

**FIVE STORIES THAT ARE ALMOST TRUE,  
BUT NOT QUITE.**

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**A PECULIAR ARRANGEMENT**

**MAKIS FINDS HIS WHISTLE**

**YOUTHFUL YEARNINGS AND TROUBLING ENCOUNTERS**

**SISI**

**THE SPACESHIP**

# A PECULIAR ARRANGEMENT

## 1 RETURN TO EGYPT

The airliner was over Cairo at about a quarter past ten. I looked eagerly out of the window trying to pick out familiar landmarks but could not distinguish much in the darkness despite the city lights. The emotions of my return were varied and confused but there was little doubt at that moment that I was heading back home. A peculiar home, this Egypt, where I both belonged and not. Which I both loved and not. In which I felt both welcome and not and where I felt that at some point in my life I would abandon. Leave it, because it would no longer tolerate me: me the foreign implant. The intolerance increasingly reciprocal.

I was born and raised in Egypt at a time when the romance of the country was being steadily eroded by revolution, nationalism, industrialization, an exploding birth rate and later on, an Islamic renaissance with its attendant religious radicalism and fanaticism. One must be clear: this romance was for the few. Mainly tourists, foreigners, novelists and the native moneyed class. Not much romance for the lower classes; servants, workers, farm laborers and villagers living in squalor and iniquity. With the nationalization of foreign companies and businesses and the departure of the foreign “colonies” from Egypt, the charming cosmopolitan atmosphere of the two main cities Cairo and Alexandria was lost. Socialism was the order of the day and those who experienced it learned the inevitable lesson early on: it does not work. Perhaps in Egypt it had its usefulness. In the few decades before capitalism was reinstated, it liberated from virtual feudalism large sections of the agrarian society and instituted labor legislation, which however, the government controlled with an iron hand through puppet labor unions.

The shrinkage of the Greek community, although slower than other foreign ones, was inexorable. A very special and prosperous section of expatriate Hellenism was returning to the motherland after a century and a half of residence in Egypt to become diluted and anonymous. A sense of superiority characterized the Greeks of Egypt. They had produced poets, novelists and artists of international renown, scores of philanthropists that endowed their fortunes to build schools, hospitals and stadiums both in Egypt and Greece. They were proud of their cosmopolitanism, of their mastery of foreign tongues, of their refinement and good manners.

I would see my mother in a few minutes. I had been so infatuated with Lisa that for days she did not cross my mind. I felt guilty for this disloyalty. She was younger than my father by some ten years, with an attractive face on the borderline of the truly beautiful with light chestnut hair, which gave a reddish hue in the sunshine. Of fair complexion and milky white skin, she had a slim, athletic body for she was an outstanding athlete in her youth. She was one of those women, which within limits, as they age become even more attractive.

She looked as young and pretty as ever as I emerged from customs and smiled happily. We kissed long and tenderly. Then I looked at my father. My mother had warned me that his health was deteriorating and it was evident in his appearance. He walked slowly towards me and kissed me too and I felt his disappointment at the abrupt termination of my studies in the US. My involvement with Lisa caused me to slacken in college. The failure that followed was inevitable.

Next morning when I opened my eyes I wondered where I was. Oh God, yes, Cairo. I can hear the traffic in the street and my father getting dressed for work. I have to get up. It is a significant day for me. A new page in my life. A new beginning. Without Lisa, without my love. However much I ache for her, she is thousands of miles away in distance and already three days past in time. They seem more like three months. A deadly combination of space and time.

I got out of bed and left my room. I came face to face with my father. I approached and kissed him. We were not accustomed to such displays of tenderness but his sadness at the airport touched me and I felt that he shared my sense of failure. I asked how he was feeling and he said, "Well enough". You could not tell whether he meant he was well or that it could be worse. I asked him for some money and he showed me the combination of a safe embedded in the wall of his bedroom. He told me I could draw whatever money I needed from there.

It was understood that I would enter the family business. There was no other viable option for me in Egypt. I had a few days' grace before starting work. I went for a long stroll in the city. I was away from Cairo for only a few months and yet it was as if I had returned to an alien world. I had taken it for granted that I would eventually reside in the US but my immaturity, Lisa and my college failure landed me back in my family's lap. I could not decide if that, finally, was good or bad luck. It was the easy way out, that was certain, but as I walked slowly adding and subtracting the pros and cons, I did not manage to reach a conclusion.

Later, when I returned home, I found Anna and my grandmother there. They lived two floors above us in the same apartment building. Anna, my unmarried aunt was much younger than my mother and only five years older than I was. She had none of the beauty and nobility of my mother or even much resemblance either physical or of character. She was a pretty, pert, brown-haired girl of normal height and a nice slim body, which she kept in shape because she was a classical dancer for a time and later became a fashion model. She was cheery, always with a funny story or incident to relate and at all times fun to have around. When she switched to modeling her reputation was tarnished somewhat because at the time the profession was not considered respectable and her lifestyle encouraged moralists to voice malicious comments. She was not intimidated and, I must say, her mother was always a pillar of support. Anna was her one and only weakness.

I kissed both of them and it was obvious that my delight to see Anna again, was reciprocated. My mother could not hide her happiness either. She had a permanent smile on her face.

"I hope you're not taking it too hard Michael," Anna said after I explained why I was back so soon.

"Well, it was a big disappointment. Sometimes I feel wretched and sometimes I wax philosophical."

"Listen Mickey, a little ignorance did no one any harm. Look at me. I did not even finish secondary school and I'm doing fine. I lead the life that suits me. I am quite content."

"Will you stop talking this way, Anna? You give a very bad impression," my grandmother scolded her.

"Oh let her be," said mother, "we're amongst ourselves."

"That's what you think," granny replied, "She tends to talk this way everywhere. She has no sense of propriety. Nor do any of her friends. She has this fellow Raymond, whom they call Moni, who not only is a homosexual but also talks as if he grew up in the gutter. He's from a good family too. He's stuck to Anna. He has

become a fixture at our house.”

“Yes Michael, I want you to meet Moni,” said Anna smiling. “He's so much fun, you'll never stop laughing. I can't go anywhere without him. He's better than a lover.”

“There you go again. I hope, at least, you'll shut your mouth when Michael's father comes.” Granny was getting annoyed.

“How was America, Michael?” Anna asked.

“Oh all right. Though not the dream world we imagine.”

“Did you meet many girls?” Anna broached her pet topic.

“Leave the boy alone, Anna. He did not go to America to study American girls,” said my grandma.

“No, not many.”

“Oh stop being so eloquent. A few, then?”

“Not even.”

“Will you cut it out, silly? One, then?”

“Yes.”

“So? Go on. Hey, what is this? Do I have to jerk the words out of your mouth?”

“No, Anna. But I can't talk just now under Granny's disapproving look.”

“Sure you can. Did you go out on a date? Did you kiss her? Did you make love?”

“For the last time, will you please leave Michael alone and stop being so indiscreet, Anna.” Granny was exasperated and mother smiled. She was probably not averse to hearing a few details herself.

With the meal over, we remained at table while Mohammed, our servant, cleared it and brought us coffee. Anna kept us amused with an inexhaustible supply of funny stories, which my mother loved and granny mostly tolerated with a frown. I looked at Anna. Not an exceptionally pretty girl but attractive because she was so high-spirited. Not innately sexy either despite a slim and well-shaped body. She provoked only with her air of availability and her gaiety. Yet she was neither fast nor indiscriminate in her love affairs. She was of the new crop of young women who, like Lisa, wanted to enjoy their sex life and wanted to have a say in choosing their partners. Without being aware of it, she was in the *avant-garde* of the feminist movement and the sexual revolution. In Egypt, no less.

## 2

### CAMARADERIE

Next day I went to the club for a game of squash. After lunch, Anna called and asked me to go up and talk to her for a while. I told her I felt sleepy but she insisted and I went upstairs to their apartment.

“Don't make any noise. My mother's taking her siesta,” she said and ushered me into her room. It was a tiny room near the entrance of the flat. It contained just the bed, a large cupboard, some shelves on the wall and a toilet-table where she kept her makeup accessories. There was nowhere to sit and we had to lie on her bed, which

was not even large enough. She had a dressing gown on and her slippers.

“What's the matter, Anna? What's the hurry?”

“Shhh, shush, let me shut the door. I don't want my mother to wake up and start coming in and out.”

“I was just about to drop off to sleep.”

“So what? Is it too much to ask you to keep your auntie company?”

“I suspect it is more than company you want. You want some juicy details about the girl I met in the States.”

She smiled.

“The juicier, the better.”

“Well, there's nothing juicy about it.”

“Don't kid me!”

“Really. I met this girl Lisa who was a friend of a friend. For me it was love at first sight but by the time she started to respond, I had to leave.”

“Oh dear. So you're in love? Where does that leave you now?”

“Heaven knows. I invited her for a holiday and she promised to come. But the more time goes by, the less likely it seems. And even if she does, what then? I forgot to tell you, she is about seven years older than I am.”

“So if you ever marry, by the time you're fifty, she'll look more like a mother-in-law.”

“I know you're outspoken but now you're being awful.”

“Oh Mickey, don't get upset. Half the things I say are over the moon. You know that. But shall we be serious for a moment?”

“Can you?”

“Sometimes,” she said smiling. “Mickey, the odds are stacked against you. Better forget her, to be able to adapt to your new life.”

“But I love her.”

“I understand. But let me tell you, you'll live a few months of hope and memories and then disappointment will set in and gradually it will dawn on you that the dream was just a dream. And Lisa a character in a romantic short story, as good as fiction.”

“What about your Dani?”

“It's over.”

“How come?”

“Sometimes, one little absurdity suddenly changes your life without any real, solid reason. One day, out of the blue, my mother decided that we had been going out together long enough and it was time Dani, Jew or no Jew, made up his mind to marry me. We were sitting outside in the hall chatting and suddenly she charges in and sits next to us. Boy, I thought to myself, something's about to change in my life. She looked him in the eye and said, ‘Listen to me my boy, I have just decided that you are not at all a serious person and quite a bit selfish as well. You have been going out with my daughter for over three years and probably have been sleeping with her too. In our society, here in Egypt, this is not done. You are ruining her reputation and she will be unable to marry when you decide to drop her. So it's one of two things. Either you marry her or you leave her. Now!’ The boy was flabbergasted. It was an additional difficulty that I was sitting right there with them. ‘Yes, yes,’ he stammered, ‘I love Anna and I want to marry her. I shall discuss the matter with my mother and we shall come to ask for her hand.’ At that my mother said, ‘Very well, I shall be expecting you tomorrow afternoon,’ and she got up and left.

“Dani looked at me and attempted to smile but could hardly manage it. A short

while later, he excused himself and left. He never came again, with or without his mother. He tried to call me on the telephone but I never talked to him after that. The funny thing is, I never thought of marriage. I did not particularly want to marry Dani, or anyone else for that matter. Yes, I was in love with him. He was not the first man I slept with but he was experienced and he taught me everything I know about lovemaking. He had a beautiful, circumcised penis, which I loved to uh, hmm.”

She put her index finger in her mouth.

“I forget the scientific word. I only remember, suck.”

“Anna, you're terrible. The word is fellate.”

“I only talk this way with you and Moni. So don't worry. Fellate, fellatio, yes. Anyway, what rubbed me the wrong way was that, faced with losing me, I believe he was sincere in his intention to bring his mother the next day to propose. But he got the veto from mum. Probably the reason is that Jews are just as racist as us Christians. That, I couldn't stomach. Mum's veto, that is. You see, Daniel's, that's Dani's name, Daniel's father is dead and his mother is a tough old bitch who controls the purse strings of the family and keeps her darling boy on a short leash. To start with, I would never marry the prospect of such a mother-in-law. Secondly, he showed himself weak and a woman cannot swallow that. Had he been strong and ignored his mother and proposed on his own the next day, I would not have accepted his proposal, but at least we would have stayed together despite even my mother's objections.”

“And don't you see him anymore?”

“No we are no longer together. I see him now and then accidentally but the affair is over. When a woman decides that something is over, she rarely changes her mind.”

“And what about this Moni?”

“After I left Dani, a hundred people rushed to fill his place. Please don't think me vain. Everybody wanted to take me out. Of course, you understand their way of thinking. They figured I would be heartbroken, would fall for the first comer and provide some easy sex. It was amusing the way they jockeyed and maneuvered around me. Like vultures over carrion. Not that I didn't go out and even sleep with one or two. Meanwhile, I was modeling for the clothing firm owned by Moni's mother and I got to know him. He is the designer of the clothes she produces. The *modéliste*. They say that domineering women tend to produce weak and sometimes abnormal sons. Well, Moni's mother is another tough cookie and her son is homosexual. But he is the sweetest, funniest friend I've ever had. Apart of you, that is. I started seeking out his company and we got on so well together that we have become inseparable. In fact, there's this stupid joke going around, that we share the men, which of course, is absurd. And to tell you the truth, despite the fact that we have been seeing each other for so many months now, I know very little about his sex life. I don't know if he has any lovers or if at the moment he's going through a period of abstinence. I want you to meet him and a further surprise is in store for you. Tomorrow evening he'll be here, please come to meet him.”

### 3 MONI

Next day, early in the evening, my mother entered my room to tell me Anna had just called. “His Excellency Mr. Raymond Homsy had arrived.” I went upstairs

and as soon as Anna opened the door, she jumped on me and gave me a resounding kiss on each cheek. I kissed her back. She was all made up and looked very attractive.

“At last, my two best friends meet. Michael, this is Raymond. Raymond, this is Michael.”

She was smiling ecstatically.

I looked at him. I remembered Anna told me the meeting would be a surprise. It was. His physical appearance. He was very short. Shorter than Anna. He was very thin but perfectly proportioned. With black hair of normal length perfectly cut and combed and the most beautiful face I had ever seen on a man. Not handsome; beautiful. Fine featured; a lovely smile with a milky white set of teeth and a striking pair of blue eyes, which dazzled you with the aura of their blue color. He was perhaps just entering his thirties. Anna sensed my surprise. She looked sharply at me for my reactions with a smile on her face.

“I heard so much from Anna about you,” he said, shaking my hand. “You are my big rival.”

“Rival?” I did not understand.

“For Anna's affections.”

“Oh hardly. From what I hear, you are not only friends but you have the same temperament and interests, the same sense of humor and sense of fun. How can I rival that?”

“True, true. But love is unpredictable. Although she did not say it in so many words, I think she has fallen for you since you returned from America. She keeps talking about you.”

“Surely you're exaggerating.”

Anna looked incredibly happy. She did not speak to deny or confirm what he said. She just smiled. She bid us to sit down and went to fix us a drink. “Whisky for all,” she decided.

“Isn't he beautiful, our Moni?” she told me when she came back with the drinks.

“She always talks about me as if I'm her pet dog. I know I'm half a mouthful, but mercy!”

“You're more than a mouthful, my dear. You know, Michael, he is a fantastic *couturier*. As good as any of the big names abroad. I tell him to go to Paris. I'm sure he'll have an extraordinary career there. But he's a mama's boy, just like you. Only more so. He doesn't want to leave his mother unaided. He says the business needs him. I personally think he's dead scared of her. He's afraid he'll get a spanking or something. I told him if he goes to France, I would go with him. Be his muse. Be his mistress if he'd have me.”

Moni smiled.

“One thing I am grateful about,” he said, “is that I am not overambitious. I am happy with my work. I am not famous but I have independence. I cannot create some of the more daring clothes that I would perhaps have been able to create in Europe but what I do is appreciated and it fulfills me. And I have my mother on hand to give me a spanking when I need it, as Anna says. She is here to take care of me and restrain my impulsive nature.”

“Oh rubbish. Your mother is smothering your talent with her iron hand. Phew, you mother-lovers.”

We sipped our whisky and nibbled at salted biscuits and peanuts. Anna initiated conversations with the intent of cementing a new friendship, Moni's and mine. Her earnestness was touching. She was praising each of us to the other. She

made me into an intellectual because of the few books I had on the shelves in my room and a romantic one at that by attributing my failure at university to the love affair which took too much of my time.

“Oh Anna, please don't exaggerate, I can do without compliments I cannot believe in.”

“On second thoughts, you are rather thick,” said Anna incensed, “and modesty will get you nowhere. Look at my sweet little Moni; he loves compliments. He just laps them up. And why not? I believe what I say. He is clever, cultured, well read. He is a *collectionneur* of rare books and paintings. He is knowledgeable about furniture, carpets and antiques. Is liable to pass outside an antique shop and drool over a broken chair. He loves everything that is worn and old. Mrs. Homsey tells me that had she not put her foot down he would have filled their house with the most repulsive artifacts. Just the other day, he went to work carrying a life-size erect penis he had just bought made of polished ebony and created a commotion at the atelier when he showed it to the girls working there and asked them if any one of them wanted to borrow it for a few days. Isn't that so my little Moni?”

“Yes, we had a good laugh,” said Moni with a smile.

“He jokes with the girls and at times when they do something wrong he screams at them like a shrew and insults them. They love him just the same. They know his bark is worse than his bite. As you see, he is a bundle of antitheses. He is cultured and vulgar. He can be extremely kind and at times unbearably cruel. He is cheerful most of the time although he has his black moods as well. Tonight he's on his best behaviour. I told him you were a serious person and he's out to impress you.”

“I am sure not. He doesn't have to try. I am impressed because he is an artist, a gifted person. Anna, you are lucky to have such a fine friend.”

“Thank you,” said Moni.

“Thank you Mickey,” said Anna, “I am so happy you two got on so well together.”

The conversation developed easily with discussions on all sorts of topics. Very often, it drifted inevitably to their everyday life, activities and amusements. They had a super-active social life especially since they became a couple of sorts. They had an amazingly large circle of friends and acquaintances and were themselves very popular. They were present at every big party, every important social event and absolutely relished the fact. So now and then, they slipped into their own particular interests and carried on a dialogue in which I had no part. They would talk of people and events, the latest gossip or scandal, ridicule this and that and laugh heartily together. The theory that opposites attract, did not hold in their case. They were, in fact, so attuned to one another that they could have been a single person talking to himself. When they would suddenly realize I was out of the conversation they would apologize.

“Oh, don't apologize. I enjoy listening to you enormously. I get a taste of what an active social whirl is like. It's something I will never know first hand because by temperament I am an outsider. I cannot stand receptions, cocktail parties, dinner invitations and the such. I find it difficult to talk to people. I have absolutely no talent for small talk.”

“It's a matter of practice,” said Moni. “Of doing often what may not be agreeable at first. Eventually one gets the hang of it and may even enjoy it. I never did go out as much as I do these days. And it's because of Anna. We have so much fun together, such a merry time. You know, we are out every night. If by chance, once every few months, we find ourselves at home, we wonder what happened.”



“You're not going out tonight are you?”

“Sure we are,” said Anna with a smile.

“Then I'd better get going.”

“No, no, stay. I'll start getting dressed and then we'll all leave together.”

Anna went to her room and I stayed with Moni and asked him about his business. He explained that ever since his teens he was interested in clothes. His mother had a small dressmaking business and when he finished school and went into the Fine Arts department of Cairo University, he used to spend his afternoons at the atelier where he learned the nitty gritty of dressmaking. He said art in modern Egypt is practically ignored. There is a tradition in poetry and Egypt has produced some good poets. Only a few great novelists, most of them laboring in an antiquated literary style, and one or two outstanding filmmakers. Nothing exceptional in painting, sculpture or architecture. As for music, he could not offer an opinion. Middle Eastern Arab music did not agree with his ear.

He left the university because he could no longer stomach the pomposities uttered by his teachers and worked full time at the atelier with his mother. Whereas previously they made dresses for individual clients that were selected from foreign fashion magazines, Moni little by little started making changes in the designs to fit a client's personality and after he gained both experience and confidence, started designing his own clothes. The business flourished and grew and they began exhibiting their models in major hotels in Cairo. The Revolution gave a major boost to their business when it restricted imports and Moni became a well-known persona in the local *haute couture* circles and with women that could still afford to dress expensively.

Anna called from her room, “Moni, come see how I look.”

He got up with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders. I looked at him as he moved to the bedroom. It takes all kinds to make a world, I thought. A perfect body with smooth movement and yet so short and thin. A beauty of a face; so attractive in speech and expression, smile and laugh. A pleasant voice that reflected his cheerful disposition. Yet a homosexual. Well, nothing wrong in that and in any case, nothing to be done about it. One just thinks of the difficulties and obstacles this will cause in his life in a country like Egypt, where homosexuals are held in the greatest contempt and are figures of ridicule.

Moreover, the incongruity of his relationship with Anna. Perforce a brother and sister relation. I was sure Anna loved him very much and may even be in love with him. She would sleep with him willingly despite his size. But that cannot be. They go out together and are constantly seen to be inseparable. Mother was probably correct in saying that Anna is developing a peculiar reputation. People must be wondering what she is doing with a homosexual to the exclusion of anyone else. Someone who is interested in her will be reluctant to approach her. Not only that: if someone shows her clearly that he likes her and is interested in her and assuming the interest is mutual, would she let Moni go? Would a potential suitor put up with Moni even if he knows there is no sex between them? She is not only cutting herself off from marriage, which in any case claims not to interest her. She is cutting herself off from sex.

Suddenly it struck me. A Machiavellian thought. Was Moni, by insinuating that Anna was falling in love with me, trying to throw us together? Perhaps he was conscious and troubled at her impasse and I presented him with the ideal solution. I would become her lover and solve her sex problem, which left unsolved might cause her eventually to turn to someone else for sex. With me as her lover, he would

guarantee not to lose her. Ours would be a semi-incestuous, hidden love affair with no marriage prospects, which would allow them to continue the mad life they enjoyed so much. So Moni, a homosexual, in his own way loved a woman and did not want to lose her. Where did that leave me? Confused, to say the least. The idea excited me. How could I be so fickle? Not a week had passed since I said good-bye to my love. Oh hell. Is it the men who are the pigs after all? Yes. Probably.

They came out of the room and I let out a gasp of surprise. Anna was stunning. She came up to me smiling and did a full turn so I would admire the whole of her.

“Anna you look gorgeous,” I said.

She said, “Yes,” and smiled happily. She agreed. No false modesty. She wore a black dress with a white embroidered collar, a pair of high-heeled pumps and a black coat over that. All with an impeccable fit. What made me unable to take my eyes off her was the fantastic way she was made up.

“You are a modern-day Cleopatra!”

“Thank you. It's my Moni. He made me up. He said let us give Mickey a surprise. He's my Pygmalion. He makes me up, he designs and sews my clothes in the atelier. I am like a mistress. He even wanted to buy me jewelry but I did not accept. That's why I am not wearing any.”

“They would add nothing to your appearance. Nobody would notice them,” I said.

“That's sweet. Don't I have a lovely nephew, Moni?”

“Tonight, it's you who's sweet and lovely,” answered Moni. “Shall we be going?”

They took the elevator to the ground floor and I went by the staircase down the two floors to our apartment. It was past eleven and my father had already retired. My mother was waiting to hear my impressions.

“We talked several times about Moni but you never told me a thing about his physical appearance. Of course, I got a shock. First his height, then the fact that he is so thin and lastly his beauty. Why didn't you tell me?” I asked her.

“I did not think to. I get so much grumbling from your grandmother that he is part of our everyday life, almost part of the family. It slipped my mind to tell you of his peculiarities.”

“If he were not homosexual, I am certain they would have been lovers.”

“Yes. What a crazy girl!”

“I don't think there's much we can do under the circumstances. I think the only thing is to weather it out. Perhaps they will tire of this frenzy. I don't know what to think. I cannot foretell how it will end.”

We talked with mother some more but mainly we went round in circles.

#### 4

### A SURREAL PROPOSAL

A few days later Anna called me and asked me to come up. I visited her the following afternoon as I had promised to do. As usual, she was in high spirits.

“Mickey!” She shouted when she saw me, “here you are, just when I thought you had given me the slip once again.”

I kissed her and held her tightly. These hugs and feels and sneaky caresses constituted my sex life. The little thrills that raised my spirits. Was Anna, these days, as deprived, as sex-starved as I was? Despite our love and intimacy, I could not ask the question. I did not want to step from jokes and teasing to indiscretions. She led me to the living room and we sat on the couch next to each other.

“Hey, what's the matter? You are not dressed or dressing to go out.”

She wore black slacks and a mauve pullover on top. The casual attire that made me feel at ease.

“Thanks to you, my little big nephew. When you said you'd come I cancelled all engagements to be with you.”

“Is that true?”

“Well, half way. We had nothing special tonight and I told Moni to take a rest. And also there's something I want your opinion on.”

“Oh yes? You look well, nevertheless, and, as usual, very sexy.”

“Come off it.”

“How's Grandma?”

“A little under the weather. She's in bed, resting. So we're not under surveillance.”

“Then let's not waste any time.” I played the fool, grabbed her, put my lips to hers and tried to kiss her. Half of it a joke, half of it serious. She started laughing and pushed me off.

“So what shall we do now? How's Moni by the way?”

“He's fine. He just bought a new sports car and we have become even more conspicuous. The only reservation I have is that he is now driving much too fast.”

“So his business is doing well.”

“Never been better. He's the top name in fashion these days and is making piles of money.”

“And you, my sweet Anna, have you renounced the male sex?”

“Not the male sex. Just sex, at the moment.”

“Till when?”

“I don't know. Shall I tell you something that I have kept to myself and dare not talk about it even to my mother?”

