followed Djamila and had eyes for no one else. Finally, she must have exhausted if not her legs at least her capacity to absorb all those colors and shapes, all those buxom ladies and heroic warriors, the ancient legends and crucifixions, the winged angels and bow-and-arrow wielding Eros, all this art which is the never ending extension and evolution of the Palaeolithic cave drawings in France and Spain, in Africa and the Libyan mountains of Gilf el Kebir in the Sahara.

We crossed the Seine and walked towards the hotel with the help of the map. On our stroll we came across some shops and Djamila bought some facial creams and makeup and in another, two black shirts for her black trousers and a simple black dress. She felt she had to wear black to mourn Farid. To be reminded all the time of his and her tragedy. I tried to dissuade her to no avail. With you on my side, Samir, I am forgetting him all too fast. It is not fair. I feel guilty about it. I know that eventually the pain and even the recollection of his face will fade but I must preserve his memory as long as I can. Apart that he was an exceptional human being, he came into my life when it was at its lowest ebb. His love, his patience and understanding renewed my hope and joy in life. I feel guilty about what took place between us and I feel I have to atone for this. Even the affection I feel for you, and I call it affection because I am too troubled at the moment to call it love, makes me feel bad and I justify it to myself by the fact that you saved my life. That it is something I owe you.

It was this continuous see-saw in her emotions towards me and Farid that kept me constantly uncertain of where I stood with her. One moment I felt her within my grasp, the next as remote as the moon. I felt that if I pushed a little harder I would jeopardize this attachment to me, which seemed sometimes so tenuous and at others

solid. Tenuous when she remembered Farid and solid when she remembered my help in her escape. I wondered how much our extraordinarily passionate carnal unions affected her sentiments. Woman, as always, a mystery in this respect.

It was early afternoon as we approached the hotel. We stopped at a small brasserie for a beer and a sandwich. We sat on a sidewalk table. People ambled by all around us and clients of all varieties chatted on nearby tables enjoying a beer or a pastis, the French arak. A waiter, an apron tied around his trousers, decidedly cleaner than Ali Baba's, brought our order. Djamila drank a sip of beer from the tall golden tipped glass and took a bite of bread. Isn't the bread delicious, Samir? she asked. Oh, the sausage too and the mustard and beer. But the French bread, the baguette, is world famous. I cannot help thinking of the poor Saharan villages. And unfortunately that is all I can offer, my thoughts. My thoughts invalidated by my powerlessness. She lifted her hands, palms up in emphasis, and looked at me. Seize the day, Djamila. Seize the day, I said. We are a speck of sand. We can do nothing for the millions of inequalities and injustices of mankind. Seize the day and try to be happy day by day. Do not deny what is within reach. She smiled. She knew what I meant. I am seizing the day as best I can, Samir, she answered.

The next few days we were typical tourists. We visited all the usual sights like the Eiffel Tower and the Champ de Mars, the Champs-Élysées, Arc de Triomphe, the Musée d'Orsay, Notre Dame, the Opéra de Paris, the Pantheon and on and on and on. The trouble was that Djamila reverted with her mourning attire of black to a mourning mood. She was not gloomy but she was not gay and I wanted so much to enjoy Paris with her laughter and intelligent conversation. She answered with patience and smiles my interminable questions but something was lacking. That color black, blackened her moods. I called Alekian on the third day as requested and he told me he would be with us in a few days without pinpointing the date. He would be staying with Rosie at their flat off the Rue de Rivoli. With Djamila there was no more question of resuming our love affair. She was affectionate with me, and in parallel, distant. My hints were met with tolerant but definitely non-inviting smiles. I had to be content to simply being near her.

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That phone call devastated me. I was so anxious for it and when the weeks passed with no news, my mind kept inventing nightmarish scenarios of arrests, of accidents, of illness and generally of disaster of some sort or another. I imagined a week or at most ten days would be enough for the journey and when two weeks went by without a sign I could hardly sleep at night. Rosie too was worried but tried to comfort me with the logic that no news is good news and that bad tidings travel faster than good ones. Unfortunately she was wrong and Samir's call from Paris confirmed my fears that something terrible had happened. My friend, my brother, the person I loved more dearly almost than my parents was killed in the desert by some Bedouin bandits. I broke down and cried and was unable to get any but the most cursory details of the incident. I had placed so much trust on Samir and I could not imagine how he could let such a thing happen. He and Djamila seemed to be well.

I called Rosie immediately and together we cried on the telephone. She wept for poor, unlucky Djamila and I cried for the brother I lost. I left the office soon after. I was unable to concentrate on my work and kept thinking of Freddy. I called mother at her atelier and again I cried while she sobbed. She did love him as a son and I suspect as a lover as well.

I told Rosie we would have to leave as soon as possible for Paris. It would be with a heavy heart but I had to finish what I had started regardless if the venture went awry on the way and if the person I was most concerned for was no longer alive. Their money was almost exhausted and I felt that taking care of Djamila was a duty that now reverted from Freddy to me. I felt I had to deliver her to her son. It was what Freddy would have wanted me to do. My most oppressive duty, however, was here in Cairo. It was to go and announce Freddy's death to his parents whom we had thoughtlessly left in the dark about this escape from Egypt. I shuddered when I thought about it. Nevertheless I could not postpone it.

I called at the grocery the next morning and asked Freddy's father for an appointment at their home. Is something wrong? Mr Naguib asked me. I am afraid there is, I said. Please let me explain this afternoon. Perhaps I was heartless and selfish not to tell the poor man straight off about the disaster that befell him and gave him time to prepare himself for the worst thus making my task easier.