“If you wish.”

“I have to talk to somebody and I have no one but you. I need to unburden myself and reach a decision. Promise me Mickey you won't tell anyone. Not even your mother.”

“I promise.”

“Moni asked me to marry him.”

“Good Lord! No! I don't believe it!”

Anna burst into tears. I took her in my arms. Caressed her hair.

“Why are you crying, Anna? Are you happy? Are you sad? I don't get it.”

She cried a while longer, unable to answer and then she calmed down. She looked at me wistfully, tears still streaming down her cheeks. A hesitant smile emerging from her anguish, on trembling lips. Her right hand moving behind my head forcing it towards the smile, towards her lips. A kiss, wetting my cheek, and another and another and then I turned my head slightly and her lips met mine in a prolonged, salty contact. Her tongue, frisky despite the tears, searching for mine, inside my mouth.

What the hell's happening, I wondered. Am I hallucinating?

“Oh Mickey, I am so grateful to have you near me, to love you and to be able

to talk to you and confide in you. The tension was unbearable. That's why I broke down. I'm sorry."

"Tell me what it's all about. I am totally confused."

"I don't blame you. It's such an absurd situation. Eva, your dear mummy, is up to something. Your father is straightforward. The sneaky part of your character comes from Eva."

"Do I have to suffer derogatory appraisals of my character?" I said, laughing despite my confusion. "And let me tell you, furthermore, not once was my mother sneaky with me or, as far as I know, with anyone else."

"Listen, will you? Eva, for some days now, has been telling us that we have to decide to move to Greece because everyone in the Greek community is thinking of leaving and eventually you shall be leaving as well. A few days ago, your grandma who dislikes Moni even more than she disliked Daniel, told him that we were thinking of leaving Egypt. Moni loves me as much as I love him. It might seem strange to you but we share a very intimate friendship. It has its limitations but we have become extremely dependent on one another. Quite literally, I'd feel lost without Moni. And it is the same with him. He was terribly upset when he heard that we were planning to leave. Another point is that I told him what happened with Dani and he is always afraid he will get the same brush off from mother. He also realizes that my reputation, bad as it was, is getting worse and my chances of marriage remote. So he talked to his mother and she agreed that it was a good idea for us to be married. It would remove the stigma of homosexuality from Moni and he would have a companion who cares and would take care of him. So he proposed to me. In fact, we discussed it together. He said he is making a lot of money and this arrangement would at least guarantee my financial security. We would live together and share the friendship and companionship just as we do now. I would continue to work as his model if I wished, and as for the housework, that would be the least of our worries. It would be taken care of by cooks and servants."

"But Anna, what about your love life? What about children?"

"He told me, each one would be free to have his own sex life as long as it was done with discretion. And I could even have a child if I wanted, which he would consider his own."

"What if in one of your love affairs you fell in love with the man and wanted to marry him?"

"He promised he would put no obstacles in the way. He would give me a divorce any time I asked. For any reason."

"Wow, what a tangle. Sorry, I didn't mean that. I meant, it is very complicated."

"What do you think, Michael? What do you advise me to do?"

"Do you trust him to keep his word?"

"Yes."

"Would you be able to tolerate the idea that he is out with his lover? Especially a steady one?"

"I think I already told you, he is very discreet about his love life. I know absolutely nothing about it."

"But in marriage, you are bound to become aware of it."

"It's a risk I have to take."

"And you must take into account that the gossip will never stop. Especially if one or two of your secret affairs are exposed. Men are not particularly discreet. On the contrary, they tend to brag about their sexual conquests. So they shall call you a tramp

and Moni will be a laughing-stock, a cuckold. To get to the crux of the dilemma, marriage will allow you to stay together and will give you security. These are the two main reasons for it. On the negative side you have all the predictable but also the unpredictable problems. A furtive and unstable love life. The unimaginable complications of having a child. Condoning his love affairs, putting up with gossip and malice. We do not even know what else might crop up. For Heaven's sake think about it: where will you sleep? In the same bedroom? On the same bed? It is a very difficult decision. It's yours, really. Not mine. I am not involved. Objectively, I would say it is such a great risk that it isn't worth taking. Of course, you can always try it and, assuming a divorce on demand is certain, you can break it up if it does not work. In the meantime, you might have lost two or three precious years of your life, which you could have used to build up a career or a new life somewhere else with someone else. One solution would be to write a marriage contract that will compensate you financially in case of divorce irrespective of the reasons."

"Michael, please help me."

"Isn't that what I'm trying to do? I am racking my brains trying to think."

"No, no. You can help me."

"How?"

"Stand by me. I have no one else but you."

"But of course, I'll do anything to help. I just cannot find a rationale that points decisively one way or the other."

"I find you very attractive."

"What?"

"I know you are attracted to me."

"What has that got to do with it? We are not the ones getting married."

"No," she said. She smiled and held my hand. She brought it to her lips and kissed it. "You know, Mickey, we never had much money to spare in our family. My mother's bitterness and aggressiveness stems mainly from that. I have felt it all through growing up. We would have never had holidays and travel if your father didn't pay for them. The prospect of being rich is very seductive. I hate myself for being so mercenary but the fact is that the security weighs as much as being with Moni."

"I understand. You have already decided."

"More or less."

"So why the pretense of seeking my advice?"

"It isn't pretense. I needed to know your opinion. And I shall need your support and love."

"You have my love, Anna. You know that. We have always been close."

"Close, but not close enough," she said with a smile. She moved right next to me, embraced me and kissed me slowly, tenderly. I reciprocated and we kissed for a few minutes. From surprise to the stirrings of sexual arousal. Then, she stopped.

"Mickey, do you understand?"

"No. I am hopelessly lost."

"What a thickhead you are my Mickey. Totally unimaginative. You see, I want to test the situation where I am with Moni and also have a lover on the side. How he will take it and how I shall feel. Before a final decision."

"Oh boy! Now, I get it. But, my goodness am I to be the lover?"

"Yes, my sweet Mickey, my lovely little grown-up nephew."

"Very cool and very cold blooded. I don't think I like the idea of being used."

"Oh you are a silly. How are you being used? I chose you, because I want you

and no one else. I have always thought you were very good looking and I want to make love with you. Moni is a friend. I love him too but differently. Don't you want to make love to me? You can always refuse."

It is crazy, I thought. Moni, the husband and I, the lover. I must confess, that at one point, I thought Moni had planned it this way but not inside marriage. It would have been more or less classic if the husband is in ignorance but quite preposterous for him to be abetting the arrangement.

She embraced me again and we kissed.

"Well?"

"Anna, I have wanted to kiss you and caress you and make love to you for as long as I can remember. To fondle you and see you naked. I dream and fantasize about it."

"Oh my Mickey, you make me so happy. I'll make you expert at lovemaking. I'll even make you forget Lisa."

We kissed again. I loved the way she kissed. Full of energy and imagination. She had a sweet breath with a hint of the scent of cloves. An expression of pain while she kissed, which turned into a smile in the short pauses between kisses. A well trained or very talented tongue, most likely both, able to assume an infinite variety of shapes, lengths and consistencies. Two restless hands in a perpetual motion of caressing, fondling, patting and squeezing. And a body that moved and trembled and emitted vibrations. Oh Moni, how bizarre not to be able to enjoy sex with your wife. To leave this enchantment to me.

"Anna! You are driving me crazy. I shall probably fall in love with you."

"And I with you. Wouldn't that be funny?"

"Let's go to your room."

"No, my dear, I couldn't with my mother asleep next door. We have all the time in the world in front of us."

"This is my fate! Glorious prospects but for now: nothing."

"Don't be so impatient. A woman does not like a man panting with his tongue hanging out. She likes him cool and debonair."

"I came in this evening quite cool and collected. Can I help it if I am, now, panting with my tongue hanging out?"

She laughed.

"I didn't mean you, silly. That's the way I talk. I'll give you a call, first opportunity. Please bring some condoms with you."

"Oh Anna, don't pour oil on the fire. I'd better leave now. It's already quite late."

"And my mother will be waiting for me," she teased, imitating my voice.

I got up and walked to the door. She followed. What a nice slim body she had. I hugged her and looked at her face, in her eyes. Women have a peculiarly vulnerable way, sometimes, of looking at you. A stare of wonder and surrender. I do not know if it is part of their repertoire of seduction, a centuries-old legacy from Nefertiti and Cleopatra. Anna looked at me in this way. I kissed her. And again. And again. I could not get enough of her.

I left in a daze. I sat on the steps outside the flat. I needed to think. What a crazy situation I got myself in. What an absolutely crazy, thoughtless girl Anna was. I dared not think where it would all lead. Throughout her life, she had been totally unconventional. One surprise after another. But this new scheme took the prize. She was mortgaging her life. And she managed to seduce me into becoming an accomplice. I had nothing to lose. Well, perhaps, I did. Who knows? In any case, it

was something that frightened me. I loved her and was concerned for her happiness. I had to think it out calmly and in the end, advise her as forcefully as I could.

Some days passed. I continued working regularly getting my bearings in the business. I had moved into my father's office. He felt unwell and decided to stay at home for a week but he ruled over us by telephone. I called him up at least a dozen times a day and he welcomed all my questions and gave me advice and hints for future contingencies. I was acquainted with our employees and supervisors at the plants. I met many of our clients and suppliers. I felt I was gaining competence and would soon be able to manage the business. During those first years, apart from the constant threat and fear of nationalization by the government, business was booming.

Since that day when I became Anna's lover on blueprint, so to speak, but not in fact, I waited for the summons. I was infatuated with Anna and dreamed of her body. Oh, I was in love with Lisa too but Lizzie was many thousands of miles away. Anna, that crazy girl, was constantly on my mind. I had not reached any sensible conclusions on her madcap decision. I called her every evening. She continued her giddy social spin with Moni as if there were no tomorrow. Twice I went upstairs for an hour or so and stole a few kisses, dangerously risking a confrontation with my patrolling grandmother. Until Moni came and took over the leading role. Both times, I left feeling frustrated and humiliated, swearing never to go upstairs again. But like heroin, I had taken my first dose of Anna and was hooked. I needed the sex.

## 5

### A N N A

A few days later Anna called me at work. I had just returned to the office from my daily rounds. It must have been around eleven thirty. I was surprised but I immediately thought; that's it!

"Mickey?"

"Anna?"

"You recognized me at once."

"No one else calls me Mickey."

"Are you busy?"

"No. But my heart is. It is thumping away."

"Why?"

"It has an inkling of what you might say."

"Clever heart!"

"Clever but vulnerable. It is badly smitten."

"Then we must hasten to heal it. How about three this afternoon?"

"Are you sure? Gosh. At your house? What about grandma?"

"Yes, here. Mother will be visiting friends. Don't forget the Gold Coins."

"They're at home buried in a drawer. I'll have to buy some new ones. No problem."

"See you in a while."

An employee came into the office to tell me something. I could barely understand what he was saying. I just nodded. The same thing happened with two other people. I was too excited. I could not concentrate on my work. I told them I had a chore and left the office. I walked towards the river. When I reached it, I leaned on

the parapet and sort of daydreamed looking at this massive, moving body of water. It always seemed to calm me. It evoked so many things. Permanence, life, antiquity, evolution, Egypt, Africa. It dampened one's own trivial preoccupations, worries and anxieties.

I left after a while and walked back towards the office. On the way, I stopped at a pharmacy and bought the Gold Coin condoms. The walk calmed my excitement and eased my tensions somewhat. From the office, I called my mother and told her I would be in later than usual. I tried to concentrate on my work but with little success. I looked at my watch every quarter of an hour or so until two thirty. Half an hour later I was at our apartment building, praying there would be no unlucky encounters. I entered the elevator alone and up to the sixth floor. I rang the bell and Anna opened. It was dark inside. I went in. Quietly, she fastened the latch. Then straightened, said, "Mickey," and hugged me. I kissed her and our tongues started a game. Love all, at our first game of love. She was wearing a *robe de chambre* and slippers. I felt the slim body inside. She stepped on my shoes with her slippers. A light, familiar scent penetrated my mind. Then, she stepped down.

"I prepared a snack and some wine."

"Can't we have it later?"

"Have you had lunch? No? Well neither have I. And the wine will loosen us up."

We went to the kitchen, an airy room with a table and chairs next to the wall where Anna and grandma usually took their meals. Sunlight was streaming in through the lone window. After the darkness, it took a few seconds for the eye to adapt. I looked at Anna. She was smiling. Why? I focused and saw Cleopatra again.

"Anna! Did Moni make you up, again? You are exquisite. I didn't notice in the dark. Not even when we kissed. Just the perfume."

"Yes, I called him and he came. It took split-second timing. Mother left at about two. He arrived at a quarter past, took half an hour of real fast work and left quarter of an hour before Caesar called for his Cleopatra."

"Mark Anthony, for Heaven's sake."

"Yes, yes. Mark Anthony."

"But there is a whiff of perversion, don't you think? Your future husband making you up for your lover?"

"Oh Mickey, we've been through all that. Don't spoil things."

"You're right. Anyway, what do I care? I just want to hold you and kiss you."

"Sit down, let's have a bite."

My mood was turning sour. "I'm not hungry," I said sullenly.

"Well I am. Have, at least, some wine."

She had some cheese and chicken sandwiches on the table. A few peeled and salted Nile valley cucumbers and a bottle of local red wine. We sat down. She poured the wine in two half-size glasses, smiled at me, and said, "To our love."

I don't know why I, suddenly, felt this idiotic resentment. I was jealous and resentful of Moni because these past few days he intruded whenever I saw Anna and wanted to make love to her. I resented that he seemed to take over whenever he appeared. I resented the fact that he was here half an hour ago, making her up. Giving us his go-ahead and his blessing. I did not need it. Nor did I need a shadow in my love life. I was so confused. I could not clear and classify my emotions. Could not explain them just then. I turned a little nasty.

"I wonder if Cleopatra ate chicken sandwiches with Mark Anthony before they made love."



She caught the intention. My intention to hurt, to ridicule. My change of mood. She got up and left. I was at a loss. What now? I poured some more wine and drank it slowly. Waiting. Some minutes passed. You absolute idiot, Michael, you fool. I took another gulp of wine. I started getting dizzy. I got up to look for her. Just then, she entered sullenly in the kitchen. She had washed her face. Not a trace of makeup. Not a queen anymore. Just a clean, pretty face with hair wet at the edges.

“Now, I’m just plain Jane,” she said. “I can eat my sandwiches in peace.” She started munching noisily. Deliberate bad manners.

I smiled cautiously. “I’m sorry,” I said.

She looked at me indignantly.

“We never, never once quarreled all these years. Are we going to start now that we decided to make love?”

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

She munched for a while in silence. Then she pushed the platter with the sandwiches towards me.

“Have one,” she said.

I picked up a sandwich and pushed her untouched glass of wine towards her.

“And you drink up.”

She looked at me and smiled, as well as she could on a full mouth. The alcohol opened my appetite and I consumed another two sandwiches. Anna opened another bottle of wine. She started drinking with me and refilling our little glasses as soon as they emptied. Together with tit-bits of small talk. We finished eating and moved to the living room. Anna brought the wine and glasses with her. She switched on an electric fire that was there. I sat on the sofa and she came and sat next to me. We faced each other.

“Are we friends, again?” she asked.

I took her hand and kissed it. “Take a guess,” I said.

We looked at each other. For an eternity, smiling on and off. Hands crossing, caressing each other's face and hair. And ears and neck. Building up passion from tenderness and affection. She moved her face to mine. The tender kiss with the pained expression and the eyes closed. The pause, the look, the smile. And another kiss. And another. Her kisses setting the pace. Inquiring. Are you ready? Shall we go on? Her body closing in. Her breast on mine. She straddled me, sat on my lap, a leg on each side, her arms around my neck, her lips no longer pausing for the smile, the expression of pain and passion permanent, her tongue, hard, urgent, dominating, in a hurry. My hand fondled her breast then moved inside the robe; the thrill of flesh. She undid and threw the robe away. I kissed the breasts, a fleeting kiss before she yanked my jumper off, tore off my shirt and flannel. Got off my lap. I feasted my eyes on a perfect body. She saw my eager look, sensed my arousal at the sight of it, and with a smile took off her panties. I saw her pubic hair. My heart beat hard and my breath shortened. She bent, took hold of one leg, removed my shoe and sock, then the other.

“Stand up Mickey.”

I stood up. I followed orders. She was the leader. She knew the way. She undid my belt, the zip of my trousers, pulled them down sweeping with them my underwear. She caressed my straining penis, embraced me, we started kissing standing up, my hands acquainting themselves with the curves and clefts of her body. A long passionate kiss that ended with a push. Instinctively I tried to step back but my trousers and underpants bound my legs. I fell on the sofa and she fell on top of me. Straddled me again, her mouth on mine, kissing me, teasing me with her tongue on my lips, on my nose, in my ear, her hands in full possession of my body; my body in

total, exhilarating surrender to a passionate conqueror.

“Mickey, the Gold Coins.”

“In my trouser pockets.”

Anna bending over, fumbling, retrieving, opening, fitting, and then finally lifting herself to bury me in her body.

“We are one, my love,” she whispered.

She started moving slowly. Unhurried movements of tranquil sensuality. Of taking pleasure and of giving. Kissing, moaning, and smiling now and then. Full of energy and gusto and the voluptuous enjoyment of having me in her. She gave me her breasts to suckle and her mouth to explore. She gave me love and called me darling and, my love, and as I was too ecstatic, too far-gone to be original returned the same endearments. She also called me Mickey, in messages and small sentences. “Oh Mickey, it's so nice. I had almost forgotten how lovely it is.” And sometimes just Mickey, singly, or accompanied by, “Oh”. Sometimes she shocked me with her raw language. “Mickey, just let me fuck you for a while and then you can fuck me.”

Sometimes she could not take her breath and she stopped and rested her head on my shoulder. Then after a prolonged journey of voluptuous meandering, she speeded up and took off to visit wondrous worlds beyond our four dimensions where you could not endure for long. Where the release of tension brought out her breath in gasps, made her heartbeat almost audible, a vein in her neck to flutter, her eyelids heavy as lead.

She collapsed to one side. Eyes closed; almost unconscious. The culprit was the wine that had anaesthetized my senses and made my release impossible. Had magnified her hunger, her privation and her passion. Magnified and multiplied her orgasms. I looked at Anna, at her body, touched her and caressed her tenderly, in wonder, with love. She opened her eyes, drugged.

“You brute,” she said, “You almost killed me. I've had perhaps a dozen orgasms. And you? Not yet? Then come my love, continue.” She stretched herself on the sofa. “But now you do the work,” she said. I moved closer and she opened her legs. I sat between them, looked at her and touched her. I marveled at Mother Nature. How she managed to enslave us with a little slit like that. To fascinate us. To trouble us. To move us. To inspire us. And finally to seduce us to propagate the human species. An organ of pleasure and of life. I could not take my eyes away.

“Mickey? Are you having your portrait taken?” said Anna with a smile.

I lay on her and for the first time in my life, I had an orgasm making love to a woman.

## 6

### LIFE GOES ON, WITH ITS UPS AND DOWNS

Sometimes, alone, in a thoughtful mood, I liked to think over and point out to myself the ironies of life. A broken heart had been comforted. A typical sex-starved male, I was infatuated again without having fallen out of love with Lisa and sometimes I wondered what would happen if Lisa appeared suddenly. Our correspondence after the first few months had spaced out. Often, I had to write two letters to get a reply. But a reply always came, with an apology. She still cared enough to apologize. Still cared enough to write. She intimated that she had met other men

and had affairs, but without details. I would not have wanted any. We both mentioned her intended visit to Egypt. It was always something for the future. Something we looked forward to. Now and then, at my request, she sent me pictures of herself that broke my heart anew. Every time. Which threw me into melancholy moods, to Anna's annoyance.

I was unbelievably lucky with Anna. We matched each other sexually. If Moni dominated her intellectually through a profound friendship and mutual dependence, I owned her body. But just that. I eventually came to accept this fact and reconciled myself to it. I stopped having petty tantrums and learned to be satisfied with a small share of her. For even if it was an important share, it still was a small share. I never had the whole of Anna. I could not possibly have had it. She lived in a world I did not care for and one she could not give up. It was Moni who was her soul mate. Oh irony of ironies, if they ever married, I would be an indispensable part of that marriage: the part that would guarantee its success and consummated happiness.

Even on our first amazing sexual encounter, when I left her and went home to a worried mother who asked me why I looked so haggard, Anna got dressed and went out with Moni to some important social do. I presume that evening she must have been very relaxed and merry. Moni would have skillfully camouflaged the blue hue of a dozen orgasms under her eyes. I saw Anna, alone, only on occasions when grandma would go out to destinations where we could be sure of her departures and arrivals. That made it a race on an obstacle course. Sometimes, it was once a week, sometimes, when we counted our blessings, it was twice. Often it was none. Consequently, when we met there was usually an explosion. Pent up drives and energies created fireworks. I called her every day but saw her less often not to arouse suspicions. In our lovemaking she often used, "I love you." She probably meant it and felt it in the heat of the exertion but I was unsure that it carried beyond that. The usual uncertainty to keep life interesting.

Our main preoccupation in those early months after my return from the States was my father's health. After he realized how serious his condition was and decided to cooperate with us and his doctor, his health improved marginally and he resumed a reduced work schedule for a couple of months. We kept our finger crossed. Not that it did much good. He started deteriorating after that and was most of the time at home, bored and irritable. He urinated with increasing difficulty and eventually had to use the artificial kidney machine at the Kasr El Aini university hospital. At first he had one session a week but in a few months' time, it was twice weekly and when his kidneys gave up completely he had to use the machine three times a week. The difficulties we faced at Kasr El Aini made us decide to move him to Greece.

We left Cairo at the beginning of autumn of nineteen sixty. We stayed a couple of weeks with my father's sister. We were lucky not to have financial worries. Father had stashed a considerable amount of money in Greece for a rainy day. Unfortunately, the rainy day had come. Fortunately, the money was there. I looked around for a flat and found one in the vicinity that suited us. We rented it and bought the necessary furniture within two weeks.

I returned to Cairo, wondering whether I should be satisfied or not. Obviously, there was no question of being satisfied with my father's condition but everything had worked out smoothly. Mother kept urging me to sell the business because, as she saw it, it was out of the question that she and father would ever return to Egypt. And it would be unthinkable for us to live apart permanently. She started a veritable campaign to persuade Anna and Grandma to join them in Greece. She assured them they would have no problems and that she would help them financially. Grandma was

all for leaving but Anna would not hear of it.

One day, when tensions rose to unprecedented levels between them, Anna broke the news that she would marry Moni. Grandma nearly fainted. She lost her speech and had heart palpitations. She shut herself in her room and stayed there for two days without eating or talking to Anna. She cursed Moni continually in a loud delirious voice. Anna was worried and came downstairs to ask me to intervene. I told her to sit and calm down. I fetched a bottle of whisky and both of us had a few shots. She calmed down and started looking at me with her special dreamy look. I kissed her and we caught fire. Our attraction and passion overriding our worries.

Since my parents' departure, my sex life with Anna lost its trait of chance encounter. We now had a roof over our sex. The luxury of programming in advance, of taking our time without fear of discovery. It also had its disadvantages. Many a time that crazy, lovable, sexy girl, coming in at two or three in the morning, would be in the mood for lovemaking and would ring the bell and wake me up. Greet me with deep passionate kisses tasting of whisky or champagne instead of cloves, murmuring, "I love you Mickey." After the rude awakening and a couple of drinks, the unholy hour was a special aphrodisiac. We would indulge in wild experimentation in sexual techniques. Anna was a living, walking Kama Sutra manual with a lively imagination on top, filling in gaps left out by Vatsyayana. I finally gave her a key to the flat because the loud ring of the bell usually startled me and I feared it might also alert the neighbors. Her favorite stunt was to enter as silently as she could, knowing I was a light sleeper, undress and slip into bed and wake me up with a kiss. Many a time I woke up to find a naked Anna towering over me, looking at me with a smile.

That day when instead of going upstairs to talk to grandma we made love, I told Anna to let grandma work it out of her system on her own. Her love for Anna was so vast and all encompassing that I believed she would compromise on this issue. However, it seems that she was unable to do so and she swung into action. She found a person who would pay the key money to take over the flat and buy the furniture. She asked if I could put her up for a week or two and I told her I found such questions unacceptable. Our home was her home. A few days later, she and Anna moved into our house, much to Mohammed's annoyance. I put grandma in my mother's room and Anna in my father's.

Grandma wound up her affairs and in a little over two weeks, I drove her with Anna early in the morning to the airport. The farewells were heart rending. The two inseparables were separating. My grandma was dressed in black. She was in mourning. She was losing a daughter. She cried silently.

"If you marry that monster, Anna, I shall forget I ever had a daughter," she said. "Or that I worshiped her."

Anna was sobbing. "I shall never leave you," she told her. "Whether I marry Moni or not, I shall be there. Stuck to you. Just wait and see. I shall never let you forget me."

The flight was called and the passengers moved slowly to the control areas. We moved to the terrace and in a while saw her boarding the bus for the plane. We waited until the plane took off. I then held a sobbing Anna by the arm and slowly we moved to the parking area and into the car. That day I did not go to work. I stayed home to keep Anna company. I comforted and tried to cheer her up. After lunch, she went to sleep and I slipped out to the club for squash and a little riding. She was still asleep when I returned. When she woke up, she felt much better. In the evening, Moni turned up. I offered him a drink, and we sat around talking and joking. Now that Anna was under my roof, I felt I had the upper hand and was much better disposed towards

him. I was very friendly and something of the enthusiasm of our first meeting colored our encounters. Later, Anna dressed and they went down to the cinema and to an appointment for a drink with friends. I went to sleep early but woke up some time later in the middle of the night. Someone was caressing my hair and face.