When I rang the bell at five that same day, the door opened and four worried and questioning eyes confronted me. I entered the hall and they followed me as if to prevent losing me. I must have been pale and my lips were trembling as I attempted a smile. I sat on the sofa of the living room and told them we had lost Farid. My words did not seem to register, did not make sense, their eyes were vacant. Lost him where, how? I started crying and they understood. Mrs Naguib started crying silently and her husband was lost in thought for a few moments. Then he said that Farid had cried when he was supposedly leaving for his honeymoon. It was, he said, the first indication that something was wrong. His usually cool and collected Farid cried with tears. What happened, Touny?

I explained that Djamila was suspected of murdering a police officer who was blackmailing her and the *Mabahez* was trying to pin the murder on her. Farid decided to escape with her from Egypt illegally through the Libyan border and into Chad. I provided them with a car and a guide to help them get away. I had no other way of helping them and I could not possibly foresee the tragedy. The escape was fraught with danger in any case. In Chad two armed Bedouin bandits shot and killed Farid and

were themselves killed by Samir, their guide. Eventually Djamila and the guide reached Paris and they phoned to give me the news. My mother Monette is devastated and will call you to offer her condolences. I am disconsolate. I really do not know what to say. There are no words that can soften our pain. All I can say is, may God give us patience to bear it. And please bear in mind that though I cannot replace Freddy, I would consider it a privilege if you would count on me as another son. As I left they hugged me and all of us cried together. It was a catharsis and I felt relieved of this great burden.

The next day I went to Air France and booked our tickets. Rosie and I could not leave immediately. I had one or two business matters to settle and in any case Samir and Djamila were safe and sound. I communicated this to Anwar el Libi, Samir's brother and told him of the loss of Farid. We met in my office later that day and examined his travel program and settled some minor details that were pending. Due to my business I had valid long-term visas both for France and the United States and we did not need to lose time awaiting their issue. I had planned to get married as soon as I saw Freddy again in whatever country we were in but it was not to be.

We departed a few days later on an Air France direct flight to Paris. Rosie was both anxious and excited that she would see Djamila again. Both of us were wondering at her state of mind. We wondered how the rest of their journey was after Freddy's death. It could not have been easy for either of them. I hoped Samir treated her gently and above all did not consider this an opportunity for sexual advances. But no, he could not have been as insensitive as all that. Though a veteran of three failed marriages and now for some years a hardened bachelor and a womanizer, he would not have thrown himself at a woman who just lost her husband, a woman in mourning. Anyway, Djamila is a toughie after all the tribulations in her life. She would give him the appropriate response. The way she gave me the cold shoulder. She is not to be trifled with. Freddy captured her heart because he was patient and loving and above all sincere. Oh Freddy, what a wonderful person you were.

We left early in the morning and after a three-hour flight we were in the city of Light. Oh, beautiful Paris, the most magnificent city in the world. It is another world. When I retire, I shall cede my business to my son and spend the rest of my life with Rosie in Paris. Rosie loves it too. I bought a lovely flat centrally located off the Rue de Rivoli, half in my name and half in Rosie's. I was as certain as that, that this lovely girl would marry me. I have been very lucky in my life and Rosie is its prize jewel. When I first met her I wanted her for my bed. My friends told me she was not easy and yet this doll was not the coquettish slut they claimed she was. What did she see in me other than my slightly mad antics and loud voice? And my insatiable need of her body? In any case, she immediately stuck to me. You make me laugh, she said. I feel at ease and secure with you. No, it was not the money because no one knew how rich I already was. Of course she saw I spent freely but that was not enough of a reason for her attachment to my person. We fitted like hand and glove.

We took a taxi to our lovely home. Rosie had decorated it and she often travelled alone to Paris for shopping. It was always ready for her, as a woman came in once a week to clean it. We had a car and were by now quite familiar with the city. At least the central parts of it, but more often than not we used taxis or our legs to move around. Traffic and parking spaces were a constant hassle. Home sweet home, I told Rosie as soon as we entered the flat and I kissed her, but my mood was not light hearted. I was not as apprehensive as for the meeting with Farid's parents but it would be difficult enough.

It was already about one in the afternoon and I doubted I would find them at the hotel but called anyway. The receptionist told me there was no answer from their rooms. Did you try both rooms? I asked to make sure they were not in the same one. Oui, monsieur, I tried both rooms. I was relieved but also felt a little cheap to have considered that they might have united as a couple. Nevertheless I had to be sure. The possibility, however outrageous, crossed my mind. My God, if that was the case I would have taken the first flight back to Cairo and left them there without a penny to work things out by themselves.

I left name and number at the reception and Samir called me at four. He seemed happy and relieved to talk to me. I asked about Djamila. She is in her room, he said. She is well. A little gloomy and uncommunicative but it is to be expected. It is good we are in Paris and there are so many places and things to see. There are plenty of distractions to take her mind off Farid. I told him we would pick them up at eight for dinner.

We found them sitting in the lobby. Throughout our taxi drive Rosie was almost shaky with eagerness to see Djamila. Djamila jumped up when she saw us and ran to Rosie. They hugged and started swaying and crying for a good two minutes. I shook hands with Samir. I noticed he had shaved his moustache. I wondered why. I kissed Djamila when Rosie released her, offered my condolences and told her Freddy's loss was most painfully mine as well as hers. She was dressed in black like the old days at Monette's and was lightly, almost imperceptibly, made up. Yes, for all her hardships she seemed in good shape though perhaps a little thin. Samir looked well enough even if a little strange to me without his moustache. We moved to an empty salon beyond the lobby and sat down, Rosie and Djamila on a sofa holding hands.