“Hello, my darling,” I said. “You're back early tonight.”

A few months later, Moni gave a sumptuous party in one of the big Cairo hotels. It took place after a show of his new winter collection. I happened to have an Armenian friend in the business and he told me that Raymond Homsy was pulling way ahead of the other local fashion designers. His latest work was both imaginative and daring and his Egyptian clientele loved his creations even if they would not always buy them for themselves. The party was the talk of the town many days before and after the event. In it, Moni announced his engagement to Anna and the celebration that followed caused a stir for its extravagance. Moni and Anna tried to persuade me to go to the party but I still could not swallow the idea of this marriage and I excused myself pleading incorrigible unsociability.

During that period, Anna was glowing with happiness. I started, again, feeling pangs of jealousy. I could not bear this inordinate bliss of hers. The only compensation was that the happier she was, the sexier she became. As a result, I suffered from lack of sleep and started going to bed very early because I knew I would have to wake up at some point in the wee hours for passionate lovemaking. We were the three schizophrenics. Sometimes, in my saner moments I tried to untangle the threads and figure out who was more to blame. I never did figure out this question but many years later when I was with Anna and everything had changed, she told me it was the happiest, most carefree period of her life.

Months went by. Despite Anna's engagement, very little changed in our lives. I kept going to Greece to see my parents and grandma who was now living with them. Twice, I offered a ticket to Anna and she spent a couple of weeks in Athens, each time. Relations were somewhat restored with her mother who, as long as she saw no marriage taking place, kept up hope. She did not know that Moni had bought a villa in Zamalek and with the help of top interior designers was redecorating it. Anna and Moni planned to marry as soon as the house was finished.

In retrospect, I would tend to agree with Anna. It was a happy time, Lisa notwithstanding. While waiting for the house to finish we had settled into a very satisfactory mode of existence. I had a part-time wife at home, which suited me well. Apart from the passionate sex, I also had companionship. I loved knowing she was there even if I did not see too much of her. Sometimes, we had early dinner together and on Fridays and public holidays we spent our mornings talking and even going to the club. Her presence was a great comfort and an antidote to loneliness. Anna, on the other hand, had two husbands. One who provided her with a home, food and a lively bed; the other, her alter ego, was her think-alike, beloved companion for the social scene. And Moni, well, Heaven knows what advantages this arrangement had for him. One thing that reassured me, however, was his great and obvious attachment and love for Anna. When you saw them together, you could not doubt their affinity for one another, the fantastic chemistry. So as the delivery date of the house moved from six months to nine, to a year, I rejoiced. I greeted each delay with a sigh of relief and great good humor.

Things were moving well enough for me. I had no problems at work and no problems at home. I got along really well with Anna once we both understood and accepted the boundaries of our relationship. The physical side of it absorbed and consumed our energies and created a conjugal intimacy, which I expected would be

disrupted, or in any case, altered by her impending marriage and her removal to her new home.

## 7

### THREE DEATHS

One sad note of this period of our life was the death of Mohammed's youngest daughter. After fathering a succession of children that died in infancy, four managed to survive thanks to improved health facilities and health awareness. One boy, about fifteen and three girls. The boy was tall, skinny, dark and unattractive. The two elder girls were plump and plain. The little one, called Leila, was a gift from Heaven. She was about ten, thin, of ordinary build and of slightly lighter skin color than the other children. She was pretty, with sparkling eyes and a gay disposition. She was sociable, always ready for a joke, a laugh and a clever reply. I never failed to tease her whenever I saw her and she always greeted me with a smile and the expectation of a good laugh. Anna simply adored her. The children had gone to the village for the summer with their mother and word came to Mohammed that little Leila climbed a tree and fell off, hit her head and died.

We were both of us heartbroken. Poor Mohammed left the house and went upstairs to his terrace room to cry in peace. A few days later, at work, I learnt from one of his relatives working at our machine shop that Bahita, the mother, took little Leila to a local midwife to circumcise her and the child was infected and died of septicemia. I was horrified, revolted and indignant but I was the only one. Not one of the other relatives thought to blame Bahita or that cruel and barbarous custom. It was written, it was the will of God. "*Rabbena eftakarha.*" God remembered her! It is so sad to think that the life of this adorable child flitted away so needlessly and apart from a momentary sadness and dismay caused barely a ripple in our lives and was soon forgotten.

My father died a little less than two years after he left for Greece. Anna was still living with me. Moni's villa was finally delivered. A medium sized, elegant building that offered the *nouveau riche* the aura of old money. It had been washed, brushed, polished and stood like a sore thumb in the socialist decadence. I was sure the bigwigs in the government did not like the show and had they known how to nationalize brains and talent they would have nationalized Moni's. That was all the capital he had and was fast acquiring an international renown. Moni moved in the villa after buying some of the most essential furniture. He wanted to furnish it to his taste and he figured living inside the house would help him plan his purchases better. So a new series of delays began together with a new subject of conversation with Anna. 'The Furnishing of the House'. Every few weeks I was invited to go and see its progress and I must admit, Moni's taste coupled with his money made for an outlandish elegance. Anna was ecstatic. I thought it was very original and smart but preferred our homely flat.

Father supported his thrice weekly, four-hour sessions of renal dialysis reasonably well for the first year or so but gradually his constitution began to weaken. Especially in the last three months, he was constantly in one crisis and out the other. Two or three times I left Cairo at a moment's notice because his condition was touch and go but they turned out to be false alarms. Throughout this period in Greece, we were very close. Closer than we had ever been in the past. After all, I was there for him. I knew these were his last days and made it a point to spend most of my time

with him and mother. I even went to the hospital and chatted with him during the filtering of his blood. He was always avid for news of the business and his employees. The foundry's foreman, Saleh, had died recently of a heart attack and he mused whether he would be next. Not in fear, just a query.

In the last days he started hemorrhaging somewhere inside of him. The doctors gave him blood transfusions but it was an exercise in futility. They were pouring blood into him and it was leaking out again. It could not continue. They did not know the cause or the location of the hemorrhage and opened him up for exploratory surgery. When he came to, he asked for a newspaper. He was that kind of a man. The night before he died, mother called me on the telephone in Cairo and asked me to come. I left early next morning and arrived at Athens airport at about eleven. I called home and my mother told me father had left us. The ground started swaying and I nearly fell. I took a cab straight home and just made it to the funeral.

There is a silly little French saying, which goes: *Jamais deux sans trois*. Alas, once again it turned out to be true and unlike the deaths of little Leila and my father this death not only caused ripples in our life but a veritable storm. A few weeks after I returned from my father's funeral in Greece, I received a phone call at the office early one Sunday morning, from Roger Saad. He was an acquaintance from school, a year or so older than I was, and a friend and relative of Moni's. I used to meet him at the club often and we always exchanged a few friendly words. But we moved in different worlds. He was the scion of a rich, well-known family and a satellite of the moneyed crowd in which Moni and Anna were the rising stars.

"Hello Roger, what a pleasant surprise to hear from you."

"Not so pleasant, I'm afraid, Michael."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I have terrible news."

"What, for Heaven's sake?"

"Moni has had a car accident. He died yesterday on the desert road to Alexandria. Not far from Cairo."

"Oh my God. Oh God."

"Yes. His mother is shattered. She asked me to call you so that you may tell Anna as gently as possible."

"Gently or not I don't think it will make a difference. The shock will be devastating. What happened? He was with Anna last night."

"Nobody really knows. Before leaving he passed by his mother's house and since his mother was asleep he left her a note saying he was going to Alexandria for an appointment early today. There was another young man in his car, also killed. The police assume that probably something happened to the car. A flat tire, a mechanical failure, something. Moni got out of the car to have a look. It was a dark night and an army truck running at a terrific speed just rolled over them. Moni was tossed about twenty meters away and the other poor soul was crushed, literally crushed inside the car. The lone army truck driver also died. What a tragedy. They could not get the body of the passenger out of the car, which had folded up and enclosed him in. They took the car to the Kasr El Aini hospital and brought a team of oxyacetylene welders to cut the car up and get him out. He has still not been identified."

"Oh God. What are we going to do?"

"What can you do, Michael? You just take care of Anna."

"When is the funeral?"

"There will surely be an autopsy. Perhaps tomorrow. I'll let you know."

"Call me at home."

“Sure. I am so sorry to have given you such awful news.”

“Thank you for calling, Roger. It was not a pleasant task.”

I left the office immediately and headed for home. Anna was still asleep. It was only eleven o'clock. I did not wake her up. I started moving about the house not finding peace anywhere. My heart was beating hard, my stomach churning. How would I face Anna? I called Mohammed and told him the news because he would be hearing screams very soon.

“It is the will of God,” he said. “May God have mercy on him.”

My feelings were in a state of confusion. They would need calm and the absence of tensions to untangle. A sense of loss and sincere sadness coupled with relief that this marriage was over. An overwhelming concern for Anna's well-being, her state of mind and her future. A realization that the fairytale life we had been leading ended so very abruptly. Another irony. Just as that peculiar marriage would have depended on my sexual relations with Anna, I had the feeling that with Moni's death, our relationship was over. Necessarily, the conditions would alter, separation seemed inevitable. My God, how would I tell her?

Anna got up an hour later. She came out of my father's room in her pajamas. Barefoot. She saw me and smiled with a surprised look on her face. She did not move to kiss me. We avoided shows of tenderness in front of Mohammed.

“Mickey! Why are you not at work?”

“I wasn't feeling well.”

“What's wrong? Why the long face?”

“Here, drink your orange juice. Let us sit in the living room. Mohammed will prepare your breakfast.”

“You're pale. What's wrong with you?”

I did not answer. I started to but I stuttered and stopped. I moved to the living room and she followed mystified.

“Michael, what's wrong?”

“I have some bad news.”

“What for Heaven's sake?” Her voice getting louder. “Has something happened to mother?”

“No. It's Moni. He's had an accident.”

“What happened? Where is he?” Her voice loud and hysterical. Nearly a scream. “Talk to me, damn it.”

“A car accident on the desert road to Alex. Anna, my love, I am so sorry, he was killed.”

“Noooooo.” A wail arose from the depths of her soul. She sat on an armchair. Convulsions shook her and loud mournful sobs. I tried to hug her, to comfort her but was pushed away. I just stood and looked at her agonized moaning and sobbing with tears welling in my eyes. I felt utterly helpless. She wailed loudly for a time and then subsided to a low moan mixed with sobs and loud gasps for air. She was muttering something all the time and I eventually made out what she was saying. “I want to die, I want to die, please God, I want to die.” Some time later, she stopped, got up, and unsteadily, walked to her room. I followed at a discreet distance behind. She went in and shut the door. I sent Mohammed to the pharmacy for sedatives. I started moving again from chair to chair, from room to room. Waiting. Unable to do anything else. Mohammed came back with the medicine. He started setting the table for lunch. At two, he asked me whether he should serve lunch. I told him to wait a while. I went to her room. She was lying on the bed. On her side, her eyes open.

“Would you like some lunch?”



“No thank you.”

“Would you like anything else?”

“Yes. After you have lunch could we go and see him?”

“Oh Anna! I do not even know where he is. Probably at the morgue at Kasr El Aini. There will be an autopsy.”

“Oh my God! They will cut him up.”

“I think it will probably be just a formality. A committee of forensic doctors will simply have a look at him. There's no point in cutting him up.”

“Please Michael. I want to see him. I must see him.”

“Okay. But do me a favor. Come and have a bite with me.”

She got up, wearily, like an old woman and we sat at the dining room table. I served her a little food and salad. I then served myself and we started eating mechanically, without appetite in tiny mouthfuls. She asked me for the whole story. I told her all I knew.

“Didn't he tell you he was going to Alex?” I asked Anna.

“He told me he would be leaving early this morning. That's why we did not stay up too late last night.”

“And did he say he would be taking anyone else with him?”

“No.”

“Have you any idea who this person might be?”

“No idea.”

She dressed quickly after lunch and we went to the Kasr El Aini hospital complex. For a while, we were bounced like a ping-pong ball from one office to the next until I decided to proceed in the only way one gets quick results in Egypt. I asked where the morgue was and we went directly there. I was planning to bribe my way through but we found Roger there trying to speed up proceedings and to get hold of Moni's corpse. He kissed Anna and offered his condolences and I told him Anna wanted to see Moni. He tried to dissuade her telling her he was badly bruised and she should remember him as she knew him in life, a beautiful, small-sized man. She was adamant. So we went into the cavernous morgue.

It was an old building with large rooms and a smell of carbolic acid. There were dozens of tanks of formaldehyde containing corpses for the university school of medicine. Life was cheap in Egypt. Medical students had all the corpses they needed to practice on. Two male orderlies agreed to bring us Moni from refrigeration, contravening regulations. They would be getting the expected tip. He was rolled in on a stretcher, covered with a dirty sheet. Anna was surprisingly calm. They uncovered him. He was unclothed, obviously had been cursorily washed and his hair was slicked back as if with brilliantine. His faultless hairstyle! One side of his face was smashed up and his neck did not seem to be well positioned with the rest of his body. His arms and legs gave the same impression. They seemed dislocated. Anna could not take her eyes off him. She started crying softly in a hanky she had brought along.

“My beautiful Moni,” she said, “What have they done to you? Will human carelessness and stupidity never cease?” The two orderlies stood staring at her. Roger took me by the arm and we moved a little farther away.

“They identified the passenger,” he said in a low voice. “He had identification on him but it was drenched in blood. He is Farid Fahmy, of Lebanese origin and a wealthy family. Reputedly a homosexual. Please don't ask me any questions about them. I haven't the faintest. No need to tell Anna.”

Anna came to us after a while in a slow but steady step. She smiled at me slightly and said, “Thank you, Mickey. We can go.” We moved to the car and on our

way home, I asked her,

“Do you feel better now?”

“Yes. I had to see him. I had to be near him one last time. An act of loyalty. Not for him. He is gone. I touched his face and the icy feel of it, suddenly, brought it home, confirmed it, that he was gone forever. For myself. It was something my conscience demanded.”

There was nothing more to say. We drove in silence and at home, she went directly to her room. A little later, I went in with the sedative. She was awake, lying on her bed again with eyes open.

“Anna,” I said, “swallow this pill. It will make you relax.”

“I don't need it, Mickey.”

“Please.”

She took the pill and when I opened the door half an hour later, she was asleep. Roger called to confirm the funeral. He had recovered Moni's body and the ceremony would take place in the Syrian Orthodox church at Daher at noon the next day. Anna was still asleep and I had a shower and lay in bed. I did not want to sleep. I wanted to be on the alert because Anna was an unpredictable person. She seemed to have calmed down but one was never sure. Despite that, I slept and woke up at nine. My eyelids had become unbearably heavy and no amount of worry or concern could keep them apart. I got up and found Anna in the living room nursing a cup of coffee. Mohammed had just come in. I asked him to prepare some tea and I sat next to Anna.

“How are you feeling, my dear?”

“A little groggy. It's probably the pill. My mind wanders. When I awoke, I thought I had overslept and should hurry to prepare myself before Moni came. Then, the terrible realization hit me.”

“They are strange and unpredictable, the little games of fate! One's life changes from one moment to the next.”

“Mickey, I feel lost.”

“I can imagine, my dear.”

“Completely lost. My life has crumbled in a few seconds. I must have been waltzing on a tightrope. No real solid basis to it.”

“Don't say that, Anna. It could happen to anybody. Sometimes things happen that devastate your life. The familiar, happy routine, bang, it's gone.”

“You see, apart from the heartbreak and the loss I feel for Moni, I seem to have lost my center of gravity. I have been cut loose from my mooring. Like a balloon in a strong wind, I have no bearings, no coordinates. He was my employer, my friend, my adviser, my companion in a magic world of glamour where he, that beautiful, short little man was a luminous presence. People liked him and respected him. Respected his culture, his intelligence and above all, his talent. I was nothing, he was everything. I am facing an abyss.”

It was then, I realized what a small part of Anna's life I was. I was just a small complement. Moni's phallus, so to speak. Once again, not any more his presence, but his ghost overshadowed me. I just barely managed not to be annoyed with her. I loved her and even in Moni's death, I found the boundaries of our relationship shifting to his favor from where I had assumed they were located. In fact, there was hardly any space left for me now that he was gone.

“Roger phoned me when you were asleep,” I told her. “The funeral is at twelve, tomorrow. I presume we shall be attending.”

“Of course, Mickey.”

“Also, I don't suppose you shall be returning to work at his Atelier.”

“No. I could not possibly.”

“In any case, even if it doesn't close immediately, it will start disintegrating soon enough. I took the liberty of booking two seats for Athens early after tomorrow. We shall go there and you can rest for a while. It will be a change for you and you can take your time deciding what you want to do next. If you want to return to Cairo, you have your home here. If not, I shall bring you the rest of your belongings. Is that a reasonable first step?”

She was silent for a while. Her eyes vacant, her mind in the past. Then emerging from the daydream, she replied, “I suppose so. Thank you, Mickey. You have been good to me.”

“You have been good to me too. We have been good for each other.”

“Yes, oh yes. All I know now is that it is the end of the fairy tale. Midnight has struck. Cinderella is back in her rags and ashes and the Prince is dead.”

She started crying, I took her in my arms and we stayed this way for a long while, until Mohammed brought me my cup of tea.

We left for Athens after the funeral. I returned to Cairo almost immediately to escape Anna's oppressive gloom and when I returned two months later, Anna had recovered from the shock of Moni's death. Well, as much as was possible after such a wrenching change in her lifestyle.

In Athens, she hardly went out of the house at the beginning. Later, after she found a job in the public relations department of a five star hotel and started meeting people and making friends, her social life improved but never got anywhere near Cairo's frenzy. She started leading a more normal life. Meeting men and, I suppose, having affairs. It was strange how her relationship with me ended with Moni's death. When I first took her to Athens, she was heartbroken. On my subsequent visits, we reverted to the old camaraderie of the pre-Moni period. I was very discreet and never made any sort of sexual advances or even insinuations. After all, we were in the same house with my mother and grandmother. I said to myself, if there is to be a follow up let it come through her initiative. It never materialized. We were friendly and companionable but not a stolen kiss or an erotic touch troubled our friendship. The taboo had been installed between us. The fever had been cured.

**27 / 2 / 2008**

## MAKIS FINDS HIS WHISTLE

It was late afternoon. Makis walked to the door.

“Good bye all,” he shouted. “Anna, I’ll be late.”

He slammed the door, annoyed. To let off steam and to let them know it. Pressed the elevator button and waited tapping his silver knobbed walking stick on his shoe. At sixty-eight, he did not need it for walking but for his old-fashioned elegance. It fitted in with his expensive shoes, his cashmere overcoat, exquisitely tasteful tie and jaunty, matching cashmere hat. It fitted with his tall, aristocratic bearing. His supercilious glance, which would have been consummate with a monocle. An elegance of the past, not in clothing style but of the times. Not many people dressed as scrupulously any longer.

When he entered the elevator he exploded.

Bloody son-of-a-bitch. Clams up, never says good-bye. The son-of-a-bitch.

He crossed the entrance of the luxury apartment building still muttering to himself.

God forgive me, his mother was all right but he's a good-for-nothing wastrel. Not above siphoning off Anna's money. Son-of-a-bitch comes in with a timid, ingratiating smile, with his false deference and will not deign to say good-bye. I'll throw him out one of these days, I swear. Don't see what she finds in him. OK he's her nephew, so what. The creep! I cannot stomach him.

He walked to the shopping center of the fashionable suburb where they lived, with his lordly gait looking at the windows of men's shops. Stopping now and then to consider a suit or a tie, looking at the price, thinking, well, for an Hermès, not bad. Shopping and window shopping always calmed him down. Put him in a good mood. He really regretted that people were becoming grubby and casual. All you saw at the coffee shops these days, even the better ones, were three-day-Gainsbourg unshaven mugs in baggy trousers, creased, shapeless jumpers hanging half-way to the knees and, goodness, shoes without socks. Oh well, they could wear what they pleased, only it made him feel awkward to be well-dressed in the midst of such drabness. Took the fun out of it. No one to look at, no one to look at you. Ah, that's a lovely suit, there. I should have known it, it's Hugo Boss. Let's see how much it goes. Of course. Quite expensive. But it's worth it. It will be my Christmas present to myself.

It was late afternoon and the weather was cool and getting cooler but Makis was enjoying himself. Only, now and then, Michael popped in his thoughts spoiling things and was instantly expelled with well-chosen expletives. But he was a persistent son-of-a-bitch and kept coming back. Shit, the creep won't let me alone, he thought as he entered his favourite coffee shop and momentarily was distracted by his friends. It was his "steki", his habitual hangout. A better sort of place with better sort of people in it. His kind of people. He used to go there practically every afternoon if the weather was passable and it was not raining. It is our gentleman's club, he used to say fondly. A place to get away from the wives. Most of the chaps were of his age group, backgammon addicts, and this afternoon were busy at play, so he sat at a table by himself and ordered the usual, a Nescafé with milk. The new girl was nice. Lovely tits, he thought. She smiled when she served the Nes. But Michael kept coming back.

Fuck him. The creep. Shabby as hell, he is. Disgusting. Probably smells, too. I never go near him. Wouldn't risk catching a flea. Anna buys him all his clothes and he pretends he is upset whenever she has something new for him. Pretends he doesn't

want her spending her money. Bloody hypocrite. I bet he isn't even trying to find a job. Pretty cozy arrangement, this, to let Anna support him. Sometimes, I wish Anna had no income of her own. I would have starved the son-of-a-bitch to death. I hate the way they get on together. Always talking away like a pair of lovers. Calling him Mickey. And with me he just clams up. Not a word. Not a smile. What have I ever done to him? Comes and goes in my house as he pleases. Stays overnight. Who else would put up with it? I hate the bastard.

“Hello Andoni. How are things? Is the poker game on, tonight?”

Andonis sat a while with Makis and relieved him of his thoughts. A retired journalist, he usually updated Makis on the latest political gossip, corruption and scandals. Oh Greece, just another third world country. A little better perhaps. Going downhill fast, catching up. Not with Europe. With Africa.

When Andonis left, Michael returned.

Is it possible there's anything going on between them? Oh come on. What a crazy idea. Was? Was there, ever, anything between them? My god cut it out. You're going to go mad. But they do go on like lovers. Not like nephew and aunt. And they are nearly the same age. Well Anna is five years older but she hardly looks it. If anything, looks younger than him. And he does look a little unbalanced. Doesn't she notice? Once by chance I happened to spy him in town. He looked totally mad, totally demented. I remember when I told her about it, she started crying. It set me thinking. Is it possible? I mean, do these things happen? And of course, I'm not young any more. I hardly ever sleep with Anna. I hardly ever can. Age takes its toll. I wonder if it's the familiarity that kills desire. I wonder if it would be the same with another broad. For a long time I have wanted to test this out.

Alexandros came in and Makis called him. He was a snazzy dresser. Close to Makis's heart.

“Are you for a game?”

“Sure.”

They asked for a backgammon set and started rolling the dice, making minor, standard intellectual adjustments to the play of chance with noisy banging down of the backgammon chips, animated exhortations to the dice to face up the desired dots and boisterous bragging of forthcoming annihilations. It was half the fun of the game. They were working off the day's tensions. Tensions? Well, the tensions of boredom, the product of leisurely retirement and comfortable financial situations. Everyone, after all, has his troubles. Makis had Michael and his senility, Alexandros, his son-in-law and the stock market. Is no one at peace, in this world?

They played steadily for two hours and Makis seemed on the road to recovery. He won most of the games and was sorry they were not playing for money. When money was involved, he most often seemed to flounder. And the saying, unlucky in gambling, lucky in love no longer applied to him. Alexandros left soon after finishing the game, unable to conceal his pique at losing so resoundingly. Apparently, he subscribed to a maxim of our less than gentlemanly, modern, smart-assed attitudes : show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser. Leaving Makis wondering how to kill the next few hours. On an impulse, he got up, put on his coat and jaunty hat, picked up his cane, waved to the boys and outside on the street flagged down a taxi. He did not drive a car any more. He kept his life uncomplicated. He could afford his cabs and used them liberally for his slightest moves. Even to the toilet if he felt like it, was his usual joke. So on to the city. Athens was a half-hour's drive in smooth traffic and totally unpredictable in bad.

He had to try it out. It was gnawing at him for some time. Was it over? Finished? Finito? Or would he find his old self with another woman? They drove to the address of a brothel he frequented in his past. One of the better ones. Rang the bell and went inside. He looked around. The décor had changed. No longer a style heavy with curtains, sombreness and age, the sense of the forbidden and guilt. It was modern, light and bright. The madame came smiling at him. Makis had heard about it but was shocked all the same. For in the old days, there was always a madame to coddle you, crack a dirty joke and recommend a girl with a cunt of velvet. This time it was a monsieur. Well, actually, neither the one nor the other, rather an amalgam of the two. A monsieur-madame, a fairy, dressed in a red and white polka-dot shirt, tight, white trousers accentuating the crotch and his saucy behind, a short red scarf around his neck with the knot on the side, red shoes, his mop a garish red-blond, a face made up to perfection, lipstick, eyeliner, shadows - the works, and body movements that would make a woman feel like a butch. Identifying him, technically, as a male, was the single earring on one ear. He would be fascinating if he were not so repulsive.

With many limp-wristed gestures and hearty giggles he exhibited the three girls that were free at that moment and Makis chose the tall plump girl with abundant body surface for caresses and squeezes, for grabbing and slapping. And when later, in their room, she took off her robe de chambre and was as naked as Eve in Paradise in the epic renaissance paintings of the great Masters, ample bosomed, ample bottomed, minus the fig leaf, Makis just stared at her. She might just as well have been the slaughtered lamb they sent him every Easter from the farm. As appetizing and as sexy.

“Well?” Eve asked. “Are you just going to look at me?”

“I’m a little tired.”

“Then why did you come?”

“I thought I might see Olga the old madame. She was a friend. Always made me laugh.”

“Oh, that’s years ago. Now we have this queer. Hard as nails despite his giggles. Listen, take off your trousers. I’ll try to get you going. You’re not going to leave me without a present, are you?”

The room was warm. Makis took off his coat, folded it and carefully laid it on the table. He took off his jacket and fitted it on the backrest of a chair. Took off his shoes and then his trousers and boxer shorts. In his shirt, socks and limp genitalia he moved to the bed and stood in front of the sitting, exposed, fig-leafless Eve who was eyeing him with amusement. She went to work on him. She tried all the tricks of the trade. Even a few that embarrassed him but his penis showed no life, not the slightest interest. He was trying hard to concentrate on sensation. On the crassness and vulgarity of Eve’s oversize flesh, on her manipulations and lingual pulsations but strangely, his mind drifted elsewhere. He was thinking of Anna with tenderness. He really did love her. And missed her all of a sudden. Oh, so much!

“Shit, I give up,” said Eve. “Get dressed. This is not your day.”

“Let’s stay here a while,” said Makis, “or else the bloody queen downstairs will understand and smirk and I shall feel like slapping his face. Don’t worry about your tip. So, what shall we do?”

Eve walked to a drawer and pulled out a pack of cards. She smiled at his surprise.

“Every room has a pack,” she said. “This is a high class joint. You’d be astonished how useful they are. And how often they are used. So don’t feel too bad. What shall we play?”

“Do you play poker?”

“You bet. Are we playing for money?”

“No. You're no match for me. I'll tell you what. The money you win, I'll pay. What you lose, I deduct from your tip. You won't lose more than that.”

“No. I want my tip.”

“Well, OK. What you lose, you don't pay.”

She fetched a box of matches and they used them for money. They sat on the bed. Makis, cross-legged, bottomless with shirt and tie and cufflinks. Eve, stitchless, heavy breasted, large nipples, ample bellied, thick legs and thighs apart. Makis shuffled the cards expertly.

“Cut.”

They played for half an hour and Makis won a fortune from Eve and did not even taste a smack of what he had paid for. He gave her a fat tip and she gave him a kiss. Sometimes, such tenderness is found even in bordellos. Between buyers and sellers of bodies. On occasion, people like Makis can be nice. But not always.

He left and took a cab to Zonar's, the famous "steki" of the Athenian boulevardiers. Of old, it should be added. The place was past its time of glory. It was still clean, luxurious and chic but the bon viveurs were a dying species. Life was a hassle and a hustle and even those who could afford a whisky at noon did not have the time for it. The stock exchange was denying them the peace of mind, the leisure. It gave them another kind of thrill but with a lot of worry. With its ally, the mobile phone, it was the opium of our times. Makis looked around. The place was nearly empty. The few faces present were not familiar and he removed hat and coat and sat, alone, near a window to look at the passers-by. In the old days he used to sit just like that, with his cronies, to pick out and ogle the pretty women. They were few and far between. Was he less discriminating, nowadays? Was it because of his age? How ironical that in his time of infirmity they should all seem to him so gorgeous. What a handsome race the Greeks are, he often thought. What lovely women they have. He ordered a whisky and a snack to while away the hour left before going to Yanni for the poker game.

Life is such a puzzle, he thought. Never gives you a clear answer. Today for instance, what conclusions can I draw? That I am, finally, impotent? Oh, certainly, I am not young or virile but am I totally senile? When the girl was fiddling me, my mind was not in it. I was thinking of Anna. Perhaps, this distraction was keeping me from arousal. Perhaps it's all over. And, after all, so what? Is it not liberation from an obsession? The obsession of the male? I will have to readjust my psyche. Well, it probably has readjusted already on its own. It's just that I have to accept it consciously. And where does that leave Anna? Oh, as if Anna was anywhere else and not smack in the middle of it. For Heaven's sake we haven't made love for over a year and proper lovemaking for ages before that. She has been so good for me this girl. My precious Anna. She has really given me a new lease on life. She has been the lucky star of my life. That's why it burns me up when I see that creep taking advantage of her. And he's the cause of the cooling down of our intimacy and tenderness. Our alienation. Ever since his mother died and Anna started supporting him, he has been a thorn in the side of our marriage. We never quarreled before and now, once a week, it's on the menu and the cause of it is his Excellency the Bum. Big deal, he's her nephew. Big deal, they grew up together. He's sucking her dry. She tells me, I owe it to him. Owe him, what? Why? Because he put her up for a few months in Cairo fifty years ago? I get sick when I see them chattering together. Like lovers. I get out of my mind. I imagine all sorts of improbable things. But is it possible? Is it? It's too

grotesque to envisage. And I know he hates me. I feel it. But young man, the feelings are mutual. I hate your lazy, good-for-nothing guts.

Makis was choking. He had palpitations, he was perspiring, and his face was beetroot-red. He had lost his appetite. Was annoyed that the little no-good creep was causing him such upheavals. He finished his drink and thought it best to go to Yanni forthwith, even if a little early. Otherwise he'd be risking a heart attack. He paid, hailed a taxi and on to the main event of the evening.

It was Yanni's turn to host the game. There were six or seven of them and took turns offering hospitality and snacks in their homes for the game. It was a once-a-week affair and Makis grew to enjoy the group and look forward to the game. When they played, time simply flew. They rarely quit before two or three in the morning. The game was poker, the stakes moderate and, well, you lost some and won some. The main thing was that they were friends and there was trust between them. Makis was a good, shrewd player and, like most people, was a good winner but not a particularly good loser. He did not like to lose and, especially, did not like to lose money. However he tried not to show it just as he tried not to show his aversion to the cigarette smoking that took place during the game and fumigated his hair and clothing and surely his lungs, as well.

Dora, Yanni's wife greeted him graciously. Told him how nice it was that he was a little early. Gave them an opportunity for a chat. Dora, never a particularly attractive woman was at the age when chubby persons, especially of the female sex, expand in breadth and contract in height. But she was a *femme du monde* quite equal to Maki's social graces. They chatted animatedly and both forgot their chagrin for a while. Michael was kept at bay and Dora's sore feet stopped reminding her that she was the victim of this gathering. For not only did she not play poker but had to serve and pamper and stay up half the night taking care of these dotards, having to clear up the debris, at the end of the day, or rather, in the early hours of the next. She was getting to be a closet feminist being too old and genteel and old-fashioned to be an overt one. When Yanni came out, she got up to serve them drinks and soon the rest of the crowd started arriving. Within half an hour it was a noisy gathering with drinks and snacks and talk and laughs and then they settled down to serious business. It was all very professional, a green felt-covered round table, chips for money and brand new cards for every game. A turn at the toilet before sitting down. Things were pretty serious.

Like most gamblers, Makis was superstitious. He had feelings, which hardly ever were reliable and looked for signs, which were mostly meaningless and made suppositions, which were touch and go. Today he wondered if the misfortune of having to swallow Michael's presence would carry to the gaming table or was he to be compensated for it? He got his answer early on. But not the whole of it. Right from the start, Lady Luck was sitting on his lap and his cards were so faultless, it was uncanny. He did not need to use his skill. Steadily, he was collecting all the money on the table. He could hardly contain himself and keep his poker face. It is getting to be unlucky in lovemaking, lucky in gambling, he thought and smiled inwardly. By the time they stopped for a break and another drink, Makis had the bulk of the money in a little mound in front of him. And when they were drinking, a sort of banter started up, half in jest, half in malice and mainly out of pique, to explain, to exorcize the inexplicable. Spyros said that something was not normal. So much luck, so persistently, is weird. Makis is either using a magic spell, has made a deal with the devil or is cuckolded by his wife. And, he added, the first two being unlikely, only one possibility was left. Some people laughed but one or two were sensitive enough to



change the subject. Makis blushed and could barely keep his lips from trembling. He was hit where it hurt. He did not think it funny and when they returned to the table he played so recklessly, so self-destructively that he started literally giving the money back. The game had become gloomy and burdensome for everyone and they packed it up early. Makis had returned all his winnings and even some of his own money.

In the taxi on his way home, he cursed Michael for poisoning his life. For introducing the element of mistrust and suspicion in it. For putting a wedge between Anna and himself. He did not have to put up with it any longer. All along the journey he fed his anger and indignation. As soon as he entered the flat he went directly to the small spare room where Anna would accommodate Michael on his overnight stays and switched on the light. Sure enough, Michael was asleep on the narrow couch. Makis felt blood rush into his face, he felt his eyes bulge and his face puff up. His tongue grew twice its size and filled his mouth. He could not form the words he wanted to articulate, to bellow. He used his leg and walking stick to prod Michael awake. And when the startled Michael sat up, Makis managed to yell hoarsely,

“Out.”

“What?” asked Michael. “What's wrong?”

“Out. Get out.”

“Why? What happened?”

“No whys about it. Get dressed and get out.”

In a daze, stiff jointed, Michael started retrieving his clothing and getting dressed under the surveillance of a trembling Makis, on the verge of apoplexy, his red, swollen face ready to explode. Anna came in her pajamas. She had been awakened by the commotion.

“What's wrong, Makis?”

“I want him out. I want the bastard out of my house.”

“What happened Makis, please tell me.”

“The straw just broke the camel's back. I don't want to see him, ever, in this house again.”

“But what did he do, today, this evening?”

“He has poisoned my life one more time. Just as he has been constantly doing ever since your sister's death when you took him under your wing. And now, enough's enough.”

“Makis, he'll leave very early in the morning.”

“I want him out now. Right this minute.”

Anna started crying.

“It's freezing outside, Makis. There's no public transport and even if he could afford a cab, where would he find one?”

“I don't give a damn. Come on you piece of shit, get moving.”

Michael dressed silently, not uttering a word. When he put on his tattered overcoat, he kissed Anna, opened the door and left. Anna sat on a chair in the hall and sobbed silently on her own. When she calmed down a little, Makis took her gently by the arm and led her to their room. Anna got in bed and Makis started undressing and hanging his clothes meticulously in the cupboard. He entered the bathroom and sat on the toilet seat. Anna was still sniffing. At three o'clock in the morning, Makis started whistling a merry tune.

**17 / 9 / 2000.**

## YOUTHFUL YEARNINGS AND TROUBLING ENCOUNTERS

It was her voice but not just her voice. It was her accent and the undulations of her moods reflected in her diction. Not of extremes, not dark and moody but playfully lurking on the merry, prowling on the joyful, permanently anchored on the lively. I never really knew her well and did not inquire if her not quite English accent was due to a foreign mother or grandmother. What I did know was that her grandfather was a pre-revolution Prime Minister of Egypt. This became, almost, her official title in the young, rich, educated, and progressive social circles she moved in, though she deserved better than that. She deserved to be known for something more than her familial pedigree. But there is no doubt, it added glamour to her glamour. A mystique to her unconventionality, a dazzle to her light-hearted love affairs.

I must have been sixteen when I first met her. My mother was a prodigiously dynamic person. A dressmaker, who not only expanded her original metier to include a number of women's boutiques but also developed into one of the leading fashion designers in a country that was waking up from the slumber of feudalism and was developing a moneyed, educated, professional and business middle-class that looked to Europe for an education in a new life-style. Not to speak of the high-pressured, highly seductive post-war American influence backed by the dollar, its technology and the culture of the glamorous Hollywood dream world. My mother was the first to dare the fashion show in our conservative, barely rousing, still vacillating, revolution-gripped country. Amina Okasha, or Amy, was her first model. Oh, there were others, lovelier than her and I loved them all but Amy was the *primus inter pares*.

It was her voice but not just her voice. Not even the near-English accent when talking English, French and Arabic. An Arab, a Moslem, articulating her native tongue, without affectation, like an English Arabist. In that voice. That voice. It cannot be explained, for words cannot describe sounds, nor notes, human voices. It was more than the voice, it was the personality of a whirlwind for she left you breathless, of a vanquisher for she left you enslaved, of a brilliant star for she left you a dreamer. At sixteen, that was all I could do. All I could be. A breathless, enslaved dreamer. And she was not even beautiful. Oh, unutterably attractive, but not beautiful. Not as beautiful as she seemed, as her luminous personality made her out.

In those days, after my father's death and the blooming of my mother's entrepreneurial and artistic energies, we lived in an apartment building in downtown Cairo. Our living quarters, one floor above the atelier, which occupied an entire floor. Four flats, interior walls torn down, a labyrinthine arrangement of corridors and rooms, kitchens and bathrooms. There was an office with a lone employee, a Copt, Habib effendi, who wore the red tarboush long after the revolution banned it, a keeper of accounts and the agendas of my mother's appointments, of the stocks of cloths and the sundry materials of the trade. There was also an extra desk for my homework for I could not bear to stay alone upstairs. In the other rooms, legions of girls and women were working, sewing by hand or on hand and leg-driven sewing machines. One or two cutters of cloth and dress patterns, the stars of the enterprise, together with the supervisors and fitters completed the picture with the big maestro, my mother herself. It would have been very difficult for a graduate of a Business School to draw a flow chart of the enterprise. We muddled along well enough. Until the shows began and the beautiful girls entered our lives and filled them with glamour and mine with restlessness and relentless longing.

My mother, who since her early forties renounced men for this mad rush to success, was not altogether happy with my increasing involvement in the business, especially the artistic aspect of it, the designing of dresses. I believe she feared that I was in the classic environment that evolved homosexuality. The absence of a father, the strong, domineering, businesswoman mother and our preoccupation with beauty and femininity in a milieu of giggling, gossiping women was bound to divert my normal sexual orientation. She kept insisting that I should study engineering. I kept insisting I would be a couturier. In any case, I was a mediocre student who hardly ever used his special desk for homework. I was always at her side when she, at her drawing board, was furiously working out ideas. Throwing in a suggestion, now and then, to have it soundlessly ignored, to see it resurface a few sketches later. I also started sneaking in at fittings until she started calling me in herself. She was encouraged by the lack of any obviously deviant, tell-tale body language in my bearing.

One would have thought, in that den of femininity I would become blasé. Never did. I never lost my shyness and timidity even though, or perhaps because of it, I was the mascot of the atelier. Even at sixteen, most of the younger girls called me Khawaga or Messiou Tony, most of the older ones, just Tony or Nino from Tonino, a diminutive bestowed by Amy that stuck like glue. Most of the younger girls were shy and decorous, most of the older ones kissed me and ruffled my hair at least once a day, to be rewarded with a shy smile and a blush. Most of the young models we hired for the fashion shows were special, ignored me, and wrenched at my heart. Most made me dream and ache and wonder if one day I would possess and love and kiss a being such as them. If ever that day would come. If such a miracle were possible. They seemed like the houris promised to Moslems who achieved paradise. As remote. So far away, I would have to die first, to reach them.

When they came for fittings, I would stick around not only to assist the fitting but in search of beauty, to look at the girl, to see a comely face, an allure of youth and womanhood, a lovely leg or perhaps an accidentally exposed breast. My mother understood, was reassured, and had me always there. The girls were usually aloof. It was perhaps strange that they generally came to this profession as a hobby. They were from the higher classes of our society. The more developed and modernized section, for the middle and lower classes were neither educated nor rich enough to provide the poise needed, nor considered the profession respectable. Amy, too, came from the very top but all of a sudden she needed the money she earned, very badly. The revolution had started demolishing all possible threats of opposition to its regime and Amy's family apparently conformed to their definition of threat and its wealth was duly sequestered. Amy, at the time, was attending university as an avocation. Just like her tennis and her ballet lessons and the cinema and parties in the evening. She was bright enough to slither from one year to the next studying during leftover time, her many activities restricting its availability somewhat. When the sequestrations, the excision of wealth from the enemies of the people took place, Amy turned to modelling to be able to maintain the façade of her former lifestyle and the fact of her good spirits.

It was Marti, my mother's younger sister, who introduced Amy to my mother when my mother started looking for young, attractive girls to model her clothes. Marti had met Amy at ballet school and they had become fast friends. I am at a loss how to describe Amy. I am afraid of doing her injustice. For how can you transmit to your reader, personality, an aura of radiance, the change in atmosphere when she entered a room, the way she drew all eyes. The lilt of a voice. The wrong pronunciation. The

laugh that made you happy. She must have been twenty-one or twenty-two at the time. A slim girl of just over average height, white skin and jet black hair, large eyes, the crinkles at the edges permanent from so much smiling of that large mouth with the perfect teeth and ineffable sweetness. Well, somewhere in that first half-hour we lost our heart to her. I lost my head as well but it was quite an achievement to win over, so fast, my hard-nosed mother. And so, Amy was in and out of the atelier at least once a day and with increasing frequency when the shows approached. Mother hired many other beautiful creatures and, as I said before, I loved them all and daydreamed about them and imagined making love to them. The longings were so intense, it is impossible to forget them even now. But Amy, I singled out. She used to come in like a tornado, throw a foreign-sounding Salamou Aleikom to the girls and plunge in the labyrinth of rooms and corridors in search of my mother. If she spied me on the way, she would hurriedly give me a kiss with a, Hello big boy, or a, Hi Tonino, and that was all. No further familiarities, no sweet-assed fussing about. It was I who followed her to hear her talk with my mother in her fascinating English-accented French, in that warm indescribable voice and frequent bursts of laughter. To her, for the rest of that day, I was transparent. After the first greeting with the hurried kiss she no more looked at me and even at times, unconcernedly, undressed in my presence. Such were the bonuses of sixteen-year-old aspiring couturiers. At school, one day, I told this to my best friend and he replied, What do you expect, they get fucked, they are used to it. It was an introduction to a contempt that is contemptible. It distressed me for a long while.

A few years passed, happily, busily, in perpetual motion for my mother and the business. Happily for me too. The 1956 tripartite aggression against Egypt, following the nationalization of the Suez Canal, closed the English school I attended and when it reopened months later, I refused to go back. My mother was terribly upset and told me she had no wish to have a semi-literate, ignorant, shallow, diplomaless dressmaker of a son. I told her that was exactly what I wanted to be and we signed a truce, or rather, her capitulation. Because by now I had become her right hand and the right hand had the upper hand. And she knew that though I would stay diplomaless, I was neither semi-literate, nor ignorant, nor shallow. For I used to swallow and digest an inordinate amount of print. Literature, popular science books and newsmagazines.

There was a slow but continuous turnover of our models, some leaving for more respectable careers, others to get married but there was also a constant influx of new faces drawn by the glamor of the business and creeping respectability of the profession. Amy was with us for a few years but as the years passed one sensed a restlessness and dissatisfaction with her lot. She had dropped out of college and had become a good-time party girl, moving from one man to the next. She never ceded her place in my heart as my favorite model and with the passing years, my transparency became somewhat more opaque. She noticed me more and we had friendly chats whenever she was at the atelier. Once or twice we went together to the cinema on a friendly basis for our age difference was still an insurmountable obstacle to a romantic liaison. Another time we met at a party. Hell, I was growing up, and yet, I must have looked awfully lost and forlorn because she came and sat with me. After talking for a while and when too many silences punctuated our smiles, she searched and found a pack of cards. She took some time arranging the sequence and then started spinning a magic tale, in her enchanting voice, her beguiling smile and crazy, unbelievable accent, flipping the cards to illustrate events and predict the future in a performance such as I had never seen before. By the time she finished half the party was her audience.

“Now let's dance,” she told me.

“I don't know how to,” I pleaded.

“I know that! Time to learn, you ninny,” she said pulling me by the arm.

That was our Amy. The one I loved. Another bond between us was a jalopy she owned. I often took it to my mechanic, to help her out, and was always rewarded by a hug and a delicious kiss when I returned it in running order. Once, after fixing her car, I took it to her house and went upstairs for a coke. The house was practically empty. I did not ask where all the expensive French furniture, antiques and paintings had gone. I understood. They had been sold, piecemeal, to keep her going. But things were getting tight, there was not much left to sell. I asked my mother to increase her salary and the hard-nosed businesswoman told me if I was so concerned, why did I not give her part of my earnings. So I shut up.

Around that time, Marti, had a marriage proposal from a Greek-American who was visiting his aunt in Egypt and she left her steady boyfriend who did not seem to have any plans to settle down. She flew to America after an engagement ceremony in Cairo and within two months was back. She did not like the middle-class life of the East Coast of the U.S. It was nothing like the movies. But mostly, she did not like it that her fiancé seemed to have too many female acquaintances and was absent far too often on mysterious duties. In Cairo, she did not make up with her previous love but collected her mother, my grandmother, and left for Greece, permanently. Meanwhile Amy started dating seriously the scion of a well-known Greek family with interests in clothing imports. The revolution, by its policy of encouraging the local industries had given a death blow to all importing enterprises and Amy's boyfriend decided to move on to Greece. Before leaving he proposed to Amy who accepted and they got married a few weeks before leaving. I attended the wedding and unhappily wished her well. I was losing my favorite model, my newfound friend, perhaps my future lover. A girl that lit up my life with her radiance, her lively personality, her humour, her beauty and incredible sweetness.

More years passed by and I fear that, like most people, we fell into the trap of thinking that success and the accumulation of wealth is what is most important in life. But then each one makes his own happiness as he sees it, as best he can. It's just that the years flew, oh pleasantly enough, but with hard work and hectic rhythms, and suddenly you realized that something had slipped you by. What? One cannot tell. It's just a feeling. Of something missed, of something not achieved. Is it the eternal human search for what cannot be had? Is it the need for something more when you have all you need? My mother was getting old. She seemed fulfilled. But was she? Without love, without a companion? And I, reluctant to raise a family and, in a sense, push her aside though this was her fondest hope. So we kept on, a fight for more of what we amply had. We took time off for a few hurried holidays, separately, usually to Greece, to see grandma and Marti. From Marti I always asked news of Amy. I was always told that she was happily married but did not have any children. I did not try to see her. She might remind me of happy days, of something that was lost. I also traveled to Europe to attend the big fashion shows, to refresh my ideas for, now, I was the main designer in our business. On such a trip to England, in the lobby of the hotel where I stayed, I fell upon a face from the past. A classic case where you muse about the smallness of this world. It was Nick, Marti's onetime American fiancé. He was in town on business and we met later in the evening for a drink at the bar. He asked about Marti and we talked about her and about this and that. He was, he said, happily married with two children and, I imagined, probably happily philandering. He asked about Amy.

“Did you know her?” I asked, surprised.

“Sure.”

“How come?”

“I met her at Marti's house,” he answered. “We happened to leave the house together one day and she offered to drive me home to my aunt's. Funny car she had, ha ha. On the way, I invited her for a drink and we went to the bar at the Hilton. We hit it off fine and drank an awful lot and we drove to her flat in Heliopolis, got laid, and then she drove me right back to town.”

I finished my drink in a hurry, said good bye and left. Well, that's the second time I see you Nick, I thought, and it's definitely the last. But why was I so upset? What did I care? For ancient history. The fact was, I did. I had a certain opinion of Amy. I had certain feelings and this story threatened them. Again I did not want to fall into the trap, or should I say, the normal male reaction of calling her a bitch. I just wanted to forget about it. And I did, for a while.

A few months later, I had finished some chores at our shop in the Hilton and went to the pizzeria for a snack before returning home. With a businesswoman mother, one did not always find something to eat at home. So I was playing it safe. I was alone, perusing a book I had just bought from the hotel newsstand and vaguely remarked that two gentlemen entered the shop and sat in the booth next to mine. Apart from the tables and chairs conventionally placed inside the pizzeria and a sumptuous salad bar in the middle, all along the walls were little wooden booths with seating for four. Two persons tucked inside the booth and two others, exposed on the other side of a small table. The wooden part of the partition reached the shoulder height of the seated person and a small curtain took over the task of concealing the neighboring customer thus providing a modicum of privacy without, however, suppressing his voice. The waiter took my order and I kept on reading the publicity superlatives on the book covers, inside and out, and at some point realized that my neighbors were talking in Greek. When the pizza and lager arrived and I put down the book, I found myself following what was being said next door. I really had no choice. Despite the piped music and the slight hubbub, the voices came on loud and clear. They even diverted my attention from my taste buds. I was not enjoying my meal. And I couldn't care less for voice number one and voice number two. But there was no respite.

From their conversation I deduced that voice number one was a local. Funny I should not know him. But then, his voice seemed older than I was and I was never in the thick of the Greek community, always on the fringe. Voice number two had left Egypt years ago and had started his life anew in Greece. They were obviously close friends who had not seen each other for some years and were exchanging news and views of that time of their life they were apart. Oh who cares? Why don't they shut up or, at least, lower their voices? Let me enjoy my pizza, for heaven's sake. But on they droned, with voice number two doing most of the droning because voice number one was doing all right. Plenty of money, things running smoothly, the factory working day and night. He was basking in self-satisfied silence. It was poor number two who seemed to be in straights and was not so much complaining, as analyzing his difficulties, both business and marital.