You must have had a rough journey, Djamila, and please forgive me for the one important question I need to ask. I know it will bring painful memories but I must know how Farid met his death. I looked at Samir for the explanation. Well, said Samir, we had crossed illegally into Chad by staging a mock attack at the Libyan army checkpoint and shooting up their jeep and four days later as we were setting camp a few kilometers outside a small village called Tekro, two Bedouins armed with rifles rode up to us on camels. They asked for water and food and shamelessly looked inside our car to see what they could appropriate. I was annoyed and took out my pistol and told them to get going. They mounted their camels and rode off but suddenly from a distance of a few hundred meters they fired a shot and Farid dropped to the ground. I was infuriated. I ran to the car and chased them in the desert and killed them. When I returned I found Farid bleeding profusely from a wound beneath his neck just above his heart. There was no hope. Please believe me, there would have been very little hope even if we were inside a hospital. In the desert there was none. The bullet had torn vital arteries. He left us very quickly without regaining consciousness.

I started crying and so did Djamila. You should have killed them Samir straight away, I said with tears welling from my eyes. As soon as you saw their thieving intentions. These people are sneaky and treacherous. Samir shook his head. You cannot kill a person because you suspect his intentions. The truth is, we were not cautious enough. This was my fault and I accept the blame. Anyway, we drove off immediately in case these two had companions who would be looking for them. We buried Farid in the desert a long way off from that cursed spot. As for the rest of our adventures, Djamila should write a book someday describing them. We had some

close calls and suffered severely from the heat but here we are, unfortunately minus the ill-fated Farid.

We were silent for a while recovering from our pain. I had no doubt Samir was not really at fault. I looked at him. He had an expression of guilt and helplessness. I tried to comfort him. It's not your fault, my friend, I told him. You could not have foreseen what happened. But tell me, why did you shave your moustache? I asked him. He seemed uneasy for a moment. One day, he said, we were talking with Djamila and she said that three quarters of the Arab men wore moustaches to affirm their masculinity. I took it as a reprimand and the next morning shaved it off. You look much better without it, said Rosie. Djamila thinks so too, said Samir. He smiled at Djamila. I could not mistake that look. I was almost certain Samir was in love with her. Or at least the long, grueling journey together tied them in a special camaraderie, a strong attachment. After a little small talk we took a taxi to a restaurant I frequented with Rosie. We ordered food and wine and chatted mainly about their trip.

Did the jeep serve you well? I asked Samir. Oh yes, it was absolutely faultless. A superb vehicle. I gave it away as a bribe to the police chief of N'Djamena to get us out of Chad without complications. I laughed that a car uselessly parked in a garage for years found its use after all. Any diamonds in Chad, Samir? Plenty of sand, searing heat, abject poverty, corruption, anarchy but no, no diamonds. I hope I won't be going there again anytime soon. The food arrived and was served with Parisian flourish. As usual, it was excellent as was the wine that the Maitre recommended.

I told Samir and Djamila that there was no sense hanging around Paris and we should arrange our departure. Samir said that next day they had to get Djamila's passport from the American consulate hopefully with an entry permit to the States on it. Then let us meet at my travel agent, I suggested, at around eleven. He is at 768, Champs-Élysées. Djamila, we shall accompany you to New York to hand you over to Nelly and Adel. Freddy would have wanted us to do this. Djamila managed to mutter, thank you, before breaking in tears again. Her nerves were obviously frayed. Rosie held her hand. It was Rosie's idea, I said. Please don't thank us. I have been to New York but Rosie has not. It is an opportunity for her to see the famous city of skyscrapers. I don't think she will like it as much as her beloved Paris though.

Next day at eleven we met at Jacky's Travel and Djamila showed me her passport with a three-month's visitor's visa on it. She seemed happy and relieved and Samir silent and gloomy. Yacoub, the owner of the agency, an Armenian, had on my instructions already booked our flights for the following day. Three tickets to New York on TWA, and one to Cairo by Misrair. I paid by check and asked Samir if he needed any more cash. He said he had enough to pay the hotel.

We ambled down the world famous tree lined avenue with its super wide pavements and luxury boutiques, its cinemas and cafés, and Rosie dragged Djamila to every shop that interested her. I think, by now, she knew most of them by heart but wanted to distract Djamila. I suspected, however, that they meant very little to Djamila in her present situation. Still, the two women chatted and laughed as they moved from one show window to the next, arm in arm. This Rosie was truly my prize jewel. My lucky star. She defied her family and the narrow-minded, gossipy Cairo society to live with me and now she was three months pregnant. We had to get married very soon and I had looked forward to doing so with Freddy as our best man.

Samir walked next to me silent and morose. I wondered what was eating him. I tried to interest him with our business and Anwar, his brother, who was about to leave for Africa and asked him if he had any plans. No, he said, I am at your disposal. He was silent for a moment. This trip has left me with a strange dissatisfaction, he

said, an emptiness in my soul, a feeling that it should not be ending as it is. Farid's death weighs on me and Djamila's departure as well. If Farid was with her it would be different. Obviously, I said. But she is leaving for the unknown, he insisted. She is going to her son, I said. After so many years, this is uncharted territory. So what do you suggest? I asked. I really don't know. The decision is not mine.