“But,” he said, “I am lucky in one thing. I am in love. I have fallen in love with a wonderful girl. Here,” he added, “I have her picture.”

A silence, an opening of a wallet, a shuffling of paper, a silence once again, and then voice number one,

“Yes, yes, very nice. But what about Amina?”

I just managed not to expectorate the beer I was sipping. I choked it down and pricked my ears.

“Oh, I still love Amy,” voice number two explained. “I mean, she is my wife, but Vera is something else. She is so bright. She is brilliant. She is the director of the American publicity company that has recently opened a branch in Greece. And you know, Amy is giving me a very hard time. She is never satisfied. Forever complaining. Still thinks she is living in the shadow of Okasha Pasha. All this bitching gets you down.”

I finished my pizza, paid my bill and left. Getting up, I threw a glance at the two men. I definitely did not know voice number one and just barely remembered voice number two although I had been to his wedding and had half-heartedly congratulated him.

So Amy was on her way out. I could not pretend I was sad. It was probably good riddance to bad rubbish for her. But what would she do? And then I remembered Nick and thought that, perhaps, she too had someone on the side. I worried a little about it, but in my life I also had bigger worries and just as the small fish are eaten by the big, so are the small worries gobbled up by bigger ones.

A few months later, my mother went to Greece because grandma was dying. She was by grandma's side in her last few days and when she died, I flew in for the funeral and flew out again to attend to the business which was making us rich and famous but not that much happier. My mother stayed on a couple of weeks longer to keep Marti company and when she returned, she told me that one evening, Amy and her husband came to offer their condolences. They spent most of the evening bickering between themselves in public, self-centered, embarrassing everyone around. Amy, she said, had lost her sparkle and her smile and although she had kept well physically, she was a different person. So much for my happy princess with the beguiling voice and the half-English accent. Well, perhaps we have changed too, like Amy, and do not even suspect it.

Across the years that followed, the obvious happened, Amy was thrown aside by her inconstant husband. Vera, I gathered from the news that trickled to us through Marti, was superbly successful in her career, though not, I thought, in her choice of a husband, whom she was soon obliged to feed, clothe and keep in style and also pay for his ex-wife's alimony. But perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps, she was very happy. Who was I to judge and on what evidence? As for Amy who had me worried for a moment, back then, she was counting her blessings and was constantly saying, partly as a joke but undoubtedly also in dead earnest, “May God keep our Vera, the provider of our daily bread.” She had become a native Greek speaker with an English accent and spent much of her time playing bridge and probably bickered no more.

By and by, as we all must, my mother died, as someone who is dear to me said, at a viable, dieable age, leaving me a rich and puzzled man. Wondering if all the rush was worth it. I never married. I had a few liaisons, a few affairs, but my true passion was my work. It was her death that shook me to my very foundations. That made me stare, wide-eyed, astonished, at the folly of my life. On an impulse, I sold my business, sold my lovely new flat on the Nile and moved to Greece. For a while I stayed at Marti's place. She had married and divorced and lived alone. I used her home as a base, for I traveled widely for the first few years of my liberation from a comfortable, addictive and inexorable workaholism. Getting to know our world. From the jungles of Africa and its endangered species, to those of the Amazon and its endangered forests, to the Arctic regions and their endangered ice. I saw our planet's teeming and suicidal, multiplying legions, its peoples of all hues, white, brown, black,

and yellow. Of all eyes, slit and round, brown, blue, green and gray. Of all noses, broad and flat, thin and pointed. Of all lips, thick and sensual, thin and hard. Of all statures, from pigmy short to Masai tall. I saw the whole of our polluted, endangered earth. And then at fifty-five, I had to take a rest and started building my dream house, on a hill, outside Athens, by the sea.

It was a happy period of my life, this building of the house. It was my new unhurried occupation, my new absorbing hobby, the continuation of my art, the need to create something beautiful. Not any more a dress, a beautiful cover of the body but a beautiful shelter for my life. For what was left of it. What was left of it, it seemed, was just this house. I commissioned three well-known architects for an initial study and chose the ugliest of the three models. It captivated me, it called to me. Sometimes what seems like ugliness tends with time to become fascinating and even beautiful in one's eyes, whereas the obviously pretty can become boring and banal. So I set to work as a pastime with no deadlines and as lovingly and hopefully as a sculptor works at his block of marble or a writer at his novel. And yet, in this happiness something was amiss. Marti was like a big sister to me, almost a wife without the bed and what few encounters I had with women seemed like infidelities. Started by chance, built up in coffee bars and bars and consummated in hotel rooms. There were not many. At fifty-five, the spirit may be willing but the flesh is weak, the desire slow to build up, is quick to dissipate, the recovery, too long. To spell it plainly, if crudely, my erections were becoming temperamental and capricious, not always reliable. But still, I felt the need for sex. Slow or not, the desire did build up and so did a need for a more permanent partner. Again the same dilemma I faced with my mother, I now faced with Marti. Finding someone else would be too much like a divorce. A divorce I did not wish.

I had always asked about Amy. Even during my three years of constant travel and also now that I was permanently grounded building my ugly, beautiful home and driving my architect to distraction. I always asked Marti about her, I never asked to see her. She was a fantasy I was afraid to spoil. Twice she came to visit us at home and both times I left the house on some lame excuse like a frightened animal. The third time, she came unannounced.

I opened the door and a gray haired woman with sunglasses jumped at me and though I retreated a few steps, could not escape her clasp. Even when she hugged and kissed me, I thought it was a mistake. Until I heard the voice and the laugh and the not quite English accent and my name as was affectionately distorted forty years ago. And then, I hugged her too, tightly, yes, very tight, and when my eyes saw tears in hers, they returned the compliment, which was real and Marti who had come into the hall was playfully trying to separate us, saying, "OK, OK, break it up."

We sat in the living room and looked at each other. Across, what, a thirty-five year old gap? Bridging it, estimating the damage. She had kept, oh well, well enough. Did not show her age despite the graying hair. Why didn't she dye it? Her skin was fresh, well kept but she had put on some weight and her face was a little pudgy, perhaps from drink. She wore a black pair of trousers and a white blouse but the elegance and the light, graceful movement of Amy on the catwalk at the Hilton had remained on a shelf in my memory. And yet, she was Amy, the Amy I loved, with the voice unchanged, with the accent as delightful, with the smile as sweet and the laugh as merry, if somewhat less frequent. Her whole bearing more subdued.

"Tonino, why didn't you want to see me?"

"Who said I did not want to see you?"



“Twice, I came here for a visit and you were gone. I was not born yesterday, you know.”

“I was dying to see you but I was afraid to spoil the image I had of you in my memory.”

“So there! I spoiled it for you just now.”

“You look splendid, Amy. Apart of your hair, not a year older than forty.”

“Oh, ho, ho. How I wish I could believe that. You don't look too bad either, considering the hardship of your travels in the jungles and the poles and across the continents.”

“Hardly hardship. First class travel and so on. My paunch attests to this. Air-conditioned exploration, I call it. One can climb Mount Everest being carried in a hammock by two natives.”

“Come on.”

“Well nearly. Still, it was fun and it was sad.”

“Why sad?”

“Because, like us, the world is aging. Human progress and selfishness are wearing it out fast. Will it last another century? Not at this rate.”

I remembered the two voices at the pizzeria. We spent three hours doing the same. Reminiscing on a happy life that was young and was gone. But perhaps, the past always seems happier than it really was. Amy wanted to hear about the last years of the atelier. The details, for she knew the general outline. She was briefed all along the years by Marti. It had a special place in her heart. And she spoke of her life. She was entering, she said, her period of loneliness. She did not have a man and friendships, at her age, were always difficult to come by. She was lucky to have her bridge playing. I asked her why she did not remarry.

“Well,” she answered, “the reasons were primarily financial. I have had a few proposals but no one worthwhile came along who merited taking the risk of losing my security with Vera. Losing the right to my alimony. I am happily married to her. She is not only tough and brilliant but also an honorable person. I never felt with her the insecurity of the last years of my marriage when my husband's business was sinking fast. He has really won his big lottery with Vera. And they seem to be happy together. Of course it takes a certain kind of man to accept a change of roles, to accept being kept. But he does, and repays her with an adoration he never showed me.”

Three hours of remembering this and remembering that. Marti was with us all the time but remained mostly silent. I was talking and listening and looking at Amy, trying to extract, to locate the old, fresh young, lively face that thrilled me at sixteen. And it emerged, now and then, in flashes too short to savor. It came with her smile, with certain expressions of her face, the old hearty laugh and it was there all the time with the voice and the accent. But

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,  
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?

Old Willie, the Great Willie got it right. Half his sonnets deal with the corruption of time. Need I say more? I just had my Amy and was trying to resurrect her magic. And then I thought and thought and wondered what was she trying to resurrect in me?

She got up to leave and I offered to accompany her. She no longer owned a jalopy. We drove from our suburb to hers and when we stopped outside her house, she asked me to go upstairs for a drink. I declined saying it was late and I had some accounts of the house to go over. She said, “Please Tonino,” and I went up. Her flat

was small but neat and comfortably furnished. I sat down on the sofa and she poured two whiskies and put on some music. She excused herself for a moment and came back in a lovely pair of silk pyjamas, her hair freshly brushed with a discrete scent of perfume like a halo around her. She picked up her drink and sat next to me with a smile. A smile and a look that asked a question.

I said, "Lovely flat. You're quite comfortable here."

She smiled again.

"You know I'm sixty-one."

"Yes."

"I know you're fifty-five."

"So?"

"Does it put you off?"

"No Amy, my dear. You are quite lovely. The question is: does it put me on? I am a crusty old bachelor who has lost the habit."

She took a sip of her whisky and smiled. She broke my heart because it was a smile that should have been smiled at me thirty-five years ago. She put her glass down and moved into my arms. She looked at me searchingly, uncertainly and smiled again. She was waiting for my move. We stayed comfortably enlaced, for a while, silent. What was there to say? I caressed her hair and she caressed my face. I felt her naked body through the silk and welcomed a faint stir of desire. She turned her face and we started kissing gently, erotically, with very little passion. I undid her pyjama buttons and caressed her breasts. They were small and soft and droopy, showing their age. They had given much pleasure, had been amply fondled, were at the end of their run. Perhaps, I was at the end of mine. I moved away and got up.

"I really have to go," I said.

"To your accounts?" she asked smiling, with tears welling in her eyes.

"Yes, my dear. I'm sorry. Perhaps, another time."

I kissed her, walked to the door and closed it behind me. Oh, Amy, we really are, you know, thirty-five years too late.

**1 / 10 / 2000**

For Mardik Guiragossian.

## S I S I

The tragedy of my life was that I was not born three years earlier and was thus not able to dominate the woman of my life but was dominated by her. She was a year older than I was. Women mature earlier than men and some even much earlier than that. So it is a chancy assumption that three years would have made a difference but as it was I did not have a chance. What flaw of character is it that makes a man so vulnerable to the existence of a single woman? That ties him to her for life and dominates his being? Is it her indifference? The occasional crumb she will throw his way? Will our scientists solving the puzzle of the human genome not discover the aberrant gene that brings on this illness and eliminate it from the human race? It will make for a happier humanity.

For a year now, her phone no longer answers. I shall have to go on the spot for an investigation. It will be a tricky business. I keep on postponing the trip. I keep hoping she will answer. I have no wish to become a Sherlock Holmes at my age. In any case, I am not well. Perhaps not well at all. I just had a liver biopsy. The doctor hawed and hummed and said it was serious. He is afraid to be honest. It is our culture. In the west, they would tell you, you shall be dead in two months. Here they will discuss your case in whispers with their colleagues and leave you in the dark. So I do not know where I stand. I have stopped drinking on irrevocable orders. Perhaps I shall now live to be a hundred. Perhaps. Not very likely.

I last met Sisi two years ago in New York. She came up from New Jersey to see me. She still looked terrific for her age. After four children, she was still hauntingly beautiful. We were just over fifty. She had put on some weight and this caused the delicacy, the subtlety of her beauty to give way to a more homely version. But her beauty could neither be disguised nor eliminated. The sweetness of her smile was intact, undiminished. Nothing is eternal and I suppose it will wear off in time though I envisage her being desirable at seventy. And then, my eyes did not see her as she was because my brain, my senses were still tuned twenty, thirty years back. At the height of her beauty, I was tempted to say. But there was no peak for she was always there, even now that she was descending a gentle gradient.

We met at the lobby of the hotel just after ten in the morning. I had flown in from Greece and had arrived the previous evening. We arranged the appointment over the phone. It was more than a whim this need to see her. We had been talking on the phone for ten years. More, perhaps twenty. Well, I saw her once before long ago after she had her second child and she came to Italy to see her aunt Yola who was dying. We met in Rome and we spent two days together cooped up in the house, chaperoned by an aunt on her deathbed. We both lodged at Yola's to be close to each other since we were stuck in the flat but the arrangements were cramped and she refused to make love with me. I told her Yola would be too preoccupied by her forthcoming *rendezvous* with the reaper of souls to notice our love play. She did not agree and she had qualms about her husband too. So we just kissed a little and I told her it was the same thing. She was being just as unfaithful as if we made love. For this too was love. She laughed and said I used the most preposterous arguments. I still believe it is true. And I was annoyed for when did Sisi ever respect conventional morality?

Anyway, that time at the lobby as I saw her coming towards me, that killer smile of sweetness hovering on her lips, I thought of the words in Brel's song. *Tu es mon Amerique a moi*. She loomed as large and as intricate. I loved America because

she was in it. She was the hope that got lost, the beauty that haunted, the passion that was derailed into murky dead ends, the amorality and fickleness that drove you crazy. I held her in my arms and could not let her go. It was not a whim this need to see her. It was a cry of agony.

“Sylvia, you are amazing. You look so good. What is it? What’s wrong?”

She was crying. Smiling and crying. I could not believe it. She was never sentimental. Not with me.

“It is you, my Gian. You are my past and I am crying for it.”

I took her by the arm and we moved to the bar. She ordered a coffee and I a double whisky with a dash of soda. At ten o’clock in the morning. We must have looked like lovers. We could not take our eyes from each other’s face. We were lovers at that moment. A little too late.

“You look fine too,” she told me, smiling. “I often think of you. You are tied to the happy moments of my life. Tell me about Alexandria. Is Justine still there?”

I laughed. She never read and I used to tell her stories from the novels I loved, sometimes, at night, when she was not out making love with anonymous men I did not know. And she, the *femme fatale*, listening like a baby does to fairy tales.

“Oh, what shall I say? Justine is now called Fatma and is too busy making a baby a year and managing her household to get involved in intrigues and love affairs. In any case, our Alexandria is past and gone. It no longer exists though our house in Mazarita is still there. So are the Luna Park and the gas station at the corner. When I pass by, I cannot bear to look at them. Alexandria is another city. It is alive and exploding with hotels and huge apartment blocks, with crushing crowds and traffic jams, dirty streets and polluted beaches. But it is not ours. Our own Alex is stuck there in the middle, a heart that beats without a soul. Can you imagine those endless, desert beaches of Agami and Maamoura where Justine, and you too perhaps, would swim naked, becoming satellite cities? For us old timers, for us Europeans, the Alex that we loved is now a Frankenstein city.”

“One more illusion spent and I must cry for it no more. But it is part of my life that fills me with nostalgia. I was so happy there and I did not know it.”

“What’s wrong Sisi? Aren’t you happy?”

“Oh, things are rolling well enough. I don’t know why I am so restless. My husband is good and loves me as much as ever. I have four lovely, blond, American children that do not speak a word of Italian. But my life is flat. My mother hated America. I think she was happy to die. We used to quarrel terribly. I used to tell her that it was she that brought us here. She practically forced me to marry Bill. I was never really mad about him, let alone in love. It’s terrible of me to tell you this but it is true. He was madly in love with me and chased me relentlessly. He wanted to marry me and my mother was his greatest ally. ‘I had to get you away from all the Mafiosi scum you were running around with,’ she used to tell me. ‘I did not want to find you some day at the morgue with your throat slit.’”

I looked at her; at her beautiful face. What were left of my life, as well, were memories.

“What a strange period that was,” I said. “How can I forget the weird trips you forced me to take? I could not understand what was happening. Of course I did pretty soon. And the way you thanked me! You did enjoy it, didn’t you? It was not all pure bitchiness to have me under your thumb?”

“I always enjoyed it with you my Giannino, in Rome as well as in Alex. In any case, you could never refuse me anything. I did not have to do it for that. Yes, those last few years in Rome were getting out of hand. I was playing a dangerous game. But

it's all over, of course, and here I am, today, with a family, with a good life, both happy and unhappy, wondering where this depression is coming from."

"We all go through it now and then, my dear. And then the serenity of family life after so much excitement must be rather flat."

"I was so happy Gian when you told me you would come. Did you really come just for me?"

"Just for you, my love. Haven't you understood anything all those years?"

"Understood what?"

"That you are my life. That I have been leading a truncated existence without you?"

She looked at me sadly.

"I never understood where our friendship ended and love began. The fact that you were younger did not help. Still we had some good moments too. Did we not?"

"Subject to your caprices."

"One has not another life to live and it is not much use to have regrets. They always come too late. But sometimes one has still a few hours' grace."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, let's go to your room."

At fifty you cannot love like thirty. Sometimes a miracle does happen. Especially if your love is worth your whole existence and you have desired her and have been denied her most of your life and might never see her again. We made love all morning, talking in the intervals and all too soon it was time for her to leave. She had a home, a husband and children.

"Gian," she said and kissed me as we were dressing, "it reminded me of Alex when dawn always came too soon. It was still wonderful after so many years. At our age."

"Yes, my lusty Cleopatra. You have revived a middle-aged Caesar."

"When are you leaving?"

"In three days' time."

She laughed.

"That was an expensive fuck," she said.

"Oh nonsense. It was a bargain for what it offered. It will allow me to die in peace."

"You are as sweet as always. I was thinking we might halve its cost."

"Oh my darling, you do love me a little after all."

"After tomorrow at nine. In the morning," she added with a smile.

My mother's side of the family was unusually good looking. They were Italians from some obscure village near Venice and in Egypt they oscillated restlessly for two generations between Cairo and Alexandria playing hide-and-seeK with their fortune which they never found. The distaff side of the family was the more interesting and seems to have contributed most of Sylvia's genes. My grandmother was beautiful and scatterbrained. Her sister was a rare beauty and was a *femme fatale* to some and *una putana* to others. She left a handful of children from a handful of marriages and a big pile of broken hearts. Women like her fascinate me for the way they weave in and out of marriages and the lives of men spawning, in the process, as is a woman's destiny, a good number of children. They are a gift from heaven to relieve our lives from boredom. I met her a few times but she was already an old woman. Two of her girls, Yola and Nina were from the same father. Nina was Sylvia's mother; a pretty, lively person who lost her husband soon after Sisi was born and never remarried. Yola was a rare beauty like her mother. She married a Greek

womanizer, who was one of the most lovable, charming and demagogic people I have ever met, and never had any children. She had a string of small pet dogs on which she lavished her affections. But over and above all else she loved Sisi. She was not a very friendly person and never showed me much affection unlike her husband who, whatever his true feelings, was the friendliest of souls. She was stuck up and not a particularly interesting person. My grandfather, who had a sense of humor, and, indeed, needed it to get along with his wife, related how once at an art exhibition Yola stood in ecstasy looking at a huge painting. He approached her and asked her if she liked it. She said she was thinking it must be a pretty big nail on the wall to support all that weight. So much for her artistic bent. My mother, too, was beautiful. She died when I was twelve and it took me some terrible years to recover from her loss.

For a time, Yola and her husband and Nina and Sisi lived together in Cairo. Before my mother died we used to visit them often at a lovely flat they had in Dokki just across the Pont des Anglais. They had a large veranda and I was more interested in Sisi's bicycle than Sisi who was, even then, a doll. A few trivial memories remain from those days. My agony to ride the bicycle which Sisi seemed to need as soon as I touched it and Nina's eternal question to Sisi. *A fato cé a? A fato pé i? Caca and pipi.* Then they all moved to Alex and I did not see them for many years until Yola and her husband returned to live in Cairo but Nina and Sisi stayed on in Alexandria. Sometime in that interval, my mother died of a cancer and I was disconsolate for years. My father, an Egyptian born Greek, could not be a substitute and he did not try. He was a successful businessman making a lot of money and had his mother and another woman from the same island village take care of me and our household. The pair did not touch me. They were ignorant and growled more than they talked and I felt no need for their companionship. I was left to my own devices, as my father was not much at home, in any case. He had his friends and they met in the evenings at a bar and sometimes played tennis in the afternoons at the club. He traveled a lot to Europe for his import-export business and loved to go to Paris where I suspect he frequented the *poules de luxe*. He often used to say, *Il y a des belles femmes a Paris.*

The year after my mother died my father asked her parents, my grandparents, to occupy themselves with my summer vacation. He rented a small villa in a small seaside village just outside Alexandria which was used as a summer resort by a steadily diminishing number of Europeans. Dekhela had a small, well kept hotel which filled up in July and August and had a few permanent European residents. I found the village acceptable because one of my school friends lived there. John, who was my namesake except that outside school I was Gianni, had an English father and a Greek mother. He also had a beautiful girl cousin who was a boarder, like him, in our English school in Heliopolis and spent the greater part of her summer holidays at his house. I was in love with her. We were both thirteen and at that age love was consummated by talk and looks and close proximity and for the more daring, a kiss, an asexual caress and the holding of hands. That was enough for me. It carried me to the limits of my experience and knowledge of sex. I don't know if it was enough for Rosie and, in any case, John's constant presence prevented more intimate contact and experimentation.

My empty-headed, pretentious grandmother was a super-hospitable person. She was a good cook and an uncomplaining hard worker who kept an open house and loved to have people around her. Her house was always full, primarily with family but friends were always welcome as well. That year her beautiful sister was often with us with her last husband who was apparently the big love of her life. She must have been in her middle sixties and though one could discern the beauty, it was also, clearly, of

the past. She had white hair tied in a bun behind her head, beautiful skin and a serenity that I suppose derived from having lived one's life to the full. Her husband was an artist, a painter. He was baldish on top but his hair was extra long at the back. It was a time of short neat hairstyles and such indulgences were the prerogative of artists. I often followed him in his long walks, burdened with his tools, canvases, stand and paints, in search for the right view or seascape to put on the canvas. In due course Nina and Sisi put in an appearance. They joined the long procession of my mother's family and stayed a few days.

In Dekhela I became acquainted with a small group of boys and girls, a mixture of Greeks and Italians. The village was small and dull and the group tried to find ways to enjoy themselves as best they could. They went to the beach together in the mornings to joke and laugh, to monkey about and swim. They bullied and good naturedly manhandled the girls, petted them and fondle their breasts and behinds on the sly, getting slaps and screams for their efforts and always a good laugh. They played volley ball in the afternoons and went for long walks along the empty beaches or the desert hills on the other side of the village at sunset. At thirteen I was too young to be accepted by the group. Until, that is, I introduced Sisi to them. After that I was their darling. Sisi was fourteen and already a gorgeous young woman that drove the boys out of their mind. Because of her I was readily accepted in their midst though I was kept away from their more intimate moments of sexual experimentation by various stratagems. A boy would approach me during the walk and suggest we take a different path and on the way would launch into the most incredible stories imaginable to keep me busy with this nonsense so the rest of the group did their kissing and petting and who knows what else without the irksome presence of the kid. When Sisi would depart for Alexandria, I was the official go-between. Especially the boys would come and ask me to phone Sisi and tell her she was badly missed at Dekhela and would she come the soonest possible. We did not have a telephone at home and I had to go to the post office, which was next door to our house and do my pleading from there. I too wanted Sisi to come. I loved to look at her. I loved that lovely face with the exquisite smile. I loved her woman's body and her full breasts. I loved her gay and merry moods. It really was unfortunate I was not a little older. We used to swim sometimes on our own. She played games with me and fought and ducked me in the water. But she also hugged me and held me tight and caressed my breasts. How could I know, then, she was slyly trying to tell me what she wanted done to her? I did not even suspect it.

I was sixteen that first summer my father sent me to Alexandria for my summer holidays. He came to some arrangement with Nina and I stayed at their house in Mazarita, just out of the city center. He provided me with a chauffeur and our light green Chevrolet. The driver was Sudanese and throughout that summer, in the worst of heat and humidity he wore a suit and tie. Needless to say, the same suit all summer. But he was clean and did not smell. He was a thin, tall, good looking man. Not totally, shiny black. A matt off-black color and had the traditional three cicatrices on his cheek that one rarely sees on Sudanese people in our days. While forever waiting for me he used to while his time away listening on the car radio the music and songs of his country. When I entered the car, I would ask him not to shut it off. Unlike Egyptian songs and music, the Sudanese hit a chord in my aesthetic sensibilities and I enjoyed them very much. He taught me to drive and most of the time I did the driving to and from the beach and for the few excursions we went together. I used to take him to the cinema with me, which he appreciated, instead of letting him wait outside in the car. Then he would take me and feed me some delicious but super spicy meats with

bread and it is a wonder I did not get hemorrhoids that summer. At night he would park the car in the garage beneath the house and disappear until next day at nine. His name was Soliman. With the peripherals out of the way, I shall talk of Sisi.

I had not seen her for three years and I fell in love within a second. We had traveled by desert road for four hours and I must have been disheveled and creased up. I rang the bell holding some loose packs and some pastry I had bought for them, with Soliman hauling my two suitcases behind me. Sisi opened the door and I can still see her smile. Delicious on a ravishing face. She was nearly my height, at the time, but I have since put on a few centimeters. She had a full Italian body. Italian like Loren in her prime and was wearing a rough housedress and was a mite disheveled herself. In that instant I wondered: will I be kissing her? And then we kissed affectionately on the cheeks but that was not it. I yearned for her lips and in those few seconds was naive enough to think a girl like her would be waiting for me.

Nina came running to kiss me and she fussed over me and we sat and talked about the family. We had some of the pastry and then she went back to her housework and Sisi showed me my room and my cupboard. We spoke in Italian although I had lost my fluency through disuse since my mother's death. We spoke familiarly because she seemed to like me and I felt it. My room had a balcony and we talked for a while bending over the ledge. Our arms touched at times and I looked at her luscious shoulders, bare arms and full breasts as we talked watching the drift and movement of people and street sellers on the pavement below. I was in dreamland constructing dreams that were never to be fulfilled. In retrospect, I often thought that had I made a bold pass at her I would have pierced the fort. My dilly-dallying was not for her. She did not have the patience and she had no lack of eagerly awaiting lovers. Worst of all for me, she was experienced and a woman who knew her own mind. The day passed easily and in the evening she dressed up, applied her makeup and went out. It was a multiple stab in my heart. I realized I had not the smallest corner in her plans. She had a life of her own long before I came along, and was so glamorous and beautiful when she dressed that she totally intimidated me. She looked quite a few years older than her age and, by comparison, I was just a child. All grounds for optimism were summarily eliminated. All hope was lost.

That summer Sisi had two boyfriends. For a while, that is, because she soon got rid of the better one. Better in my opinion, of course. She, obviously, had other criteria. I met him during my first days in Alex. His mother was Nina's friend and we passed by, all three of us, Soliman driving, and picked them up from a narrow crowded street in Camp Cesar. Then we drove down the Corniche to the private beach of the San Stefano Hotel which was not far out of town. It did not have an extensive sandy beach but it had the amenities which would allow the ladies to sit comfortably, drink their coffee and later to have our lunch in a civilized manner. It also had cabins for changing in and out of our bathing costumes. Pierro was a thin, tall and very handsome young man. He was the perfect match for Sylvia and it was the fondest wish of Nina and Pierro's mother that the two would marry. Pierro was obviously very much in love with Sisi but things don't always work out as one wishes. He was a polite, serious boy, was studying at the university and would soon graduate as an engineer. He would make an ideal husband and Sisi too seemed happy with him. However, impressions are often misleading. Sisi did not much bother with him beyond that single occasion, as far as I could tell.

Sandro was the man who occupied her mind and dominated her being that summer. Theirs was a tempestuous relationship with quarrels every other day and then reconciliations; constant jealousies and I suppose not a few infidelities on both



sides. Their lovemaking must have been wild and passionate and deeply rewarding to both. Sandro was a meaty hunk, tall, ungainly and untidy, his blond hair usually in a mess. He was not good looking but neither was he unpleasant to look at. He was unfriendly and regarded me with suspicion and distaste. Perhaps, knowing his Sisi he would have preferred I was not around. He owned a huge Harley Davidson which was just about right for his size and bulk and if you moved around Alexandria, which in those days was still a small city you were bound to fall upon him, at least once a day, speeding this way and that. If he did work, his application to his job must have been casual indeed. He was the typical semi-educated, macho male and perhaps that was what Sisi liked though she often rebelled at his overbearing and bullying ways. He often came home and the pair shut themselves in her room for hours and left a discomfited Nina to carry an uneasy, self-conscious conversation with me. Once, in her room I found a round half shell, like a large coin, of thin gold aluminum foil. On the outside was the logo GOLD COIN and around the circumference was written, For the Prevention of Diseases. I could not understand what it was. It was not a pill and it was not chewing gum. I put it in my pocket and later showed it to Sisi and asked her what it was. She grabbed it from my hand with a smile, ruffled my hair, called me *stupido*, crushed it into a small round ball and threw it away. My education started with tiny steps but somewhere along the line those tiny steps turned into a giant stride.

Meanwhile, some more trivial memories crowd my mind and have to be recorded before they are lost in the infinity of the human comedy. During those summer months, Sisi used to sleep with just her panties on. Unfortunately she slept in a prone position and despite the frequent patrolling in front of her room I only saw a bare back, a lovely pantied backside, a pair of luscious legs and a cascade of hair on her pillow. Not a glimpse of breasts I was dying to see. She moved about the house without a bra and the loose movement of her breasts in a shirt or a housedress sent my imagination racing and my frustration to its zenith. Oh, what an ass you were, Sandro, to antagonize a Goddess. What an ass to ignore her at times. It used to infuriate her when he did not show up for a day. She used me to annoy him, to take her petty revenge. She told him we went to the beach together, to the cinema, to the conservatory where she took her piano lessons. All of which was true but I was her little puppy dog following her whims, hardly a rival to Sandro. At times she used to stage situations that would enrage him. She would put a jug of lemonade on the table in her room and two glasses and when Sandro arrived, Nina would open the door and tell him that Sylvia was in her room. He would lumber in and find me cozily drinking my lemonade with her, in her room. He would glare at me and I would get up and leave the room with my tail between my legs. I was not too proud of this but I would do anything for Sisi. It is a miracle I did not get a bashing.

My summer routine in Alexandria started taking shape. I had a few friends from school one of whom was very close. We would meet at the beach and sometimes go to the Alexandria Sporting Club, a swanky private club where we would play squash and ogle at the pretty girls. At night, the 'in' place to go to was the San Stefano open air cinema. For the upper-class young people it was the place where they went to look each other over. Where boys met girls and started the innocent, romantic friendships of those days. The film that was playing was of absolutely no importance though it provided the excuse to get away from home. Laughter, conversations and shouting would blanket the sound track of the movie.

For a beach we usually chose the Sidi Bishr number two. Alexandria is a long, narrow city stretching alongside the sea and the choice of a beach was vast, however, most of the beaches near the city were unbearably crowded and the first-rate ones

with immense stretches of very fine white sand and clear, luminous, unbelievably turquoise water were far away to the west of the city. Sidi Bishr no.2 was near the end of the Corniche, the road that weaved its way along the edge of the sea for ten or so kilometers and ended at the Montaza Palace, former summer residence of the Egyptian monarchs.

In those days, the beach had an entrance fee which kept the poverty-stricken and the riff-raff out. It kept out the boys and men who swam in their underwear and the fat women in their dresses. It kept out the families that brought their food in pots and pans to eat their midday meal on the sand littering the place with soiled newspapers and watermelon husks. And it kept out the penniless and almost certainly sex-starved youths who came to stare and stare at the good-looking young women in bathing costumes and who would sometimes throw an obscenity at them for there was no hope of an exchange of civilities. No, Sidi Bishr no.2 was not for them. It was for the affluent, stylish summer vacationers and once again like the cinema where the film didn't matter, it was a beach where sea and sand didn't matter. There was constant movement to and fro along the length of the beach on a paved pathway where the radars and the eyes of the young were on full alert. Where the fashionable dresses and slacks were as numerous as the fashionable bathing suits and where the elaborate hairstyles suffered not a drop of the Mediterranean.

Sisi joined me now and then for a morning at the beach. I used to hire an umbrella and two chairs on the spot instead of dragging my own along. I would sit down and she would get up and disappear. Later, I would see her walking on the promenade with a retinue of young men. If she happened to notice me, she would throw me a smile and keep going her way as if I were some distant acquaintance. I would swim alone to a rocky island half a kilometer away and often punctured my feet on the sharp rocks while trying to get on it. I would then return and sunbathe and Philippe, the photographer, would trundle along, take a picture, often unasked, and bring it to me an hour later. It was fantastic speed at an age when even the transistor radio had not yet put in an appearance. I took quite a few pictures with a ravishing Sisi next to me, holding hands, hands over shoulders, smiling at each other and pretending to kiss. I needed them to take to school in winter and boast to my friends and I gave her a few to show Sandro when they had a quarrel.

Once, my school friend came with us and that day he stopped talking. I asked him what the matter was and he said he could not get over it, how beautiful she was! It was love at first sight. On another occasion, a girl from school called Madeleine spotted me and came and sat under my umbrella. She was about two years younger than I was and like Sisi she had lost her father and was sexually precocious. There is, I think, a definite correlation in that. Girls tend to be sexually more aware and experienced when their household lacks a father. Madeleine made many passes at me at school but she was not to my taste and I rebuffed her. That day she sat with me and we chatted and I thought she was a pretty good sport to do so after my multiple rejections. She was wearing a bathing suit but her hair was freshly combed and, I remember, a few strands of pubic hair sticking out from the side of her costume between her legs. Some strange details seem to adhere on your brain and I wondered why she did not trim her hair in that region to avoid this distasteful effect. As we were talking Sylvia came along and Mado got up and left.

“What was that?” asked Sisi.

“A girl from school,” I answered.

“I see you have very pretty girls at your school,” she told me with an ironic smile.

“She is in love with me,” I said. “She even asked me to sleep with her.”

Sisi was horrified.

“Ha,” she said, “the cheek!”

Sometimes when no one was available to join me for a swim, I stayed at home and listened to Sisi practice the piano. It was in the hall and there were some easy chairs where I would lounge. Sisi had talent and she liked her instrument. She practiced nearly every day. Of course the exercises were tuneless, boring and interminable but usually when I was there listening to her she would also play some of the wonderful pieces of Chopin, Liszt and Mendelssohn for my benefit. I admired her tremendously for this talent though in truth I could not evaluate it. Still, her perseverance, for a girl so seemingly fickle in other aspects of her life impressed me. I used to go to the conservatory quite often with her because it was in the afternoon at an hour when there was nothing else to do. Her teacher, an elderly white haired woman seemed very fond of her. Sisi introduced me as her young cousin and the lady said,

“Oh, not so young, not so young,” and I loved her for it.

I stayed at Nina’s over three full months, middle June to early October.

Alexandria started emptying after the first week of September and the beaches were a delight not only because the crowds and the traffic jams at the Corniche had eased but also because the usually turbulent sea and huge waves that alternated with milder conditions throughout July, August and mid-September gave way to an exceptional calm. It is a very short time when the sea is like a lake, the weather is not scorching, the crowds have gone home and one feels that, at last, Alexandria is no longer usurped by the Cairean hordes but is, once again, in the hands of its inhabitants, its illustrious ghosts and its history.

All through that summer Sisi was with Sandro. Their week was divided, roughly, into four peaceful days and three quarrels. Well, I am perhaps exaggerating a little and, anyway, I should be grateful that this was so. I owe so much to those quarrels and Sandro’s domineering, heavy-handed stupidity. The funny thing is, I never did find out the reasons for them. I suppose they were trivial and different each time. One day, I came in from the cinema round about midnight and asked Nina if Sisi was out. Nina was in her nightgown ready for bed. In a low voice she told me that Sandro came and picked her up earlier in the evening but half an hour later she was back because they had a terrible fight. She shut herself in her room and was sulking. As one can imagine, Nina did not have much of a hold on Sisi. The girl dominated her thoroughly. She was strong willed and independent and could be rough on her mother. She neither took her advice nor confided in her. I had the feeling Nina liked me and considered me a good prospective match for Sisi despite our small age difference. I suppose that was mainly because of my father’s wealth and in a rather obvious and not very helpful way she tried to throw us together. She shared my dislike for the ruffian Sandro and after the Pierro fiasco her hopes fell on me, admittedly not a very promising short-term prospect.

“Why don’t you go and talk to her?” she suggested. “It might cheer her up.”

I opened the door to her room. It was dark and I started to shut it again but she called, “Gian?” I went in and fumbled on the wall for the light, found the switch and turned it on. She let out a scream,

“Shut the light!”

I did, and in that split second caught a glimpse of her in her panties and her large breasts, slumped slightly on each side of her chest. I caught my breath. I had

spotted her finally lying on her back and I saw, if for an instant, the objects of many a fantasy.

“Come, sit down,” she said and I slowly went towards her bed in the dark with my heart desperately trying to jump out of my chest. I reached her bed and sat down sideways to face her though I could not see her in the dark. She reached and took my hand. I could feel she was smiling.

“I cannot go to sleep,” she told me.

“I just came in,” I said, “and Nina told me you had a fight with Sandro.”

“Stupid bastard,” she muttered. “What did you do?”

“I went to the cinema.”

“With Soliman?”

“Yes. What happened?”

“We were to go to a party and I asked Sandro to come with his father’s car because I would be well dressed. He came with the Harley. Half way there and my hair was a mess. I told him he was a stupid fool and he called me a putana and left me right there on the street.”

“What a gross son of a bitch.”

“I was lucky a taxi passed and I returned back home. In that part of town one rarely finds a cab.”

She was holding my right hand and she put it on her breast. My face was aflame. I caressed her hair with my left.

“This Sandro,” I said, “he is disgusting. Isn’t Pierro much better?”

“Oh, he’s a mama’s boy. He’s insipid. He is afraid to touch me.”

“And you want to be touched! Yes?”

She laughed. My right-hand fingers were squeezing her nipple gently. My breathing was heavy. My penis was aroused.

“Gian, have you got five pounds?”

“Sure.”

“Give them to me.”

I let go of her breast and stood up. I took the paper notes out of my pocket. I could not make out the five pounds in the darkness.

“I cannot see the money. I cannot make out the five pounds.”

“Okay, give me all of it.”

She took the money and put it under the pillow. Then she took off her panties.

“This son of a bitch called me a *putana*,” she said. “I do not want to be called a *putana* for nothing. I took your money. You have paid for my body. Now you can fuck me. And I shall tell him I did it.”

I was shocked.

“My darling Sisi, you are not a *putana*. I love you. I want to make love to you but I do not want to buy your body. Nor your love. You are not a *putana*, you are a doll. A lovely, gorgeous, desirable young woman. You are full of the joy of life and this punk Sandro does not deserve you.”

I put my hand under her pillow and took back the money. I am not stingy. It was a symbolic gesture. I caressed her hair and kissed her forehead, said good night and went for the door.

“Gian,” she said, “don’t leave me.”

I stood for a moment.

“Please come back.”

I went back to her bed and sat down. My heart started its agitated palpitations again. She took my hand and kissed it.

“Take off your clothes and come lie with me,” she said. “I need you tonight.”

“And Nina?”

“She’s probably asleep by now. In any case, it doesn’t matter.”

I took off my clothes in a daze and went to the bed. She moved to the side to make room for me. My erection was gone. She moved close and embraced me. Put her hand there and felt the softness, the tension, the anxiety. Heard the rapid breath. Perhaps felt the pounding heart.

She said, “Don’t worry. We’ll take it easy. We have all night. Is it the first time?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Caress my body, Giannino, do anything you want. When two people make love, they love one another. Everything they do gives them pleasure. There is no shame.”

She brought her face next to mine and a lively tongue played with my lips. I opened my mouth and it went in. We kissed and stopped and with every pause I caressed her breasts and belly and back and arms and her behind. She opened her legs and I touched the soft, wet opening in the midst of the forest and tried to guess what the landscape was like. I had never been there before. And we kissed again and again and the thrill of her kiss, of her feeling, of her emotion, of her desire seemed to descent to my genitals. We sighed and moaned and murmured our love and pleasure and occasional enquiries for confirmation. She clasped and stroked me and commented that it was not as big as Sandro’s but it was nice and hard and would I open the small bedside drawer and fetch some Gold Coins. We did not sleep that night. We made love on and off until dawn and then I went to my room, exhausted, happy, in love more than ever.

In the morning I woke up later than usual. I could not look at Nina. She took it in her stride. Of course she guessed. With my puffed eyes, blue semi circles beneath and my haggard look could it be otherwise? I did not wait for Sisi to wake up. The day was half gone. I left the house alone and Soliman drove me to Sidi Bishr. I took my usual umbrella, bunched my clothes into a pillow and went to sleep on the sand. Philippe passed by sometime and took a picture. I still have it somewhere. So young and handsome I was, sleeping away my happiness, dreaming of Sylvia. I woke up at three and was still too tired for a swim. We went and lunched nearby on kebab and iced Stella beer with Soliman. Then we went to the palace at Montaza and drove around the lovely manicured gardens and went to the various beaches it housed to meet, perhaps, a few of my school friends. A number of them owned cabins there. But the beaches were practically empty and we drove back to town and entered a movie. At nine I was back home. Sisi was getting ready to go out. She kissed me on the cheek. She was all smiles.

“He came and apologized,” she said. I did not have to ask, who. I was incensed.

“And you forgave him after the way he treated you?”

“He has a good heart.”

“That, I doubt very much. He must have a very good you know what.”

She laughed.

“Anyway,” she said with a smile, “we did give him his punishment.”

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Was that what it was, finally? What we did yesterday?”

“No Giannino, no. I wanted you. You were very sweet.”

So we were back to square one. Well, not quite. There was a new low-key familiarity and sometimes we looked in each other's eyes and there was this strange sense of unity, of understanding, of sharing a secret. Best of all was the way I felt when I saw Sandro. No more with my tail between my legs. I had given it to him below the belt and he didn't even know it. But Sisi was beyond my reach on a regular basis. Once or twice I tried to kiss her on the mouth and she pushed me away.

"Ma basta Gian, I am back with Sandro. I am not a *putana*."

"I know," I answered angrily. "It is I who is the *putana*. Feel free to come to me whenever you feel like fucking. I shall never push you away."

She laughed heartily.

"Oh Gianni, you silly boy, what is this rubbish you are saying."

Of course, she was right. Men are not like women. But quibbling aside, I had the great pleasure, that summer, before I left, on two other occasions, to have been the preferred mode of punishment she meted out to Sandro for his coarse manners and vulgar ways.

I left Alexandria with a heavy heart and Sisi with a broken one. But when one is young one recuperates as easily from mental depressions as from physical illnesses. School and friends, sports and studies occupied and distracted me and Alexandria, its carefree life and loves retreated in the recesses of memory where the vast archives of our experiences fade away with time. Admittedly, some do faster than others.

The following summer my father proposed to send me to a summer school in Switzerland but I asked him to go again to Nina's house in Alexandria. He looked at me and smiled wryly and without any preliminaries said,

"Sisi is a beautiful girl but she is a tramp. I would not want you to get involved with her."

I did not answer him. Out of our bland relationship of near total indifference to one another he had a way of suddenly intruding in my life, of giving me directives, of hurting me and angering me. We looked at each other and he said,

"But if that's what you want, I shall arrange it."

So it was Alexandria again with its orange-and-black ancient taxis. Its slow tramcar that went all the way from Ramleh to Sidi Bishr in an hour. Its empty Eastern Harbour with its rowing and yacht clubs and the Qait Bey fort on whose site the Alexandria Lighthouse was situated in ancient times. Its museums and zoos and the Antoniadis gardens. Its districts of narrow streets with famous names: names of the legions that made the city famous in every field of human endeavour. Alexandria with its corniche, snaking its way east parallel to the coast with its beaches, public and private, its casinos, restaurants and hotels. Alexandria with my gorgeous Sisi that would afflict me a lifetime.

Nothing much had changed except that Sandro was no longer in her life. They had broken up definitively in winter. I saw him speeding like a raging bull on several occasions on the streets of Alex. Oh well, good riddance to that vulgar bully. Sisi was now a dazzling young woman of eighteen turning heads when she walked the streets. She had just finished the Italian secondary school with excellent grades and could have entered university but she did not want to. She was looking around for a job. She was still going out regularly on dates in the evenings but did not seem to have a steady boyfriend. My father called her a tramp and he would not have said something as nasty without knowing something concrete. He was a close friend of Yola's husband. Did he whisper something? A distant relative of the family whom I met by chance and fell into a short conversation casually told me,

"Sisi, yes, a very beautiful girl! She likes older men."

What was I to make of it? Nina did not seem happy either but she clammed up.

It often happens that if you try to recreate a magic time, a period of your life that despite its ups and downs offered you strong emotions and happy experiences it usually does not work. It is more often than not a letdown. I hoped so much to pick up our relationship where it had left off, especially now that Sandro was out of the way but Sisi for reasons I could not fathom was strangely remote. She was friendly and a measure of our old camaraderie was present but there was also something that warned, do not touch. So I picked up my old routine of beach and club, friends and cinema. A little reading too and this made my days at times happy, at others a little forlorn. It was not easy to be in love, to see her day and night and feel her indifference. All the more difficult because one did not know what was going on outside the house. So by the first week of September when my friends returned to Cairo I decided to follow suit. I announced it to mother and daughter and a very strange thing happened. Nina burst into tears. I went up to her and kissed her and asked her why the tears. She told me,

“I shall feel so lonely again but I know you are unhappy.”

We had an easy and friendly rapport but had never exchanged confidences and her sentiments and understanding touched me.

That same night, I went to sleep at the usual time, round about midnight. Sisi was out. An hour or two later I was awakened by her. She was sitting on my bed in a nightdress caressing my hair.

“Gian,” she said, “can I lie a little with you?”

“Of course,” I said and she took off her nightie and moved into my arms. We were silent and motionless for a while. The sensation of having her naked in my arms was heartbreaking and enthralling at the same time. I had pined for her for two months and I was leaving in three days. I loved her but I was no part of her life even if she gave me, occasionally, her love, her body, her orgasms and deliriums, which were as precious as mine. Did she realize she was tormenting with offers of succulent titbits a starving man? I did not say a word. Who was I to demand explanations? To ask about her life and her anonymous lovers? She now came my way and I would enjoy her. Then I would lose her and I would cry for her. Some loves bring more pain than pleasure.

Her chest was on mine, her eyes looked at me in the dark like a cat and her breath was tickling my face. It smelled of alcohol. My hand was lightly stroking her back and behind. She kissed me lightly on the lips.

“Do you love me?” she asked.

“Does it matter?”

A question for a question.

“Yes, because sometimes I feel you hate me.”

“Sometimes I do,” I said.

“Don’t leave Gian, you can stay another month. I shall come every night.”

It was quite true, sometimes I did hate her. Like now. Making an offer too late. I loved her too much not to hate her at times.

“No Sisi, I am leaving. Purgatory is better than paradise for a month and hell for a year.”

She kissed me passionately and we made love till dawn.

The next day I went to Sidi Bishr and slept under the umbrella. The beach was half empty. Philippe passed by and took a picture while I slept. I have it somewhere.

It has a presence in it one cannot see. It is in the dream I am dreaming. It is my divine Sylvia. That's why I seem to be smiling.

Sisi came to me that night and the night after. On the third day I left. We were all of us crying.

Sometime during the following winter, the Italian community in collaboration with Cinecitta arranged a contest for the most beautiful Italian girl in Egypt. The prize was a trip to Rome for the winner and her chaperon, a two week stay at a first class hotel and a screen test at the Cinecitta studios. It sounds so funny and dated the word chaperon. It was still the time when virginity was important even for starlets and, I suppose, hypocrisy at its highest. Sisi participated for a laugh and won hands down. In those days Egyptian-born foreigners were starting to leave Egypt and Nina thought it a perfect occasion to join the exodus. She was not happy with the drift of Sisi's life. She was going nowhere and was widely acquiring the reputation of a loose woman. Her prospects of marriage were close to nil in a vanishing Italian community where the young men were the first to depart. The house in Mazarita belonged to Yola's husband. All they had to do was pack their bags. This they did even as the local magazines circulating were filled with Sisi's pictures in different dresses and bathing suits and ravishing smiles. The next I heard of her was that she was working as an Alitalia ground hostess at Fiumicino airport in Rome. I presumed the screen test was not very successful or else she did not relish reaching out for fame by passing through the film producer's couch. She had her own convictions of right and wrong and sense of integrity.

That year was my last at school. My father decided to send me to England the following winter. I had no particular interest for further studies but England was the destination of most of my friends and I thought London would be the most agreeable city to spend a few years in. I liked the quaintness of the English and admired many of their qualities although I felt no great affinity for them. The problem was what to study. My father came up with some strange notions picked up undoubtedly from his friends. He advised me to opt for mathematical physics and electronics. It sounded impressive but I didn't know what it meant. I would have liked to be a brilliant scientist just as I would have liked to be rich and famous and admired but did I have what it takes? In any case I had to take a secondary school Advanced Level certificate with good grades to enter university to start with. However, my studies are peripheral to my story and suffice it to say, I spent five years in London and returned home every summer.

I left Egypt on an Alitalia flight on my nineteenth birthday. In those days of propeller airliners there were no direct flights. It was hip-hopping to Athens, Rome, Paris and London. I had of course chosen Alitalia in the hope of seeing Sisi. We arrived in Rome about noon and there was an hour and a half to wait for takeoff to Paris. She was not one of the girls that met the flight and escorted the passengers. I went to the information desk and asked for her and they called her on the public address system. She came at a fast trot a few minutes later looking like a film star playing the part of a ground hostess. She was that beautiful, that out of place. She had lost a little weight and was looking exquisite in her blue uniform and high heels. She did not look at me. I looked at her with a smile but she did not turn to face me sensing a male making a pass at her. Then the girl at the counter told her I asked for her and she looked. The scientists say that the process of recognition is a very complicated matter they still don't rightly understand. It is instantaneous when you are expecting someone or if he is in your everyday milieu. Sisi was not expecting me and she stared at me a few seconds before she uttered my name and fell into my embrace. We kissed



and could not let go of each other. I was so thrilled to see her. So happy she was lovelier than ever. So blissful that she seemed delighted to see me. She took me by the arm and we walked to a sitting area and sat down. I asked her about Nina and her life. Was she happy? She asked me about Yola and her husband, my father also, out of politeness. She was happy, she was working hard. Her job had movement and variety. She was doing something on the side as well. Oh, she managed pretty well.