I did not understand what Samir was driving at. Was he really in love with her? Did he make a move towards her and was rejected? Did the shaving of his moustache have anything to do with it? It did give him a kind of dignity in place of his looks of an adventurous drifter, a happy-go-lucky fortune-hunter. For he was not a worthless person. He was intelligent and brave and obviously unhesitating in difficult decisions. The way he went after and killed the two Bedouins proves it. Oh hell, I cannot be bothered with his moods. I have enough problems of my own.

We sat at a sidewalk café and ordered beers and sausage rolls. That, I told them, would be our lunch. We must reserve a little space in our bellies for dinner. I am putting on weight, as Rosie keeps reminding me, and I don't want to give her an excuse to leave me. Rosie smiled. I missed my opportunity on this, she said. I can hardly afford to do it now. I am three months pregnant. Djamila jumped up, hugged and congratulated her. My best wishes Touny, she told me. Farid would have been overjoyed. Samir smiled and said, Mabrouk.

We consumed our delicious rolls and drank our iced lager in that most cosmopolitan of avenues, the Champs-Élysées, and looked at the amazing variety of peripatetic pedestrians going to and fro. It was almost a cross-section of the world population. When we finished we left by taxi for our respective abodes and met again for dinner at another restaurant at about the same time as yesterday. The dinner was pleasant with small talk, with bits of recounting of their desert trip and descriptions of the abject poverty and lawlessness they witnessed in Chad. They took turns in these descriptions and Samir looked at Djamila when he recalled the days of hardship. I could not miss the tenderness in his glances and so did Rosie, as she later told me. Djamila cried several times when we talked of Farid and I could not hold back my own tears. The wine loosened us a bit and most of the small talk flowed easily. At about eleven we called it a day. Tomorrow, all of us at Orly by eight, I reminded them as we bid each other good night.

I expected an emotional farewell between Djamila and Samir but the intensity surprised me. Samir's flight was announced before ours and we accompanied him to the exit gate. Djamila's face was drawn and Samir seemed lost in thought with an apprehensive look on his face. I shook his hand, thanked him and told him we would meet in Cairo in a couple of weeks. He turned to Rosie and extended his hand but Rosie approached him and kissed him on both cheeks. Thank you for everything, she said. We are all very grateful. Already a liquid film glazed his eyes when he turned to Djamila. They embraced and started shaking. I could not believe my eyes. They were weeping, both of them, quietly, uncontrollably, holding one another in an enveloping grasp of tensed muscles. I turned to Rosie in bewilderment and saw tears in her eyes. Then Samir disengaged and walked away rapidly, wiping his wet cheeks with his hand. Djamila turned to us unsteadily, searching in her bag for a hanky to dry her eyes. Rosie gave her a paper tissue and she wiped her tears and blew her nose.

Our flight finally took off, after a slight delay, at eleven. We were all subdued because Djamila seemed depressed. She talked to Rosie now and then and it was mostly Rosie that initiated small talk. I had a window seat at the other end of the row with Rosie between us and did not join in their conversations. I thought it strange that Djamila should not show greater excitement now that we were on the last lap to her

son. Perhaps her reserve concealed apprehension as to what this meeting with son and sister would give. Not immediately perhaps, but in time. She had not seen them since Nelly came to Cairo to take Adel with her, six or seven years ago when his father was in prison. She wrote to him a letter when she arrived in Paris. A letter he almost certainly has received but does not know that he shall see her in just a few hours. I presume now that her goal is almost accomplished she must be thinking of the uncertain future that Samir talked about. He might have been right after all. Her life seems fated to confront tragic upheavals.

We left Paris at eleven and touched down at Kennedy Airport at twelve thirty local time. Seven and a half hours flight time minus six hours time difference. As the plane approached the airport the view from the porthole was stunning. I got up and made Rosie take my seat with Djamila next to her. It's a beautiful sight, said Rosie. Beautiful but frightening, murmured Djamila. Why frightening? I asked her. I don't know. I haven't thought about it. In the desert, after Farid died we were two souls in the middle of nothingness but we had a goal, cooperation, compassion, and companionship. Here I shall be alone in this monstrous agglomeration of ten million. The very skyscrapers of Manhattan make me shudder. Oh don't exaggerate, I told her. You have your family here. This is an orderly civilized society where people work and live well. They are not starving like the natives of Sahara who kill to steal. If I am not mistaken, she answered, crime is hardly lacking in this city. It exists, I said, but it is being fought and if you don't look for trouble in New York, trouble does not look for you. I do quite a lot of business in the diamond district of midtown Manhattan. This diamond market developed when the Nazis took power and Jews fled from Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. It is mostly in the hands of Orthodox Jews and some of these people with their traditional garb of black robes and kipa, beards and tzitzit fringes, carry millions of dollars worth of diamonds in their pockets. Just like you, as rumor has it, said Djamila with a smile. I laughed. Yes, just like me. We close deals with a simple handshake and they mutter a traditional blessing (mazel und brucha).

You must have become very fond of Samir during this journey, I changed the subject. Of course I did, she answered. He struggled alongside us to save my life, something he need not have done. Especially since he did not know me and he avenged Farid's death. That was very important to me. I would have been sick if those two killers got away. How can I not be grateful to him? Is that all? I asked. She looked at me startled. I felt dreadful. Forgive me Djamila, I said. Please don't answer. I am breaching the bounds of discretion and propriety.