“And love?”

“Ah my little Gian, have you still not learned that love is complicated?”

I laughed.

“It was the first lesson I learnt,” I said.

“Yes. We have an abundance of handsome men in Rome. Handsome and tricky. Conjurers of love. Casanovas every one of them.”

“Anyone steady?”

“I am here less than two years and, well, they come and go. Nobody that lasted. And you, Giannino, you have grown. You will come into your own in London. Plenty of girls will be running after you.”

“Perhaps, but not the one I love. Sisi you have grown even more beautiful than before. I saw you coming towards the counter just now and I could not believe my eyes. Forgive my vulgarity, I thought, who is the lucky man who is fucking her?”

She laughed and we talked a little longer and then it was time to board the plane. She gave me her address and phone number and made me promise that on my way back I would stay a day or two with them. Nina would be overjoyed.

“She loves you very much,” she said.

London agreed with me. I was very happy there. I found most of my intimate friends and did not lack companionship. My studies rolled along at an easy pace. The girls did not run after me. I had a few agreeable relationships but nobody that lasted, as Sisi had put it. I came pretty close to it but never fell in love. I was already in love. And if one will scoff at this let me tell him that being in love, falling in love, has no explanation. It is an affliction and a blessing. Sometimes it is so strong it will not erase. I sent her a letter now and then and cards for Christmas and Easter. She answered my cards but never wrote except just before summer to ask for a passport picture. I sent it with an inquiry that was never answered.

Returning home for summer, I arranged my ticket for a two-day stay in Rome. I sent her all the details. I arrived two weeks later at midday and Sisi was waiting for me just as I entered the airport building. We kissed and she seemed preoccupied. I could not miss it. She took my hand and pulled me aside.

“Giannino,” she said, “will you do me a big favor?”

“Anything,” I said.

“I want you to take an envelope to America.”

“What?”

“Please, don’t worry. There is absolutely no danger but it is important. Everything is arranged. Passport, ticket, hotel, return. You shall be a day and half a night in New York and shall be back after tomorrow.”

“Oh God, Sisi, what is this crazy scheme all about? I came to see you and spend two days in Rome not to be sitting in an airplane. My father is expecting me in three days’ time.”

“I shall send him a telegram and arrange your ticket. Please Giannino; I shall make it up to you.”

She ruffled my hair playfully and kissed me on the mouth but her heart was not in it. She was waiting for an answer and I gave the only answer I could. I was

given my instructions, an Italian passport with my picture and a different name and all visas in order, some money, a TWA ticket and a leather business bag with some magazines and a large, plain, brown envelope. My suitcase was checked out of the Alitalia flight and checked in the TWA one almost immediately and I was bundled off to the plane in a daze. She kissed me, thanked me sweetly and winked her eye.

“I shall be waiting for you,” she said with a smile.

I started on the return journey to London through Paris. It was boring as hell going back the same day. The flight left at two. Two hours to Paris, an hour’s rest, another hour to London, two hours’ rest and off to New York at seven in the evening, local time. It was early summer and the days were long and there was daylight when we took off but within an hour we were flying in pitch black skies. The crew prepared and served dinner and then the lights were lowered for the people that wanted to sleep. The flight was long and uncomfortable. I rummaged the bag and brought out the magazines and looked at them. I tried not to worry but questions kept crowding my mind. For whom was I being used as a messenger? What was in that envelope? How did Sisi fit in all this? What if I were caught? An elderly passenger tried to be sociable and start a conversation but I was too worried to be civil and my monosyllabic answers finally shut him up. Still, there was some excitement. I was going to New York, the cultural capital of the world. The city of skyscrapers and famous museums, of theatre, jazz and classical music, Harlem, Times Square and Central Park, of Italian gangsters and Jewish diamond traders in traditional garb, long unkempt beards and merchandise worth millions in their pockets and a dozen other nationalities and the artists and aspiring authors in the cafés and bars of Greenwich Village. It was a dream city but I would hardly see any of that. Yet it would be a thrill just to be there, just to walk its streets.

The airplane was racing away from the sun and after thirteen hours in the air we arrived at four in the morning local time. It was still dark. The view of the city from the air, lit up, was magic. It is one of those experiences that round up your life, like seeing the Pyramids or the Parthenon. We landed at Idlewild. Kennedy had not yet been murdered. I passed through immigration and customs with no problems and took a taxi to the city. The city that never sleeps was shaking off its lassitude. Its traffic was starting to tone up. Everybody was talking English with an American accent, obviously. But it sounded strange to my ears after nine months in London. My hotel was in Manhattan, my room was booked by persons unknown and by six I was stretched on a comfortable bed waiting. Somebody would call to pick up the envelope. I opened the black and white television set and the American twang put me to sleep. A rap on the door woke me up a few hours later. I opened the door. A well dressed, swarthy, Italian-looking young man looked at me and glanced inside the room. He seemed surprised to see me.

“Sylvia did not come?” he asked.

“No,” I said. I asked him in. He entered confidently and sat down on one of the two armchairs. I started fishing in murky waters.

“Was she supposed to come?”

He did not answer. He just asked,

“Did you bring the envelope?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Can I have it?”

I got up and brought it to him. He took it and examined it minutely. I suppose he wanted to make sure it had not been opened.

“What’s in it?” he asked.

“How do I know? I am just the postman,” I said smiling.

“When are you leaving?”

“My flight leaves at midnight. I shall leave the hotel at ten.”

“Okay,” he said, “don’t leave your room. I shall bring a reply for you know what.”

“No, I don’t know what.”

He eyed me suspiciously trying to guess if I knew what was being played.

“An envelope for you to take back,” he said.

“Can’t I go down in the street for a while to stretch my legs?”

“You heard me. Anything you want, you ask room service. My, my,” he added, “Don Massimo will be mighty disappointed.”

“That Sylvia did not come?”

“Sure.”

“What does he want her for?”

“To practice his Eyetalian,” he said and laughed. He looked at me again, suspiciously. “Are you one of us? You’re a bit young.”

“Yes,” I said, “I’m new and I don’t know the ins and outs yet. Is he sweet on her?”

“You bet. Wouldn’t you be?”

“I am!”

“O ho ho. You’re aiming a bit high, aren’t you?”

“Does he want to marry her?”

He laughed.

“Ha, ha. You really are green. He’s already married. Has kids going to college.”

“What does he want with a twenty-one year old girl?”

“Well, he wouldn’t want a fifty year old hag, would he? And Sylvia’s no girl. She knows how to handle them.”

“Who’s them?”

“The rest of the top brass. She’s got herself a cozy job. In charge of dispatches. How come she trusts you?”

“I’m her cousin.”

“Santa Maria! I’ve been shooting my mouth.”

“Don’t worry. My tongue’s under control. What’s your name?”

“Giacomo. And yours?”

“Giorgio. It was the name in my passport.”

“Listen, forget what I said.”

“What did you say? You didn’t say anything.”

He smiled. We became friends. He probably had an automatic under his armpit and had already killed a few people. It was reassuring being his friend although orders were orders and sometimes even friends had to go. No hard feelings, just business. As he was leaving, he looked back.

“Shall I send you a broad?” He was being extra friendly.

“Nah. I’m too tired. I’ll just watch TV.”

I watched TV and dozed on and off and when I was hungry I ordered a meal and some wine and an hour before I left Giacomo was back with an envelope.

“Will you be coming again?” he asked me.

“I don’t know,” I told him. “It depends on Sylvia. How often do you get dispatches?”

“Oh, at least once a month.”

“Does Sylvia come too?”

“She’s only been with us a year and a half and, well, she must have come five or six times. But I think it has been noticed and the last time was questioned by the immigration. She has not come for some months. Mostly she sends us the dispatches with air hostesses and stewards and of course she bears full responsibility. This is a no joke game. One slip and she’s a goner.”

At ten I left the hotel. I took a cab to the airport. Passed immigration no questions asked and boarded the plane. By one in the afternoon I was at Fiumicino where Sisi was waiting looking gorgeous with a smile on her lips.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“No. everything’s not okay,” I said.

She lost her smile.

“What’s wrong?”

“How did you get mixed up in this business?”

She smiled again.

“Mamma mia, you gave me a fright. Don’t worry about it. Listen, I have work until three. Walk about, look at the shops and the pretty girls and I shall pick you up here later.”

As she walked away, I wondered where Sylvia’s life was heading. Would she ever be happy? Would I ever be rid of my obsession of her because, it was clearer than ever, I would never have her.

She picked me up at three; we fetched my bag and left the airport in her car. She drove fast with skill and assurance. It was an expensive sports car. Obviously from the Mafia sideline. She was gay and asked about my trip to New York and about my life in London. Did I meet any girls? Yes. Did I fall in love?

I smiled.

“Love, you have taught me, is a complicated business. And it is very exclusive.”

“Meaning?”

“You cannot be truly in love with two persons.”

She looked at me and smiled.

“Are you still in love, my Giannino?” she asked. “Isn’t it getting a bit boring?”

I laughed.

“Sisi darling, when you are driving that fast it is advisable to keep your eyes on the road. Love,” I continued, “if it is not shared can become disheartening, depressing but never boring. It has extraordinary powers of survival and might even strengthen. If you are thrown a morsel of it now and then, you live for it. For the next morsel. It becomes a way of life. I think, probably, it becomes boring only if it is reciprocated. I am not sure though, I was never in that situation.”

She laughed.

“I love your little maxims.”

“I love your laugh and your smile.”

We reached her house in a new and seemingly expensive district with tasteful buildings. I trundled my bag into the elevator and we went up a few floors into a smart, well furnished apartment. Nina came out of the kitchen at a run. We fell into each other’s arms and kissed with tears of happiness. Mine a response to Nina’s. Sisi was amused.

“He loves you more than me,” she told Nina. “He did not shed tears when he saw me.”

We sat and talked of Yola and her husband she had not seen for years and the good old days in Alexandria.

“Aren’t you happy in Rome?” I asked. “We tend to idealize the past. Alexandria is slowly deteriorating, at least in my eyes. It is growing and becoming a modern, crowded city packed with people, cars and traffic jams. It has become unbearable. I know because I go there for work quite often.”

“Anyway,” said Nina, “things never stay the same. When we first came here we lived in a poor neighborhood and I made some friends. Believe me, I was very happy there. Then Sisi started making money and she bought this flat and now I have no one to talk to. I just worry and worry hoping everything will be all right.”

She got up and went inside to prepare a meal and then we sat down and had the late lunch working people have after work. Later, Sisi took me out for a drive around Rome to show me the sights.

“Don Massimo is keeping you in style,” I said to her when we went for a coffee.

She was annoyed.

“Nobody is keeping me in style. I am offering a service and they are paying me for that.”

“Neither your employers are lawful nor the work you are doing for them.”

“Oh for Heaven’s sake, who is lawful in Italy these days? The Mafia has penetrated everywhere. Corruption has never been so widespread. Even Prime Ministers and the politicians are said to be involved. Is it I who will make the difference?”

“But it is a dangerous job.”

“If it were not dangerous I would not be getting that much money.”

“Giacomo said one slip and you were a goner.”

“I am extremely careful not to make that slip. I am good at my job and I have learnt to choose the right people to work with.”

“How did you get into it?”

“A two-bit punk Mafioso I went out with a couple of times introduced me to his boss who asked me to take a few envelopes to New York. I did it a few times and was well paid for it. He grew to trust me and suggested I organize a courier service for them and be in charge. And of course I bear the responsibility.”

“And Don Massimo?”

“Don Massimo is one of the five bosses in New York. The so-called boss of bosses, Don Giovanni Corleone, was indicted a couple of years ago and has skipped the country. He is back in Sicily in his fief and directs operations from there. This created a new need for secure communications between Italy and New York. And so I found my niche. Most of my contacts are with Don Massimo. He is in love with me but he is in his sixties. I am nice and polite with him for the sake of a smooth working relationship but that is all. A decrepit old man would not interest a young woman except for the sake of money but despite everything I have still not become a *putana*.”

We went to a bar later at night and drank quite a lot and talked even more. When we went home, Nina had made a bed for me in a small spare room. I said good night to Sisi. I did not want to push things. It is not in my nature. I undressed and got in bed and ten minutes later Sisi came into the room.

“Did you think we would leave it at that, my Giannino?”

“Did you come to pay me off, Sisi? I am not a *putana* either. I did not go to New York to force myself on you. I did it because I love you. I will do it again, anytime.

“I know, my sweet Giannino. I came because I want you. Don’t you want to be the lucky man who will be fucking me tonight?”

“Yes, my love. More than anything else in the world.”

The next day I woke up late. Sisi had gone to work. Nina prepared breakfast and we talked for hours. Mostly about Sisi. She was terrified of her connections with the Mafia. She did not know where it would all end. At about noon I went down, took a taxi to the city center and walked about Rome. Rome and Sisi, they were connected in my psyche; the one more beautiful than the other. I kept walking, thinking of her, daydreaming and loving her. She was my destiny but, alas, I was not hers. I returned home at about four. Sisi was back. I could not take my eyes off her. She was made for love, this beautiful girl. Her abandon in lovemaking was bewitching, her deliriums mesmeric and her orgasms breathtaking. We had our late lunch and sat and talked for hours and then rested a while. In the evening we went out to a tavern where they sang traditional Italian songs and drank Chianti. We returned home late and made love many times. I loved her desperately. Did she not love me at all?

In the morning we went to the airport together. I promised Nina I would pass by on my way back to London in three months’ time. There were no tears this time. The reunion was not too far off. In the car Sisi asked me to come to Rome a few days earlier to fit in a trip to New York. Also to get a tourist visa on my own passport from the US Embassy in Cairo for one entry in the US. It would be better than traveling so soon with the same fake Italian passport. When I said good bye I told her that she was very sweet to me and I loved her as always. She said that I was sweet with her too and that she loved me too. Even if it were true, nothing much would change. But it was balm to my heart.

I arrived in Cairo at five in the afternoon that day. My father met me at the airport and asked me if I had a nice time in Rome. I said I had a terrific time and would like to visit Italy again for a few days on my way back. He said, “Of course,” without any further comment. Outside, Soliman was driving the car. My father said that the English couple, for whom he worked, left the country and he had hired him on a permanent basis. He, my father, would be leaving for Paris for a month and had booked me a room at the San Stefano Hotel in Alex during that month. I could take Soliman and the car along. Was that okay?

“Yes, very nice, thank you father.”

He was caring in his way. Alexandria was not the same without Sisi. Not that year. Not ever again. Still, I met my friends and had a good time.

I went to London for another four consecutive years. One more year for my Advanced Level certificate and three years at university. I did not study mathematical physics and electronics but I did graduate in literature. Instead of a computer whiz kid I became a dreamer. A lover of words. During those four years I flew eight times to New York. Eight times I renewed my love affair with Sisi. I do not know what she did in between but when I was there she was mine. I met and made love with many girls in London. Not one of them diverted my single-minded attachment to her. The wonderful and ecstatic interludes ended with my graduation. I entered my father’s import-export business and was tied down for a year. I wrote to Sisi every few months but she only sent me a few words on the Merry Christmas, Happy New Year and Happy Easter cards. And suddenly, one day, an overjoyed Yola called me on the telephone to announce the fantastic news that Sisi had been married to an American businessman and would soon be leaving Italy permanently to settle on the East coast of the US. I barely managed to offer my congratulations for this stab to my heart. I think it was common knowledge my love for Sisi and I had a feeling Yola, in a streak

of nastiness, wanted to tell me, 'There, you silly boy, she married someone better than you.' But Yola was now my only link to Sisi and I was playing a patient game of politics. The following Christmas I phoned her and asked her for Sisi's address to send her a card and from Sisi I got her home number in New Jersey. As telecommunications became easier I started calling her every few months to see how she was getting on. This went on for years and had she not seemed happy, each time, to hear my voice, I would have stopped.

The years went by. This is a sort of epilogue. Whereas before I needed a page to describe one day, now a paragraph will cover twenty years.

My father died at sixty-three of a debilitating illness and of course I took over the direction of his business. Soliman went on pension and I heard of him no more. Yola's husband died and Yola left for Italy where she had some relatives. I visited her in Rome on her deathbed because Sisi had come to see her and I needed to see Sisi. Yola's mother lived to be over a hundred and was taken care of by some of her other children that were still alive so I did not have occasion to see her. Nina died in the US but I am not clear about the date. I, of course, never married. My lifetime love was one. I could not get attached to any other woman. I was rich enough to have servants to serve me and good looking enough to have affairs mostly with married women although by temperament I was not a hunter. I had to sense a keen interest on the part of the woman to begin tentative approaches. I was lucky that these never lacked. I started drinking far too much later in my life. Later was not very late. By the time I was forty-eight I knew trouble was brewing. I bought a house in Greece and stayed there at least half the year because doctors and hospitals seemed more competent than Egypt's. I traveled to England often enough for checkups but eventually got bored and did not find the trips worth the trouble.

When I was fifty, I went to New York to see Sisi. I had a feeling I would not last very long. I was still drinking at the time despite serious warnings from my doctors. I made love with her. She still loved me. I was not the love of her life but, then, did she have one? I do not know for sure. It was enough to know that she still cared for me. That she still found pleasure in my body. I told her, it would help me to die. I don't think she understood. For a year, after that, we talked at least once a month and then there was no answer on the phone. I started making plans to go there to find out what was wrong but kept postponing them because of my weak physical state. Many months later she answered. They had moved to another state temporarily for business and were now back home. I told her I had cirrhosis and was dying. She started crying.

"Can I come and see you one last time?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "yes. I shall be waiting."

I cried, too, because I knew I simply could not go.

**Athens 29<sup>th</sup> September 2002**

Dedicated to that beautiful girl Sylvia B. whom I loved helplessly, hopelessly for two summers, in my youth, in Alexandria. If she ever reads this story and feels calumniated, I beg her forgiveness for much of what I wrote is untrue. It was a play of the imagination for the sake of fiction. I hope she is alive and well, living happily with her family in New Jersey.

# THE SPACESHIP

It was always to the ocean that I gravitated in my moments of introspection and loneliness. It seemed to be my life's only true and long lasting love affair. An overwhelming, fateful attraction. I did not offer my love to that infinitely large and heaving mass of water as I did to the few women of my life. I just loved it inertly with no demands and in return received the inexplicable comfort of its perpetual movement and sound of the surf. I could sit and stare at it for many hours. Hours of thought and temporary well-being. Temporary optimism. Even its indifference was acceptable, unlike that of a woman. Sometimes in my despair, I hoped it would send me a beautiful mermaid to lure me in and drown me painlessly, beautifully, releasing me from life with a long passionate, breathless, choking kiss. Sometimes, I longed for this kiss of death without being brave enough to initiate it, to taste it.

I loved southern California's coastline. Both the wide sandy beaches and the wild rocky seafronts. Both its life giving dawns and its stunning, multi-coloured, cloudy, winter sunsets. After I settled in San Diego I invariably drove there after work to walk and swim until dark. It was a lonely time of my life but I did not seek company. I had to find myself after the few devastating emotional and professional failures I had been through. I had lived too fast, too superficially until then. I had entered the American mold where time was money and there was never enough of either. Now that there were even less of both, I was searching for a reason to continue. Searching my soul, asking the most vital question of my existence: Is it worth it? Do I go on? For it was not only the shambles of business and marriage. It was a crisis of age. A crisis of health. I was in my early fifties, a time of stock taking and I could not help having my doubts. Especially since an unexpected, unbelievable chance encounter.

I cannot imagine what I would have done without the ocean. What would have happened if I lived in an inland city? Perhaps, nothing much. I kept on thinking of Kazantzakis's aphorism, that one is only truly liberated when one realizes that there is no salvation. Perhaps, I would be at peace when the message finally sank in. As it was, the ocean was there and it provided me with small, daily doses of salvation denying me a true, deep sense of liberation. After work, I would drive endlessly up and down the coast in my small car and would stop to spend the afternoon and evening swimming and sleeping on the beach. I could not bear my empty home.

On weekends, I would spend the whole day on the go. I would drive for hours, north, along the coast towards L.A. past La Jolla, Del Mar and Encinitas past all the state beaches with the lovely Spanish names to end on an out of the way bay or a deserted beach. I would swim for hours wading in the deep, not thinking of cramps, currents or sharks for I did not fear the kiss of the mermaid. In colder days, in warm clothing, I would walk along the sea shore and huddle in blankets at a sheltered spot when I exhausted myself, to sleep with the unceasing movement and sound of the waves providing constant and comforting company.

My life was not altogether empty. I had Zoë. I hardly saw her anymore. I would almost forget my love for her in the two-month intervals between her visits. Her name means life in Greek. She was what was left of my life. And yet for days I would not think of her. When I did, I would lose my breath and break into a sweat. I was afraid time and distance would make two strangers out of us just as it made total strangers of her mother and me but it was never so. Every time I saw her, I was



moved by her beauty, by the love I saw in her eyes. Had my seed produced this fragile, blond angel? My seed and the womb of her mother who met me with a frigid face and a tight smile whenever I called to pick up Zoë. At twelve, she was far more beautiful than either of us. And she melted in my arms. She needed me. She needed a father and this fact went a long way to alleviate my disappointments, my health problems and my despondent self-centeredness.

I certainly do not blame my wife for our separation, much as I came to despise her. For it was the same old story. The same mistake too oft repeated. So commonplace, in fact, one would have thought a sensible person would beware. But the lure of money is insidiously seductive and success makes one vain. One never imagines such pitfalls are as much for oneself as for everyone else. So, ever since our arrival in the States I went about trying to make our fortune with a single-mindedness that, now, in my saner, if somewhat more desolate moments, I consider utterly insane.

I married Emily in the last month of my final year for my Master's degree in architectural studies in London. I cannot bring myself to give a description of Emily for not only might it be unfair but also because she no longer means anything to me. I cannot bear to think of her. How strange love is. How quickly and easily it can turn to hate. She was from a rich, English upper-class family and my Greek origins were rather distasteful to them. But we were in love and Emily was strong willed and would not listen to their entreaties to sever our relationship. She fell pregnant a few months before my graduation and though we did not want to have a child so soon, it solved our confrontation with her family. A marriage was quickly arranged to avoid a scandal although pregnancies outside marriage had ceased to be items of low-voiced gossip in the England of the late seventies.

We were married in a morning ceremony of the Anglican Church, followed by a midday reception of champagne and caviar, of loud upper class accents, of my dear fellow's and ha-ha's, of top hats and tails for the gentlemen and extravagant, tasteless dresses with insipid morning hats for the ladies. It was the first and last time I met the whole of Emily's family and friends. That whole period of preparation for the marriage was something of a nightmare. Not least because I had very little money to contribute to the expenses and felt very much manipulated and ignored by the family who made all of the decisions. I pleaded with Emily to come with me for a week in Greece so that we would be married in a small forgotten church on a hill or a forgotten village with just a single priest but she would not hear of it. She could not do that to her family. As for mine, they did not attend the wedding. They did not think they would be able to cope with the Lords and the Sirs. My family was poor and knew not a word of English. I was studying on scholarship.

Our honeymoon was quite unorthodox. If you could call it a honeymoon. In any case, the family thought it was inadmissible. I had my finals coming up in less than a month and immediately after the wedding, I returned to my room in London and started studying eighteen hours a day while Emily stayed at the family's estate in the country. She would come and spend a few nights a week with me and leave in the morning. Finally, I was quite happy a baby was on the way even though I never imagined it would be as wonderful as Zoë.

A month or so after my graduation we left for the United States. It was my big dream. Emily covered all our travel expenses and our first months in Los Angeles. I found a job soon enough at a large architectural enterprise and, a year later, I started my own little business of building and selling small single-family houses. Meanwhile, little Zoë came to brighten our lives.

A decade flew by. A decade of business success and the steady erosion of our marriage. I realize now, how totally selfish I was and how I pushed aside and ignored my wife's dissatisfaction. I hardly had any time for her. I caused her much distress and, I am afraid, the distortion of her character from a happy girl to a complaining shrew. Only Zoë kept us together. I had become a workaholic and the more I earned, the more money I seemed to crave. I was working with banks, buying plots of land for housing development and was well on the way to becoming a millionaire a few times over when an economic recession struck causing a drastic drop in the demand for housing, a consequent drop in their prices and the price of land. I was caught out holding large bank loans, large plots of land whose prices tumbled to a fraction of their original value and ready housing for sale with no buyers in sight. I was bankrupted so fast I could not believe what had happened.

That was the last straw for Emily. She had not put up with me, so long, for this. She filed for divorce and I left our house because I could not bear to stay where I was not wanted. Zoë was eleven at the time and she understood we were separating without quite understanding why. It helped that we were not loudly quarrelsome. We exchanged our grievances in reasoned, upper-class English tones. Reasoned but bitter and implacable. I was shocked to find out the depth of Emily's aversion for me and the contempt she felt for my business failure and was shocked to realize, once the masks were down, the distaste I felt for her. How many years did we live in this state without knowing it? I tried to explain to Zoë that we were separating because we no longer loved each other but she could not understand it.