We took a cab from the airport to the Hyatt in Manhattan. I asked Djamila to stay with us for the first few days but she would not think of it. I wanted to take my Rosie to a more luxurious hotel such as the Plaza or the Pierre but I thought of Djamila squeezing in a miserable flat in Brooklyn and decided against it. We registered, left our luggage and took a cab for Brooklyn. Djamila gave the driver the address. She was close to apoplexy. Both Rosie and I saw it. To get her mind off that awesome reunion I asked her to tell Rosie a few things about Brooklyn. I hardly know anything about it myself, I said. I usually fly in and fly out of Manhattan within two days. She looked at me and started crying. She guessed my intention. Good, I thought, the tears will release her tension. Touny, she said, I owe you so much that I find it almost useless to try to express my thanks. There are no words that can express my gratitude. Rubbish, I said. What I did, I did for Farid, and what I am doing, I am doing for Farid. That is not to say you do not count in our feelings. Both Rosie and I love you very much. Now tell us about Brooklyn.

Well, the little I know I gathered from the letters Adel sent me through the years. Brooklyn is the most populous of the five boroughs that make up the city of New York. The second biggest is Queens. As a city itself of over two million people, it is divided into different neighborhoods. Many ethnic groups dominate some of them although the makeup is fluid as new immigrants move in and others move out. As a general pattern the population is becoming increasingly mixed. Adel lives with my sister Nelly in Bay Ridge, which is an Italian enclave but where Irish and Greeks also live as well as an increasing trickle of Arab Americans, both Moslems and Copts. There are mosques as well as Maronite and Coptic Orthodox churches. As far as his description of Bay Ridge goes, it seems to be a clean, primarily middle class neighborhood, which resembles the upper class London districts with rows and rows of architecturally identical nineteenth century houses. Suddenly Djamila stopped. She realized we were on Brooklyn Bridge and closing in on the target. She did not continue and we travelled for another ten minutes in silence.

Eventually the taxi stopped in front of an anonymous house like all the others in a clean, tree lined street. We got out, paid the cab and Djamila looked forlorn and lost carrying her small battered suitcase and handbag. It was nearing the end of June, three in the afternoon, and the weather was hot, humid, and unpleasant. She was on the threshold of her new life. She looked up at the building. Solidly built, three floors and an attic. Then turned to us with a questioning look. She was uncertain where to go from there, what the next step was. I saw Rosie turn away to hide her tears. I went up the street-side stairway and looked at the names on the intercom. I found Nelly Tewfik and Adel Sadek. I motioned to Djamila to come up and pressed the intercom buzzer. Yes? said a voice. It's me, Djamila. Come up, third floor. I have friends with me. Come up, come on up all of you. A buzzer unlocked the door and we entered.

I took her suitcase and told her to go up ahead of us. She climbed the stairs quickly and lightly. We followed with Rosie and heard the door open and the two sisters embrace noisily with cries, tears, and laughter. I heard Djamila ask, where's Adel? He's not here. He'll be back in the evening. We didn't know you were coming today. Djamila turned to us. She had lost that cowed look of ten minutes ago. These are my friends, Antoun Alekian and his fiancée Rosie. I left the suitcase near the door and we shook hands with Nelly. She was slightly older than Djamila but looked a good ten years older with a slight resemblance to her and plump like most American women her age.

We entered a small living room with a sofa, two armchairs, a small table and the ubiquitous television set on one side and a larger table with chairs on the other, where meals were obviously served and eaten. The heat was uncomfortable even in the flat but a large fan was on at one corner of the room and provided some relief. Nelly brought a jug of homemade lemonade with ice cubes floating inside and served us in tall glasses. The two sisters sat on the sofa and every so often leaned to exchange hugs and kisses. We talked mainly in Arabic though English intruded in mid sentence and Nelly's American accent jarred my nerves.

My goodness, Djamila, we received your letter three days ago. No need to tell you it was the most shocking and upsetting letter I received in my life. What a terrible thing Farid's death was. I swear to you I cried. Adel took it more calmly. He was not happy with this relationship. He thought Farid was far too young for you. I kept telling him it was none of his business. He has finished school, by the way, and has gone to the beach with his girlfriend. He ought to be back by eight. He has been accepted in a number of colleges but chose the School of Natural and Behavioral Sciences of the Brooklyn College. It is an excellent college, it is conveniently close,

and he will be able to live at home. Moreover, it has a beautiful campus. He is very happy because his girlfriend, a sweet Italian girl, will also attend there. He says he wants to get engaged to her. Of course he is far too young but I do not object. I let him believe I am favorably inclined because these early romances do not last. They wear off soon enough.

She went on and on about Adel as if she were his mother and perhaps she deserved the title more than Djamila but I thought out of delicacy she should not sound so possessive. After half an hour of small talk, I got up saying to Rosie that we ought to leave the two sisters alone. After so many years they surely have a lot to say. Djamila's eyes met mine and pleaded voicelessly, please stay a little longer, but it was too hot and stuffy in the flat and I needed the Hyatt's air conditioning.

As we reached the door, Nelly touched my arm. Mr Alekian, she said. Please call me Antoun or Touny like all my friends, I interrupted her. Well, Touny I would like to express my admiration and gratitude for your moral and financial support to Djamila and Farid. If I had a brother, I said, I would do the same and Farid was more than that. Please excuse us, we are quite tired from the voyage and we need to rest. We will pass by tomorrow at about eleven to take Djamila sightseeing. You are more than welcome to join us. It is also Rosie's first time here and she has to see the sights.

We found a taxi and headed for Manhattan. Rosie was depressed. How will Djamila ever adapt in this environment? she said. Did you look at the flat? It's tiny. Two small bedrooms, a small bathroom and kitchen. Where will she sleep? Her flat in Daher was twice the size. My darling Rosie, I said, I cannot be more royalist than the king. I did my duty and to be quite frank if it were not for Freddy, I would not have been embroiled in this affair. To top it all, I almost feel guilty for Freddy's death. I keep thinking that perhaps there was a better way to get them out of Egypt. Some way that would have spared Freddy. The boat off the Mediterranean coast for instance. I should have explored this alternative mode and found a large enough ship to take them safely to Malta or Crete or Cyprus. Don't torment yourself, Rosie told me, what happened was unforeseen and is not your fault. Not remotely. It was his fate and speculating about alternative means of escape will not bring him back.

The next day we met Adel. He was a tall, handsome boy of eighteen with regular features and a crew cut hairstyle. Apparently he resembled Albert, his father. There was a strange aloofness about him. Contrary to the outgoing friendliness and sociability of Americans, he did not try to be friendly. He answered politely our questions about his studies but avoided to elaborate. He gave the minimum of himself. With Djamila I noticed a strained and labored affection on both sides, which was not the same with Nelly. I thought, surely that would change with time. With Nelly his familiarity and rapport were blatant. He had forgotten his Arabic, or at least he did not try to speak it and his American English, like Nelly's, was traditionally New York's. It lacked Rs and had other quirks which did not endear it to my ears. I suppose my accent was equally uncongenial for them.

We decided with Rosie to stay three full days and to depart on the fourth. Originally I toyed with the idea of getting married in New York with Adel as best man and Djamila bridesmaid. When I met Adel I changed my mind. There was not the slightest affinity between us. I did not want to burden him with something he would not relish and even though I wanted Djamila to be present at our marriage, I desisted asking him. Instead I planned, on the spot, a rough and ready sightseeing tour for us. I had to take into consideration Rosie's pregnancy and not tire her too much. So from Nelly's house we took a cab to the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. The view of New York from the top floor was fabulous. A live map of the city with

the boroughs, the bridges, the sea and its ferries and ships, the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and other landmarks. Then we went to the Rockefeller Centre, saw the famous Plaza, and took a cab to Central Park where we walked a little and took a horse driven carriage for a ride. The second day was spent in visiting the Museum of Modern Art, MoMA, which interested our cultured ladies and the third day a round trip on the Staten Island Ferry to see the New York harbor and the Statue of Liberty. On each of the three days we lunched at the Hyatt which had an excellent restaurant and Djamila took a cab home.

During those three days there were a lot of low voiced conversations between Rosie and Djamila but I did not get involved. I did not ask Rosie what Djamila had to say. I preferred to remain detached. I believed I had done my duty to Farid and Djamila to the utmost despite the unfortunate mishap. We left on the fourth day for Paris without visiting Nelly again. There, I arranged a civil marriage ceremony at the Mairie with one of my close Armenian associates in Paris as witness and best man. With Rosie, we legalized a relationship that was alive and thriving and was more than I had ever hoped for.

ROSIE

It broke my heart to leave Djamila in Brooklyn with Nelly and an unresponsive Adel. She looked so much forward to rejoining her son that his lack of warmth wounded her cruelly. She told me that when he came in later that first day, whereas she threw herself at him and held him tightly, his arms were limp. He kissed her formally with a polite smile and uneasy eyes that examined her critically. She abruptly and painfully realized that time had diluted their bond. He was too young when he left their home. The letters they exchanged regularly in the early years lost the feel of initial, desperate longing for each other and, in time, became friendly but less frequent exchanges of news. And now besides Nelly, he had a girlfriend to share his affections and awaken his budding sexuality. She told me that the fact that they had to communicate in English was another stumbling block to their intimacy. It was acceptable in their letter writing but not in everyday conversation. With Nelly, at least, they mingled the two languages, Arabic and English, carelessly and unselfconsciously.

There were other small things that did not bode well for her stay in her new home. When we left the house that first day, Nelly asked her how long she expected to stay with them. Djamila was stunned by that question. She said she didn't know. It was too early to tell. She asked Nelly if it would be easy to find a job. Nelly told her that without a Green Card she could not hold a job legally. She could apply for residence but it would take time. Meanwhile she could work unofficially as a day help in one or more of Manhattan's wealthy families.

When I asked her where she slept, she said, on the sofa. Adel offered his bed but she refused to inconvenience him and he did not insist. Her few belongings she squeezed in two drawers he emptied for her in his room. On top of everything she had the feeling that she had intruded in a family that was quite happy without her. There were not any overt signs of discontent on their part but the tight fit of three people in two small rooms and one little bathroom was disconcerting for all.

We cried when we parted. I came to love this unfortunate woman that was so brave in facing her many misfortunes. The worst part was that she was not the cause for any of them. Fate seemed to hound her implacably. We exchanged addresses and promised to start a regular and frequent correspondence. I shall need your support and advice, she told me.

Touny and I spent two weeks in France. After our civil marriage we took a super luxurious tour of the Côte d'Azur and stayed at luxury hotels in Nice, Cannes, and Monaco. Antoun did not want to drive and we took it easy with nothing to think about and nothing to organize. It was a true honeymoon.