“But daddy,” she said, “I love you both. What am I going to do?”

I lived the first few months of the divorce proceedings in a tiny run-down apartment in downtown L.A. and did some part-time work at my old firm. I visited Zoë on the weekends and, sometimes, when I had the time, went to her school to kiss her and say hello just before she took the school bus home. In those days of extreme depression Zoë was my umbilical cord to life. Emily started working at an Architectural designer's office even though she did not need the salary. In London she had earned a diploma in Interior Decoration. She had plenty of money of her own but the job was part of the divorce. The assertion of independence and freedom of her new life. Again and again, in my more clement and thoughtful moments I recognized how unfairly I had confined her life and would allow her in no way to let her needs take precedence to mine. Two years in London and a decade in the U.S. had not altered my Middle Eastern mentality. Always too late, it seems, one regrets one's unfair treatment and selfish behaviour towards others.

Some months later, I was offered a full-time job in San Diego and moved to that city, which seemed so pleasant and was so much less vast and chaotic than L.A. There, with a steady job and a reasonable salary I recovered some of my self-respect though not altogether my peace of mind. I missed my Zoë terribly at the beginning. I was grateful to Emily for not putting any obstacles to my visits to Zoë and for having waived her right to alimony and child support. She also agreed to let the child spend a week with me every two months instead of seeing her once a week which was not always feasible now that I lived in another city. She also managed to get permission for this absence from the private school that Zoë was attending on condition that she would do the homework that would be assigned.

It was in San Diego that I resumed my full-time love affair with the ocean. I say resumed because, one way or another, my life was always connected to the sea. I was born and lived on the island of Kos until my family moved to Athens when I was fifteen. We invariably returned to it, to our house on the island, for our summer

holidays and I have loved the sea for as far back as I can remember. In San Diego it became my refuge from loneliness. I was so terribly happy and gratified to see that Zoë had inherited this love of mine. We spent lovely weeks in the spring and summer together at the seaside and our recreations were always associated with the ocean and with excursions up and down the coast. She was developing into an extraordinary swimmer and could keep up with me and with the long hours I spent in the water. She was growing strong and tall and promised to be a fine athlete. I also talked to her at length about my origins and I promised her a trip to Greece to meet her grandparents and also to Kos as soon as my finances allowed it. I warned her that her Greek grandparents would not be as grand as the English ones she had visited with her mother two years earlier but that they would love her very much. And in any case she ought to be acquainted as much with relative poverty as with wealth. I had, unfortunately, missed my chance to teach her Greek in my hectic past and now I confined my mother tongue to expressions of tenderness. I called her Zoëoula mou (my small Zoë, my little life), aghapi mou (my love), and koritsi mou (my girl). She responded as well as she could. She called me, daddy mou.

In San Diego I contacted a Greek fellow student from my London days and a distant girl cousin who had also immigrated to the States with her husband. Both ended up in San Diego and so I did not feel totally alone. Though I did not see them often, we kept in touch. Roughly speaking, I saw Michael once a month and phoned Cathy every few weeks. She was a lovely girl. Simple, sociable, beautiful, with a smile so devastatingly sweet, I often wondered what would have happened had we met in Greece, long, long ago, before either of us was married. Idle speculations of a lonely and depressed person. In any case, Cathy was married to an engineer and had two grown children. A boy had just entered a university on the East coast and a young girl was still living at home, attending high school. Her husband was typically Greek. Macho and a bit of a boor. I had the impression, which might have been tinged by a bit of wishful thinking, that she was not particularly happy in her marriage. But then this is hardly unusual. It seems to be the general rule. How many truly happy and well-matched couples does one know?

Michael and Cathy's husband, Yannis, were friends. They were part of a handful of Greeks in San Diego who kept in touch, tried to keep the Greek traditions and resist the American melting pot. From Michael I learnt that Cathy was very seriously ill. He was not certain of the illness but there were rumors circulating in the small Greek circle that she was diagnosed HIV positive. I was absolutely stunned. I called her home immediately and Yannis answered the phone. I could not question him point blank and in the generalities we exchanged he told me that Katerina was fine. He always called his wife by her proper name, Katerina, and never failed to get annoyed by the pet name I had adopted. He would scowl like a Greek peasant every time. I called their home in the morning, several times after that, hoping Cathy would answer the phone but there was no reply. About two weeks later I called and was again confronted by Yannis and, again, everything was just dandy. I could not get any information and I let it go for a while.

Autumn came around and then winter started showing its teeth. Well, in San Diego it is never severe but I could no longer swim. I did not stop haunting the beaches that were now mostly deserted. Some beach parties would take place around campfires at night and I always enjoyed observing them discreetly from a distance, lying down somewhere comfortably on a blanket I had with me. They were usually college-age youngsters having fun with loud music and liquor and boisterous shouting and laughing. Now and then, a couple would drift off for a little privacy in the

darkness and would drift back later to be greeted with jeers and laughs by the rest of the crowd. I enjoyed observing the antics of the youngsters.

I felt like a scientist scrutinizing an unknown tribe in the jungle. These would be, I thought, the last carefree years of their lives before they entered the jungle of careers, businesses and family life. Well, perhaps not jungle. It would not be as bad as that but it would not be easy. It is never easy to be satisfied with what you have. It is often not easy to accept your fate. It is not easy to spend a lifetime with a person you loved so dearly and passionately at the start. Perhaps life has become too long, too rich, too loose and free, with too many opportunities for change. The increasingly volatile and bizarre permutations and combinations of a restless humanity are the results of their evolution. Of their advancement and flaws.

On and on my mind would wonder trying to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, the riddle of life. Trying to justify my sudden fall from grace. Sometimes, pessimism drowning me in the sound of the surf and, sometimes, hope reviving me like the fresh breeze that blew in from the ocean. I could not stay at home. I could no longer read newspapers or books. All I could do was sit and think and walk and think and, sometimes, exchange a few words with another ocean loner though I preferred to be alone.

That day a party was on and a large gay campfire was lit and the usual music and laughs and shouts intermingled with the incessant sound of the wind and the waves tumbling on the shore. I was just about starting to identify the noisier members of the party when a woman sat on the sand a few paces away to my left. I assumed she was from the party though she looked much older than the others. Moreover, her clothes were different. She wore a sort of cape under which I could just make out in the darkness, a pair of jeans and light brown suede shoes. When I looked at her face, she smiled and said, "Hi". I answered, "Hi", and saw that she had a woollen head cover and a thick blond pigtail emerging behind, reaching her waist. I did not talk to her but kept observing the lively tribe at the campfire. Wondering if the mood would have been as merry and the noise as animated around a campfire in the Stone Age. Or if our world would survive and youngsters would have the same fun around campfires a thousand years from now. I was engrossed in idle thoughts when she asked me the time.

"It's nine thirty," I said.

"Thank you," she answered. "I guess the spaceship will not be coming tonight with all these people around."

"The spaceship?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered simply.

We did not talk after that for some time. I felt a little uncomfortable at the beginning but she was silent and I undid the package of sandwiches I had with me and I offered her one while I consumed the other. She took it and thanked me. When a couple separated from the party and started walking along the beach, in the darkness, she asked,

"Do you think they are looking for the spaceship?"

"No," I said, "they are probably going for a smooch."

"Oh," she said and laughed. "I did not think of it."

The third sandwich I split in two and gave her one half. She took it with a smile of complicity.

"Are you, too, waiting for the spaceship?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I did not know it existed."

"Oh, well," she said nodding her head with understanding.

A long silence followed. The less we talk, the better, I thought but I did not move away. Somehow, I felt the move would be insulting to her even if she did not understand it. An hour or so later, I decided to leave. It was nearing eleven and I had work the next day. The party too was about to end. Some of the young people had already left.

“Well, I have to leave,” I told the woman. “We might meet again. Do you often come here for the spaceship?”

“Not always. The spaceship will always find me. But I must be at a deserted spot.”

“Well, good-bye,” I said getting up, collecting and folding the blanket I was sitting on.

“Good-bye,” she answered. “Thanks for the sandwiches.”

I moved away a few paces and as an afterthought I turned and asked her,

“Do you want me to drive you home? The spaceship will almost certainly not be coming tonight.”

“I know,” she answered. “But I shall be staying here tonight. I have nowhere to go. There's this nice fire to keep me warm when the kids leave.”

Damn it, I thought, why the hell did I have to ask her that question? Being nice and polite always lands you in trouble in this country and it is only in the U.S. that one finds nice looking women totally mad and totally alone and homeless. But I could not let it go at that. I just couldn't.

“Don't you have a home?” I asked her. “Where do you live?”

“I have some friends that put me up but they were not at home this evening.”

“Would you like to come with me?”

“If I shall not put you out. Don't you have a family?”

“I do, but they live in L.A.,” I said. “Here in San Diego I live alone.”

“OK then, thanks,” she said smiling and got up on her feet and we walked across the sand to the road where my car was parked. We got into my tiny Volkswagen and a faint stench of a person whose body and clothes had not had a recent wash reached my nostrils. It was not revolting, just barely evident, just barely disagreeable.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

She smiled. “We've just had your sandwiches,” she said.

“Yes, but are you hungry?”

“Well, just a little.” And then she changed her mind and said, “No, not really.”

But we stopped at a McDonald's for a hamburger and she ate it with gusto and polished off an ice cream as well. She took off her woollen head cover and I noticed that her thick blond hair was just starting to turn gray. She must have been my age, just about fifty and she was handsome in the sense of an older woman who must have been beautiful in her youth. She still had a good complexion, a sensual mouth and white strong teeth. My God, what a strange situation! I had a thousand questions to ask but I was silent. I did not utter a word. I did not want to get involved.

“What's your name?” she asked.

“Paul,” I said. “I am Greek. In my language it is Pavlos. What's yours?”

“Pavlos, Pavlos, Pavlos. How nice it sounds. It suits you. Mine is Janet. Rather ordinary, isn't it?”

“It's OK. Shall we get moving Janet?”

We drove silently to my two-bedroom flat and when we entered she took off her hat and cape. She wore a thick woollen brownish-yellow pullover underneath, over a white shirt which was buttoned at the throat as if waiting for a tie. She was slim

and well preserved for her age. For the age I surmised. She sat down on an armchair in the hall and waited. I switched on the TV for her but she got up and switched it off.

“I don't watch television,” she said, “People talk too fast in it and I cannot follow them. Well, I can if I try but it is mostly a lot of baloney. A lot of noise. In the spaceship it is very quiet. It is a different world.”

I went about my business while she sat there quietly, absorbed in her thoughts. I washed in the bathroom and put on my pajamas. I got out an extra pair for Janet. I gave it to her and told her she could have a bath or a shower and then she could sleep in the second bedroom which was where Zoë slept when she visited me. She asked if she could wash her underclothes and socks and I said, of course, and that next day I would leave for work early. She could either leave or else wait for me if she wanted me to drive her somewhere. I, then, wished her good night and she said,

“Good night, Pavlos. Many thanks.”

I slept immediately but sometime later I woke up as a naked Janet was slipping under my bedcovers. Her hair was loose and sweet smelling and so was the rest of her body, she was firm and soft at the same time and her breasts were the right size. She snuggled up to me and for a long while we just remained in a silent embrace. And then she turned her head and kissed me and said, “Pavlos, I love you.” She said it over and over again, after every kiss and I who had not been with a woman for over a year found her kisses and caresses too sweet to resist.

She unbuttoned my pajamas and I told her I did not have any condoms and she said not to worry, she was clean and I said I was not thinking of that but of pregnancy and she said she was past that. We made love until dawn, and she was so tender, that when she told me, I love you, I told her I loved her too. I felt I owed it to her. I felt I loved her.

I slept for an hour or so and then left the house for work. I also left a twenty-dollar bill next to her clothes hoping she would not take it as payment for her services but the help of a friend. I did not call her up at home, from the office. I did not want to push my luck one way or another. I did not know just then that my fate had been sealed. When I returned home she was gone. She had taken the twenty-dollar bill but nothing else was missing. Not that I had anything valuable lying about. I was in a daze, half in love, wondering where she could have possibly gone, wondering if she would come back, wondering what would happen to her. I hated myself for not asking more questions, for not finding out more about her life, her friends, her whereabouts, her spaceships. I spent the next week stalking all the beaches near the one we met trying to find her but to no avail.

Two weeks later I went to L.A. and picked up Zoë and Janet simply slipped out of my mind. Zoë mou was my life and that was that. I also managed to talk to Cathy. I called her at home in the morning and, miracle of miracles, she answered the phone. It was a touching, emotional talk. She had often wondered why I had not called. I told her I called a dozen times and Yannis always told me that she was fine.

“But what's wrong with you?” I asked.

“Well, Paul,” she answered, “I do not want to worry you with details but I have to tell you I was pretty sick and have been undergoing chemotherapy. I think the worst is over and my doctor is very optimistic. I am already feeling much, much better, so pray for me Paul. I have gone through some terrible moments.”

I told her I wanted to see her very much and would she receive me in the morning when Yannis was not at home. She said she did not want to see me just yet as she was totally bald from the chemotherapy but we would meet as soon as her hair

grew once again. I told her I would call her at home in the mornings, every day. It was a promise I kept and a tender intimacy blossomed between us.

When I started vomiting a few months later, I thought nothing of it. But the condition persisted and I decided to check it out. I took a day off from work and went to hospital and did a battery of tests. Nothing seemed to be wrong with me except that the blood analysis showed that I was HIV positive. It was a shock. I would not have cared so much if I did not have Zoë or if Zoë was older and married but as it was, I felt very vulnerable. Of course, I knew how I had contracted it. I was interviewed by a social worker and had to answer many questions about who infected me and whether I had intercourse with anyone else and would I give them the name and address of the person who infected me.

The doctor spelled out the probable consequences in detail. In three or four or five years my condition could turn into full fledged AIDS and the odds of survival would be much more remote. So, I should prepare myself for chemotherapy as soon as possible. It would take a few painful months but with a cocktail of the very latest drugs my condition and chances for survival would be considerably ameliorated. I should understand that there was no cure but that the illness was now manageable and should be constantly monitored. It was something I would have to live with for the rest of my life but, at this moment, the rest of my life would be much longer than if I were infected ten years ago. Meanwhile, if I did have intercourse it should always be with a condom.

I, once again, started combing the beaches at night in the hope of finding Janet. I was sure she was unaware that she was an HIV carrier. Not only might she infect other persons but who would take care of her if she developed AIDS. Unfortunately, though I kept up the search for more than a month, I never saw Janet again.

I did not break the news to Cathy immediately. I waited for her complete recovery. One day when she had the result of her final blood analysis, she called me up at the office. As was my habit, I left the office and went to a pay phone in the street and called her up. I did not like to have my colleagues listening in to my private conversations. She was exuberantly happy.

“Paul,” she cried, “Paul, I have temporarily stopped the progress of the virus. It is more than a miracle. I feel I have a new lease on life. It's funny, though I am not cured, though there is no cure, I feel it is a new beginning after so much despair. I want to live, Paul, I want to travel, to dance, to fall in love again.”

“Oh Cathy! A million congratulations. Would you believe me if I told you I am probably as happy as you are?”

“Yes, Paul, I do believe you.”

“And it is a bizarre coincidence that it is my turn to be sick. Finally, what was wrong with you? You never told me though some persons seemed to know.”

“I had HIV antibodies in my blood.”

“Yup, that was the rumor. And now it's my turn.”

“What turn? What are you saying?”

“I have had a blood analysis and I was found HIV positive.”

“Good Heaven's. How did that happen?”

“How did it happen to you?”

We agreed to meet next day during my lunch break to see each other after nearly a year and exchange stories and we did meet the next day at the small square near my office. She was half an hour late and I started getting annoyed. But when I saw her, I knew I would have waited a year. She was radiant and her smile broke my

heart because she was not mine. Because I was not part owner of that smile. We embraced. She was so lovely. She was carefully dressed and wore a little makeup, carefully applied. I knew that was for me. She wanted to be beautiful for me. She was that, even without the makeup. Her hair was black, short and curly and the few white hairs I spied now and then did not diminish her though she commented on them by way of a joke, that time was flying that she was getting old. She also complained of the new wrinkles around her eyes. I told her she looked like a sister to her children and as to the wrinkles, they did not diminish her beauty. They were like the certificate of very old wine because like wine she improved with age. Talking gaily in this vein, we went to a nearby park and sat on a bench in the sunshine. It was cool but pleasant. I kept thinking of that phrase: I want to fall in love again. She could not have been happy with her husband to utter it. Did her meticulous attire and makeup hint at something more than feminine coquetry?

“Cathy,” I told her again and again, “you look wonderful.”

“For an HIV carrier, you don't look too bad yourself. You're as handsome as ever.”

“Oh, nuts. I'm just lucky that you find me handsome.”

“It's the same thing. But how long have you known it?”

“A few weeks.”

“And what have you done about it? Why didn't you tell me?”

“Nothing yet. I have a few years' grace. I didn't tell you because, just like you, I did not want to worry you.”

“One can never be sure how much time is left, you know. You must go into chemotherapy immediately. I shall take you to my doctor. He's the best there is.”

“Not now Cathy, I can't afford to lose my job. I have been working full time for a little less than a year and I have very little money.”

“But can you afford to lose your life?”

“Of course not. I have my little Zoë to stay alive for. And also a delicious smile seems to be entering my life.”

She smiled.

“Won't Emily help?”

“I don't want to ask her. I'll work for a year or so to put some money aside and then go into chemotherapy. But please clear this intriguing mystery. How did you get infected?”

She was not sure. At first she suspected her husband but when he was tested he did not have the HIV antibodies even despite the sex they had together. It was possible that she was either infected through an operation and the blood transfusions she had undergone a year or so earlier or else by her dentist. Yes, it was a mystery and likely to remain so. I told her of my strange encounter with Janet and she was so sorry both for me and that unfortunate woman who was, almost certainly, oblivious of the time bomb in her blood. She asked about Zoë and Emily and my future plans and talked to me about Yannis. He was obsessed with money and was rushing around trying to make his millions. He reminded me of another thoughtless person who had been through that process and had his face bashed. Perhaps Yannis would be luckier. In making money, that is, because it seemed to me he had already lost his wife. At least, he had lost her love and respect.

Our relationship blossomed fast. We met regularly once a week and spent a couple of hours together. We talked every day on the phone and my colleagues at work started noticing that a phone call would come for me early in the day and I would leave the office to go to the pay phone on the street. Sometimes we would talk



for as long as an hour. I fell in love with Cathy. Oh yes, from that very first day. And Cathy? Her whole attitude was affectionate and loving and she seemed to treasure our friendship but I yearned for more. She expressed her love on many occasions but never on her own initiative. Usually after I told her I loved her. Never as often as I needed to hear it. She often asked me about the future and hinted that if I would consider marrying her she was ready to leave Gianni. She never spelled it out explicitly. Some things are difficult to express even to persons with whom one is extremely intimate. And a blunt refusal could not but hurt and cast a shadow on our love. So she just mused and speculated on the possibility, saying a divorce would not be easy with the children and common property but it was not ultimately impossible. She could no longer bear to have him touch her. She felt he was using her like a toilet where one relieves oneself then flushes the water and it's all over.

I was not ready for such a step. I felt terribly vulnerable. I had nothing to offer other than my love and in the end love, alone is never enough. Furthermore, I had a serious illness that would plague my life and very little money. It would be madness and, above all, I had my little Zoë to consider. I told her we could be lovers until our lives settled down a bit more and the prospects would be clearer and we could decide on a permanent union. She would not hear of it. Not just on moral grounds. It would unravel her life. It would drive her mad. She would not be able to sleep with two men at the same time. She asked me how I would feel knowing that while she slept with me she also shared a bed with her husband. I could not answer that one and we settled into an intimate friendship with sexual desire and sexual undertones but no sex. I loved her and thought of her constantly. If she missed a daily call, it would put me off all day. Missing our weekly meeting was like a drug addict not getting his fix. And we had started getting more and more physically intimate. We caressed and kissed one another and walked in the streets, arm in arm, like two lovers. I suppose, Cathy, finally decided the intimacy was getting out of hand and just when I thought that we were about to cross the line, I felt a slow but deliberate disengagement on her part.

Her health had improved and she, now, felt strong enough to take a job managing a women's lingerie shop. So, although we kept up the daily phone calls, we hardly saw each other after that. I complained very gently to her that we never met anymore but I did not want to pressure her more forcefully. I was sensitive on this. I do not impose myself when I am not welcome. After all, I thought, if she does not love me I will not change this by entreating her. Love must come freely and at the same time a relationship survives only if there is reciprocity. Lately, despite the phone calls, I felt the lack of it and was often depressed.

For three months, ever since she started working, we had not seen each other and one day she called me earlier than usual and said she would be out of the shop for some errands. I asked her to take an hour off to meet me for a coffee and she said she would be on the other side of town. I was upset again. It seemed, disappointment was the only item our relationship was able to offer me lately. I could not put it out of my mind and was brooding for the whole of that day. I had not stopped loving her. She had given me courage, self-confidence and the only companionship I had. I was secretly proud that a beautiful woman, some ten years younger than myself would look at me despite my precarious health and shaky financial circumstances, consider me attractive and seek my company. But all this seemed to be more or less over and I was heartbroken.

The next day I had her usual gay, daily call on the phone and I nearly chickened out. I picked up my courage on my way to the pay phone on the street. I

called her and she started to talk to me gaily in Spanish. Her daughter was learning the language at school and she had picked up a few words from her.

“Cathy, listen to me,” I said interrupting her jovial tone, and I explained that our relationship had ceased to be, for me, a source of happiness and more often than not it depressed me. I no longer found the reciprocity I expected from her and this pained me almost daily. I was still in love with her and because I was literally suffering, I wanted to ask her not to phone me again. With time, I hoped to get over her or, at least, to stop the daily obsession of phoning her and longing to see her. I am sure she was shocked and she did try to justify and excuse herself but I firmly repeated that I could not go on. After a moment’s silence, she said she was truly sorry for the pain she caused me.

“Don’t worry; I’ll soon get over it. Nobody I know has ever died of love,” I said.

I heard a gasp of surprise and then we both laughed. She asked if she could call me up now and then to find out how I was. I said, of course, and with that we said good-bye. For days and days I thought constantly of her and hoped she would phone and ask to meet me to talk things over but it never happened. Once or twice, I dialed her number just to hear her voice say, Hello, and then clicked off. But things are better now for once again little Zoë came to the rescue.

Soon after I broke up with Cathy, I went to L.A. to pick up Zoë for her week's stay with me and a smiling Emily said she wanted to talk to me. She had not accustomed me to smiles and good humor of late. We sat in the living room. Zoë was there looking a little troubled and uncomfortable.

“I have talked it over with Zoë,” said Emily, “so she can stay with us.” And she went on to tell me that she had a marriage proposal from one of her colleagues at work who was also a partner in the business. They had been dating steadily for some time and she was in love with him. She was very happy about everything except for one thing.

“The trouble is,” she continued, “he has two boys. One about Zoë's age and the other a few years older. Unfortunately, since he is a widower, his one condition is that they must live with us. I do not think it right that Zoë and the boys should live under the same roof and I wondered, Paul, if you would take her with you to San Diego. Of course, I intend to participate in her expenses and I shall come to see her every weekend.”

I looked at Zoë. She was pale and her eyes were large and round and they were looking at me intently.

“Zoë, my darling,” I said, “why are you looking at me like that?”

She tried to smile and said,

“Both mummy and I are waiting for a reply.”

“Zoëoula mou, my precious darling, don't you know my reply?”

She smiled again. This time more confidently.

“I think I do,” she said.

I opened my arms and she flew in my embrace. We kissed each other tenderly.

“I am the happiest man alive,” I cried, “I did not know today would be a big day in my life. Congratulations Emily, I wish you all the happiness in the world and I really do thank you for everything. In the last analysis, you have been good and generous with me. Much more than I was with you. More than anything, I thank you for the happiness you offered me today. You are getting a husband and I, my daughter. The most wonderful daughter in the world.”

We left L.A. with Zoë and started preparing her room for a more permanent residence. We went to the local high school and worked out the details for her transfer. I could not afford a private school and despite Emily's offer to help with the expenses I could not bring myself to accept the offer. We would live with what I earned as best we could.

By the time she finally moved in with me, two weeks before her mother's marriage, spring had arrived and we started going regularly to the beach for a daily swim in the afternoons. Zoë was now fourteen and was blossoming into a rare flower. As we returned from the beach, one day, it must have been the well-being that comes after the exercise that made Zoë say,

“Oh daddy, I am so happy with you. You won't go marrying on me, will you?”

“I won't even go dying on you, aghapi mou,” I said.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

I was shocked at what I had said. It came out spontaneously. So I explained that I had a terrible illness and in a few months, at the start of her summer holidays, I would go into chemotherapy right here at home and it would be a difficult time with pain and fevers and loss of hair and the inability to do any work whatsoever. The worst of it was that there was no cure. It was an illness that should be constantly restrained by chemotherapy but at least it was no longer necessarily fatal. I would need her help and she would have to sacrifice her summer holidays to help me through in this initial phase. She was startled and when the message sank in she started to cry.

“Do you think you shall be able to cope?” I asked softly.

She came up to me and hugged me with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Yes, daddy mou,” she said. “Oh, daddy mou, yes.”

**Luxembourg 17 / 12 / 2001**