We returned to Egypt just after the middle of July and at the beginning of August I received the first of Djamila's letters. Generally, its mood was neither gloomy nor happy. She was getting used to life in Brooklyn with Nelly and Adel. And it seemed they were getting used to her. However, she sensed that their tolerance had a date limit. Not a precise date limit but one near enough that made it easier for them to be patient. She, herself, told them that as soon as she started earning money she would look for a place of her own nearby. In any case her refugee status at home made her long for this. She had very little privacy and sleeping on the sitting room sofa meant that she was the last to go to sleep and the first person to wake up. Their habit of watching television in the evening kept her up later than she would have liked. At night her thoughts turned to Farid and she stifled her weeping in her pillow,

unable to go to sleep. She also thought of Samir and would have liked to know how he got on with his life. She missed him and wondered if his love for her still held or was slowly dissipating. In the midst of son and sister she was often overwhelmed by a vast loneliness.

She began going for walks and not only became familiar with the neighborhood but helped Nelly with chores and purchases. She wrote she felt terrible not being able to contribute her share of the living expenses. The little money I left with her she kept for her very personal things like shampoo, makeup, and sanitary napkins. She thanked me profusely for that as she could not envisage asking Nelly for money.

In that first week, as she walked, she saw an employment agency and went in. She explained her situation and told them she needed a job, any job, while her American residence was being settled. They asked her to leave a phone number and they would call. She was also getting used to the weather, which was not always as unbearable as it was during our stay in New York, but varied. The humidity though was constant and especially high when it rained. Summer rain was a normal phenomenon.

I answered, of course, her letter with our news and about my own humdrum existence and it became a regular once-a-month exchange of letters. In her second letter she had already started work at a young woman reporter in Manhattan. It was a twice weekly job and the girl promised to introduce her to other colleagues so she would work five or six days a week. She learned to use the subway to travel to Manhattan with the millions of Americans that packed it every day to go to work and on a Saturday spent the day at Central Park. The previous Saturday she went with Adel and Sylvia, his girl, to a Coney Island amusement park. Sylvia was blond, looked slightly older than Adel and was a very pretty and lively person. It was clear that Adel was mad about her. They more or less ignored her, walked hand in hand, and kissed, quite uninhibited, in the midst of people. Djamila felt very lonely following them a little distance behind. She swore to herself never to go out with them again. She wrote she had Samir's address and finally wrote to him a letter in Arabic and also gave him their Brooklyn phone number.

In my next letter I told Djamila that my belly started pushing and the polite and proper people of our society began wondering if the child would be illegitimate. Oh, shame! We did not announce our marriage and we did not go through a church ceremony. We lived quite happily without the church's blessing and did not miss it. She answered that she was glad my pregnancy was proceeding normally and advised me not to gain weight. She had noticed my healthy appetite when we last met and that I had put on a couple of kilos. She was by now working five days a week in Manhattan and was earning quite good money. The people that employed her were pleased with her conscientiousness and she was at last relieved to be able to contribute a small sum to Nelly for her share of expenses.

She loved Central Park and it became her regular weekend recreation. She simply needed to get out of that claustrophobic flat every single day. She saw old and young people jogging in that lovely park and her only extravagance was to buy a track suit and a pair of gym shoes. Otherwise she kept her expenses to a minimum and saved her earnings for the future, whatever that might be. At the park she went for long walks and started jogging, a little self consciously at first, but quite happily later on when she saw that no one took any notice of her.

Samir began calling her every few days in the evenings. He told her he was not much of a letter writer and would keep in touch with her by phone. He thought of

her constantly and reminded her of his marriage proposal and her theoretical acceptance. He was still in love with her, dreamed about her, and told her it was time to start thinking of putting theory into practice. In my next letter I asked Djamila for explanations. She had not talked to me of any marriage proposal and she answered that it had occurred in Paris before Antoun and I arrived. It was out of the question at the time and even now there were so many obstacles to its realization that he should not have troubled her by reminding her of it. For a start she could not return to Egypt so where would they live? He was tied to Touny and Anwar for his living. So even though things had changed, primarily with Adel and Nelly, the obstacles still seemed insurmountable.

It was funny, she wrote, that Nelly got curious about the telephone calls and when she told her about the friendship with Samir and his proposal, Nelly told her not to reject it out of hand. To work on it. It was a solution to everyone's problems. I did the same. I was thrilled. I was absolutely enthusiastic. Djamila, I wrote, when there's a will, there's a way. But let your feelings guide you. Not mine. Though I have to tell you that I cannot envisage a better match. You are more or less the same age and I have come to admire and appreciate Samir very much. Moreover he once said he never wanted children and I am sure you don't either. I cannot find a single drawback, a single flaw that would mar this union. Think it over very carefully, my darling Djamila.

Djamila's Green Card came through quite fast given that her sister and son were holders of one and now she could look around for a less demeaning and tiring occupation. The irony, however, is often not far behind. The Green Card arrived when she least needed it. September was ending and Nelly told her that Adel would be starting college in a week or two and her presence in the house would be detrimental to his studies. Despite his summer romps with Sylvia, he was a studious boy and he would need absolute silence in the flat so it was time for Djamila to go. Though the dismissal was not unexpected, it still came as a traumatic shock.

As fate has it, Samir called that same night. Late. The others were asleep. She told him the news and she broke down and cried. I would have left on my own in any case, she told him. I even started searching for a tiny flat nearby or a room to rent in a family. But to be shown the door summarily, that hurt. So God has finally answered my prayers, Samir said laughing. She had tears in her eyes but laughed as well. Perhaps it was not God, perhaps it was the angel Gabriel, she said. I would have accepted even Lucifer's help to have you my darling Djamila. And suddenly, yes, she felt it was deliverance. The curtains were drawing apart once more in the theatre of her life to the next act. She was not sure if it was act three or the fourth act or the fifth that was beginning but she was sure it was the last. Spell it out to me, Samir. I am in the Libyan desert, in Chad. Tell me what to do as you always did in those lovely, hateful days. You mean it Djamila? You will finally be mine? Yes, my love, yes, she answered. His voice became urgent, his diction brisk. He was not taking any chances. Today is Tuesday. Next Tuesday rendezvous at the Hotel Odeon in Paris. But,.....No buts. Do you have money? Yes. See you next Tuesday. He put the receiver down.

Within a week Djamila left the United States for Paris. The farewells with her family were lukewarm. Slightly warmer on Nelly's side than Adel's. She promised to write to them, they promised to answer, to keep in touch. Djamila cried not while saying goodbye to them but when she entered the cab for the airport. She cried because she had lost the son she loved so dearly. She realized that these were, sometimes, the ravages of time and distance to strong feelings of love. It was another

small tragedy in her life. Small, because no death was involved. Because Adel had grown, was healthy, intelligent, and would find his way in life with Nelly as his surrogate mother.

She met Samir at the Hotel Odeon and their reunion was as tearful as their parting but without the pain and desperation of the latter. They spent a week in pre-honeymoon, illicit lovemaking, museum trekking, and sightseeing. In Beaujolais soaked dinners and still more lovemaking after it on a soft double bed minus the Chadian mosquitoes, with the lights on. Then a civil marriage ceremony at the Mairie and another honeymoon week of, henceforth licit, though no less lascivious love games, where Samir's four-month celibacy and Djamila's jogging-induced energy and endurance brought them, in Tantric jargon, as close to God as man can get.

Djamila sent me a card every single day of their stay in Paris. They were gay, enthusiastic mini messages of their activities and happiness. They were a great joy for me. I was in my eighth month and was feeling heavy with a huge belly. Touny was the happiest of men. He loved to see me naked and caressed and kissed his son through my belly. I hoped it would be a son so that he would not be disappointed though I, personally, pined for a daughter. My breasts were inflated to almost twice their size and my nipples very brown, and Touny, a voracious lover in any case, became almost insufferable with desire. I say, almost, because I must not pretend I did not like it. In those two weeks of daily cards from Djamila in the post I learnt that they were leaving for Malta to see if they could settle there. Malta was close to Egypt and Samir's unconventional business without regular office hours would allow him to spend most of his time with his wife and leave for his travels when necessary.

Djamila's next letter came just after I delivered our darling son. Touny was delirious with excitement. Rosie, he said, he looks like you. He will be a lovely tall, beautiful boy just like you. Your genes vanquished mine, no doubt about it, and good thing too. I am so terribly happy. We shall call him Hagop like my father. I did not much like the name but in Egypt traditions are strong and there were no two ways about it. Grandfather Hagop would have been deeply hurt if we chose another name. In any case, diminutives are common in Egypt and I decided we would call him Gippy. A little silly perhaps but better than Hagop.

Our correspondence started again a month or so after Djamila and Samir settled in Malta. She wrote that they rented a nice house in Valletta and bought some furniture and electrical appliances. It was a lovely historical city and her descriptions made me long to visit it. I wrote to Djamila that I shall certainly visit them when I will be able to travel again with Gippy. For the moment things are not so easy. I have to nurse him many times a day. My cow sized breasts produce plenty of milk but his avid sucking has lacerated my nipples and I have to use a pump to extract the milk and feed it to him in a nursing bottle, which means a whole lot of extra work. I am forever pumping milk from my tits which sometimes hurt and seem ready to explode.

Djamila seemed very, very happy. It was, she said, almost a second honeymoon with Samir as they went about organizing their home and their lives. Between tasks and shopping they took long walks and went sightseeing in that glorious city which is recognized as a World Heritage. It is Baroque in character and contains buildings from the 16th century onwards with a great number of palaces, churches, and gardens which are carefully preserved as an architectural heritage.

Our correspondence inevitably lagged but did not stop. We loved each other too much for that. Gippy was growing and our reunion with Djamila in Valletta was becoming more viable. I had not been in Paris for over a year and when Touny told me to start thinking about a trip there, I said yes, on condition we spend a few days in

Valletta on the way. Touny, of course, had lost the ability of saying no to me a long time ago. Djamila, meanwhile, had found a post as an English teacher in a secondary school and had something pleasant and constructive to keep her occupied when Samir went off in search of hard, bright carbon stones collected from mines in dirt poor countries by a wretched workforce to decorate necks, ears and fingers of rich, narcissistic women who were deluded into thinking that they added to whatever natural blandishments they possessed. She was also learning Malti, the local language that was very closely related to Arabic. At long last she seemed at peace and fulfilled.

Two years later we met in Valletta and one afternoon Djamila told me about the psychological blockage that occurred to her in Chad after Farid's death. I kept her secret, as she asked, and never told Touny. It was both a very painful and a very exhilarating secret. She shared it with me because she loved me as a younger sister. She confessed that the severe guilt she felt for having dragged Farid to his death was slowly fading. One tender love gave way to a compelling passion. Time was working in its usual inexorable manner.

I could not help thinking of the obvious: that life goes on and time heals our spiritual wounds. I wondered how often Djamila now thought of Farid. I thought perhaps in her happiness with Samir, his memory receded into the thick mists of the past. I am sure the wound will be festering for the rest of Farid's parents' life. And now and then, late at night, in quiet moments, with Gippy asleep and I, stretched on the sofa with my head on Antoun's lap, I see tears in his eyes. Memories of Farid and guilt are mingled in them.